Peace churches warn of 'back door draft' Draft official visited Brethren facility: Draft official visited Brethren facility

News in the April 5, 2005 issue

Leaders of a dozen Mennonite, Quaker and Brethren churches that shun military service say they will coordinate their plans for “alternative service” programs for conscientious objectors should a draft be reinstated.

That coalition of historic “peace churches” says they have been told the Pentagon does not plan to reinstate a military draft, but they remain concerned about a “back door draft” targeting the poor and minorities. Church leaders referred to what they called “intensified, high-pressure military recruitments . . . where poverty and racism exclude our brothers and sisters from the opportunities that give life meaning and hope.”

The coalition’s two-day meeting at Elgin, Illinois, in early March was prompted by an unannounced visit in October by a draft official to a Church of the Brethren facility in Maryland. Several churches felt the visit signaled that a draft may be imminent.

But last month Selective Service officials reiterated that “the administration’s position on the draft is quite simple: there isn’t going to be any,” according to spokesman Dick Flahavan. But Cassandra Costley, manager of the Selective Service’s Alternative Service Division, also described current planning for a draft were one to be enacted.

From another perspective, J.E. McNeil, executive director of the Center on Conscience and War, a conscientious objector advocacy group, urged participants to consider the draft a real possibility. Recruitment shortfalls by the National Guard, Army and Marines indicate a draft cannot be ruled out, she said.

(Citing Department of Defense figures since 2000, the *St*. *Louis Post-Dispatch* on March 15 reported that black men have grown less attracted to military service. Whereas African-Americans once constituted about 25 percent of the Army, that percentage had fallen by February to 13.9 percent of Army recruits and 18.4 percent of Army Reserve recruits.)

After the meeting, the church representatives, who described themselves collectively as Anabaptists, said they will draw up plans to allow conscientious objectors to serve in two-year domestic service projects in lieu of military service.

“We are called to a clear allegiance to Christ above all allegiances, and a recognition that it is only through Christ that we can show love to our enemies,” said a joint statement by the Church of the Brethren, U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, the Mennonite Church USA and the Conservative Mennonite Conference.

The churches said they hope to provide alternatives to military service, as well as ways to shelter “undocumented church members” who may not want to serve in the military.