

Peace-church colleges wrestle with having armed guards: Schools seek nonviolent alternatives

News in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

In the wake of shooting rampages at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University that together left nearly 40 people dead, several colleges that previously relied on unarmed security staff—such as Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan—have taken steps to allow armed guards on campus. Many colleges already do.

But at schools affiliated with the historic peace churches—the Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers—the question of guns on campus has prompted deep levels of soul-searching on how to simultaneously embrace nonviolence and keep students and staff safe.

Trustees at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, which traces its roots to the Church of the Brethren, voted in April to authorize security guards to carry guns on the campus that is home to 1,460 students. It's the second Brethren-related school to adopt armed guards; five other Brethren schools have not.

“Obviously that [Brethren] legacy was in our minds, but we were certainly more cognizant of the needs of students and of parents who wanted to know if their children were going to be safe,” said Juniata spokesperson John Wall, a member of a review group that recommended arming school security personnel.

The decision to employ armed guards was not an easy or swift one. Discussions were held with students and faculty. Juniata's Baker Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, one of the oldest such programs in the country, asked college trustees to take more time to study the issue.

Andrew Murray, the center's outgoing director, said he and others felt it was important to offer an alternative philosophy of security that didn't rely on guns as a first response. “I'm saddened by the decision because I think it's simply an

assimilation to a culture which makes presumptions about guns and security which have no basis whatsoever in fact," he said.

The theological imperative to make peace was one of several factors considered in discussions that occurred on peace-church campuses. Some institutions looked closely at the nature of their relationship to the peace church. Does the church own the school? How does its values inform the culture of the school?

Less than 10 percent of the 2,700 students who attend Quaker-related Guilford College are members of the Religious Society of Friends, but "it's a huge part of our culture and identity," said Sara Butner, associate director of communications and marketing for the Greensboro, North Carolina, school.

Butner said the question of armed guards at Guilford didn't really come up because the school enjoys adequate support from the local police force. "I don't see us getting to the point where we would have sworn officers," she said.

Other schools also cited reliance on the expertise of local law enforcement. "We have a good working relationship with the local police department," said Richard Aguirre, director of public relations at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, a Mennonite-owned campus with 1,000 students.

At Earlham College, a Quaker-related school of 1,200 students in Richmond, Indiana, a security review occurred even before the Virginia Tech massacre in April of last year. Earlham campus security director Cathy Anthofer was hired in 2007 to help the school with emergency management. She said Earlham's likeliest emergency would be caused by weather, not violence. "We've defined what an emergency is on our campus," Anthofer said. "Earlham is not a reactive institution."

Anthofer cited a good relationship between the Earlham campus and local law enforcement. "The chief of police of our local department graduated from Earlham," said Mark Blackmon, Earlham's director of media relations. "He understands where we are on this issue."

In crime statistics released in February by the U.S. Department of Justice, campus crime rates decreased over ten years in every category of crime—including violent crime—with the one exception of sexual assault. "Campuses are safer than the general population," said Christopher G. Blake, associate director of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators.

In their security reviews, a number of colleges also examined preventive strategies and immediate emergency response that could employ nonlethal force, such as Tasers.

“There may be other nonviolent alternatives officers could use,” said Donald B. Kraybill, senior fellow at the Young Center for Anabaptist Studies at Elizabethtown College, a Brethren-related school in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. “I would hope that colleges in the peace church tradition have the brainpower to come up with creative nonviolent alternatives.” -*Marcia Z. Nelson, Religion News Service*