

Super Bowl parties OK as long as NFL guidelines followed, experts say

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MIAMI (ABP) — Despite crackdowns from the National Football League in recent years that frightened many church leaders into abandoning watch parties for America's biggest sporting event, experts say churches are free to host viewings of Super Bowl XLIV on Feb. 7 as long as they follow a few NFL guidelines.

“Churches, ministries and other non-profit organizations are free to show the game on large screens in their public facilities without fear of violating copyright laws so long as the church abides by three simple guidelines,” said attorney David Middlebrook of the Texas-based [Church Law Group](#), in [a YouTube video](#).

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First, Middlebrook said. “the game must be showed on equipment the church regularly uses in the course of ministry.”

Second, “churches cannot charge admission for the party. The NFL has stated, however, that churches may take up a donation to defray the cost of the event if they desire.”

And, “Finally, to avoid any copyright infringements, churches may want to call their event a ‘big game ‘party rather than a ‘Super Bowl’ party.”

Middlebrook's firm consults with churches and ministries on legal issues.

Many churches abandoned long-standing traditions of hosting Super Bowl

parties out of fear of legal action by the NFL in 2007 and 2008. In 2007 [Fall Creek Baptist Church](#), a Southern Baptist congregation in Indianapolis, received a cease-and-desist letter from NFL officials ordering them to stop a “Super Bowl Bash” party they had planned for about 400 members and guests, who would have watched on the church’s wall-projection TV.

The case received significant publicity, and the NFL initially defended its copyright-infringement policy. But in early 2008, members of Congress threatened to alter copyright law to exempt churches — sports bars are already exempt — from provisions prohibiting large-group showings of copyrighted broadcasts.

The NFL then changed its rules to allow churches to show games as long as they followed the guidelines Middlebrook enumerated. [According to a press release](#) from the Rutherford Institute, a Virginia-based Christian legal group, church watch parties are kosher as long as a church shows the game on its own regularly used equipment, in buildings it regularly uses for ministry purposes, and doesn’t charge admission.

Holly Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said her organization sometimes gets question from churches around Super Bowl time about broadcasts, and that Middlebrook's advice is accurate.

[Super Bowl XLIV](#) is scheduled to be played Feb. 7 in Miami. The game broadcast begins at 6 p.m. Eastern time on CBS.

-Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for Associated Baptist Press.