

Events' use of weapons to try to save souls divides religious leaders.

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — In an effort its spokesman has described as "outreach to rednecks," the Kentucky Baptist Convention is leading "Second Amendment Celebrations," where churches around the state give away guns as door prizes to lure in the un-churched in hopes of converting them to Christ.

As many as 1,000 people are expected at the next one, on Thursday at Lone Oak Baptist Church in Paducah, where they will be given a free steak dinner and the chance to win one of 25 handguns, long guns and shotguns.

The goal is to "point people to Christ," the church says in a flier. Chuck McAlister, an ex-pastor, master storyteller and former Outdoor Channel hunting show host who presides at the events as the Kentucky Baptist Convention's team leader for evangelism, said 1,678 men made "professions of faith" at about 50 such events last year, most in Kentucky.

In Louisville, he said, more than 500 people showed up on a snowy January day for a gun giveaway at Highview Baptist Church, and 61 made decisions to seek salvation.

McAlister's boss, Paul Chitwood, the Kentucky Baptist Convention's executive director, said such results speak for themselves. "It's been very effective," he said in an interview.

But other clergy question what guns and gun rights have to do with sharing the Gospel.

"How ironic to use guns to lure men in to hear a message about Jesus, who said, 'Put away the sword,'" said the Rev. Joe Phelps, pastor of Louisville's independent Highland Baptist Church.

"Giveaways for God" seem wrong, he said. "Can you picture Jesus giving away guns, or toasters or raffle tickets? ... He gave away bread once, but that was as a sign, not a sales pitch."

Nancy Jo Kemper, pastor of New Union Church in Versailles, Ky., and former director of the Kentucky Council of Churches, said: "Churches should not be encouraging people in their communities to arm themselves against their neighbors, but to love their neighbors, as instructed by Jesus."

"Second Amendment Celebrations" in church make a "travesty" of that message, she said. "How terrible it would be if one of those guns given away at a church were to cause the death of an innocent victim."

McAlister, 60, who pastored churches in five states before taking on the role of traveling evangelist, concedes that neither guns nor gun rights are part of the Gospel. But he said he uses the love of guns and hunting in Kentucky as a "bridge to un-churched men so they will hear what we have to say."

'Outreach to rednecks' is a way to attract people.

In an article titled "God, guns and good ol' boys," Roger Alford, the Kentucky Baptist Convention's communication director, described McAlister's work as "outreach to rednecks."

McAlister, an avid hunter who owns more than 30 firearms, describes it as "affinity evangelism," in which preachers reach out to potential converts based on their common interest in a sport or hobby.



Chuck McAlister, a self-described master storyteller and former Outdoor Channel hunting show host who presides at church gun giveaways as the Southern Baptist Convention.

"The day of hanging a banner in front of your church and saying you're having a revival and expecting the community to show up is over," said McAlister, who hosted the religious-themed "Adventure Bound Outdoors" on the Outdoor Channel for 16 years.

"You have to know the hook that will attract people, and hunting is huge in Kentucky," he said. "So we get in there and burp and scratch and talk about the right to bear arms and that stuff."

He said he can understand that some people have a problem with giving away guns, "given the misuse of guns and our moral decline." But, he said, "we certainly don't advocate violence. We are advocating guns for hunting and protection only."

Chitwood, a bow hunter who occasionally hunts with a gun, said, "I don't think hunting is inconsistent with the Gospel in any way. A lot of guys in Kentucky hunt."

Asked what Jesus would think of the gun giveaways, McAlister said, "I don't know, but he was pretty handy with the whip when he ran the money-changers out of the temple."

The guns are donated by local businesses and presented briefly to the winners in church, so they can be photographed with their prize. The firearms are taken back and must be reclaimed at a local gun shop, where the winner must pass a federal background check.

The National Rifle Association declined to comment. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's chief spokesman, James Smith, said only, "I don't think we're a good fit for this story."

Gun enthusiast for 'the God who made the great outdoors'

The events seem like political rallies/prayer meetings, according to a video on YouTube of a men's wildlife supper on Feb. 4, 2013, at Silverdale Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Wearing a camouflage shirt and frayed cap, McAlister ambled onto the stage, where he was surrounded by stuffed game and firearms.

"How many of y'all own guns?" he asked in his South Carolina accent. "Lemme see a show of hands."

"That is awesome," he said, as the hands went up. "We've got an army right here!"

McAlister sought appealed to their love of hunting and enmity toward gun control. For 30 minutes, he mentioned nothing about God or Jesus.

Instead, he leaned on his rifle and talked about his love for the outdoors, about patriotism and about his "Daddy" and "Granddaddy," who he said took him hunting as a child and taught him to "work hard, to be honest and to look a man in the eye when shaking his hand."

He derided gun control. "It's not the gun, it's the man behind the gun," he said, "and criminals don't care about a bunch of rules."

He told hunting stories and jokes –including about how he had to refer to "harvesting" deer on the Outdoor Channel to be "politically correct" but now can say: "We don't 'harvest deer.' We kill the suckers!"

He spoke without notes, prowling the stage in a headset, taking the crowd back to the soybean fields where he hunted with his kin and learned important life lessons.

"I remember walking across a field one day when Granddaddy asked me why two bucks don't go off to rut and two roosters don't form a covey. He said, 'Do you know why that is? It's because animals have more sense than some people.'"

The crowd erupted in laughter, and he moved in to close the deal.

"There is only one path to know the God who made the great outdoors, and that is through his son, Jesus Christ," he bellowed. "My friends, you listen to me and you listen carefully," he said, lowering his voice.

"I am here to tell you there is nothing more, nothing else and nothing better. Jesus is the only cure. Jesus is the only hope. That may not be politically

correct, but I don't give a rip about political correctness," he said. "Because it's true."

His hunt for souls produced a huge bounty – 103 men reportedly made "salvation decisions" accepting Christ as their savior.

'There will be bashers'

At Paducah's Lone Oak Baptist Church, which will host Thursday's event, the Rev. Dan Summerlin said there has been some "push back" from people who are opposed to firearms.

"Any time you try something different there will be bashers," he said.

Summerlin said he has received some calls and notes from people who lost loved ones at Heath High School, 12 miles to the west, when Michael Carneal opened fire on a group of praying students in 1997, killing three and injuring five others.

"My heart aches for those people," Summerlin said.

One of Carneal's victims, Missy Jenkins Smith, who at age 15 was left paralyzed from the chest down, said she was "shocked" when she found out about the event from a reporter.

Smith, who has two children and works as a motivational speaker and counselor for at-risk students, said that while people have a right to bear arms, "I would have really thought they would have come up with other ways besides this."

For years some rural Kentucky churches have given away fishing rods, hunting gear and even a few rifles at wild game dinners, Chitwood said.

A Baptist church in Oakwood, Ga., last year gave away .22-caliber rifles at services to attract men who don't think going to church is "manly," its pastor said, according to news accounts.

But Chitwood said McAlister came up with the idea of focusing the events on the hot-button right to bear arms, and McAlister said it was his idea as well to give away firearms in larger quantities.

"We have found that the number of un-churched men who will show up will be in direct proportion to the number of guns you give away," McAlister said.

He said that when he spoke at a church in Traverse City, Mich., in February 2013 that gave away 80 guns, 382 people made "professions of faith."

McAlister said the giveaways have wide appeal. "We get meat hunters who hunt just to put food on the table" along with "executives who think nothing of paying \$10,000 to hunt bear in Alaska," he said. "Guys all want to receive something for free."

But Kemper, the Versailles pastor, said offering the chance for a firearm "verges on bribery" and "makes a mockery of what evangelism, to my way of thinking, ought to be."

"If the program were just about the joys of respecting nature and other creatures, killing animals for the sake only of food — not for sport — and how these activities might deepen relationships with all that is holy ... I would not be so alarmed," she said. But she said the proliferation of deadly weapons has created an atmosphere of fear and distrust.

"The followers of Jesus are meant to build the kingdom of God on Earth," she said, where "everyone can live in peace with their neighbors."



Chuck McAlister uses the love of guns and hunting in Kentucky as a “bridge to un-churched men so they will hear what we have to say.” The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal