

On October 2, 2006, gunman Charles Roberts walked into the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, PA. After many tense minutes he released the adults and young men, keeping ten young girls tied up in the front of the classroom. As his agitation increased, the situation quickly deteriorated. Finally, realizing what was about to occur, one of the Amish girls spoke up and said: “Shoot me first.” Another responded by saying, “Shoot me next.” Roberts did exactly that. He shot all ten girls, killing five, and then took his own life.

Jonas and Anne Beiler were both reared in an Amish-Mennonite community. They left the Amish faith, married, and began a life together in Lancaster County, PA. Together they have experienced the joys of founding Auntie Anne’s Soft Pretzels and Family Resource and Counseling Centers as well as the pain of losing their 19-month old daughter, Angela Joy. Jonas was asked to help during the Amish Schoolhouse shooting. We had the opportunity to interview Jonas recently and wanted to share with you an insider’s picture of the Amish and their ability to quickly reconcile.

**Brad Harrub:** A few years ago your life was changed by the shooting at the Nickel Mines school in Lancaster County, PA. Can you give our readers a sense of what it was like to be in that community during the initial hours of this tragedy?

**Jonas Beiler:** A couple hours after the school shootings I was called to come on the scene—members of our counseling staff at Family Resource and Counseling Center had already responded to an earlier call. Having heard and continued to hear the sad news unfold on the radio, I made my way to the farm next to the schoolhouse. Everyone was in total shock and disbelief.

**How could this have happened?** I don’t recall ever feeling such dread.

When I arrived at the farm, 75 to 100 people had already gathered in a supportive way, and this began a deep grieving process for the community.

**BH:** One of the quickest messages that was learned from the Nickel Mines shooting was the lesson of forgiveness. This was reconciliation on a level that most cannot even grasp. Please share some of the ways the Amish showed reconciliation after the shooting.

**JB:** True to this strong culture, the message of forgiveness came forward very quickly. As I engaged various Amish people in conversation and watched them support each other, I saw once again the strengths that set this culture apart from the rest of the world. They do three things very well: marriage, family, and community.

As the community came together, they began bringing food for the families that had fallen victim to this tragedy. There were 10 families inside the farmhouse doing their best to get information on which hospital their child or children had been flown to.

Even as that process continued throughout most of the afternoon, there was a visit made to the shooter's widow and his parents to make sure they had what they needed and that they were okay. The Amish people brought food and made sure the message was related to them that they don't hold any of this against them.

As days and weeks and months went by, there were meetings from time to time with everyone involved: the Amish families, the shooter's family, first responders, state police, pastors, and counselors that were part of that tragic day. Amish people make friends with those that they experience tragedy with. So the benefits of true forgiveness set the stage for many good things to happen.

For example, after the schoolhouse was demolished and a new one was built, they still held their end-of-the-school-year picnic. Because there were no lawsuits or litigation, the stage was set for school officials to extend invitations to some of the first responders, helicopter pilots, and state police to attend the end of the year picnic. One of the first responders reported that this was a very healing event for her because she got to interact with the parents and children in a much different setting. It had a calming effect on her spirit and gave her the opportunity to experience some healing—maybe a lot of healing. It's hard to explain how these events foster healing but it happens. In a situation where lawsuits and litigation exist, and people are told by the legal system not to talk to each other, this kind of healing is squelched. That's obviously why in this world of lawsuits and litigation we know little about this kind of forgiveness.

**BH:** Having grown up in the Amish community, what is the history of teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation?

**JB:** It is woven deep in the Anabaptist history—they have done this for many years and will do it for many years to come. The Amish have a very deep culture. Tradition is passed down from one generation to the next by role modeling.

**BH:** You wrote an incredible book *Think No Evil*, which causes many readers to have a complete paradigm shift regarding how we forgive and reconcile. Can you tell with our readers the significance of leaving the gates open at the Amish schools versus locking them and adding phones or security?

**JB:** The Amish are a unique subculture in modern times and have the ability to not be influenced by the changing world and its demands. It's by choice that they are not influenced to make changes based on the pressures of the world around them.

**BH:** One of the young victims who was shot specifically said: "Shoot me first," and subsequently was the first to be shot. Having grown up Amish, why do you think she said those words?

**JB:** At that point I think this girl had a deep feeling that this may be fatal, so she put herself in harms way to hopefully save some of the other children and to minimize the violence. That would be the message this culture models to their children.

**BH:** If you could communicate one lesson of forgiveness to the American people today, what would that be?

**JB:** Releasing those that hurt you is a choice, but dealing with the emotional aftermath of what happened to you could be a long process. Forgiveness is about you, not the person that hurt you: it's about peace within and peace with God.

Also remember that forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things: a forgiveness exchange between two people is the basis for reconciliation; however, to be reconciled with somebody or to trust them again could be a process that takes time. Experiences must be rebuilt to ensure the hurt person that those who hurt them can be trusted again. To think that because you have been forgiven that you become trustworthy immediately is a myth. The hurt person needs time and experiences consistent with trust to be able to trust again.