Policing Issues in the Anabaptist Faith

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Four years ago I responded to an invitation to open dialogue about policing and the Anabaptist Christian faith. That the invitation came at all indicates these faith groups are becoming more cognizant of the need to discuss the issues of a coercive state and the apparent part played by Christians in support of it.

For the past while, representatives of MCC and of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College have met with a few practicing Mennonite and Brethren in Christ police officers to discuss issues of their faith and their work. Over the course of these conversations the following questions were seen as the most important:

- Do you feel a conflict between your occupation and faith?
- Does your faith community feel a conflict between your occupation and faith?
- Is it necessary to keep your faith and occupation separate?
- Is the use of force in keeping with Christ's teachings?
- Where do police officers see themselves with the community of Anabaptists?

It has been 32 years since I first stepped inside the doors of a Mennonite Church. It was on the encouragement and much gentle tugging of my wife that I finally agreed to do so. I was a cynical five-year member of the Toronto Police. My chosen occupation had drawn me from a small town where almost everyone knew everyone and, for the most part, cared for each other. I was thrust into a large multicultural setting where people not only didn't know each other, they really didn't care to. At least that was my initial impression.

All my police training did not prepare me for the daily holocaust I was about to see. For the next five years I was one of society's human garbage collectors. I would see victims at their most vulnerable or bad guys at their lowest levels of depravity. My only alternative was to talk to the only people who could understand what I was going through: other cops. I finally got to the point where society was a black hole that no amount of effort on my part could ever change. I could see only people who despised me for my job or tolerated my presence as a necessary evil. Anyone who was friendly toward me was out to get something, and I had to be on my guard all the time.

But then came along this gentle, kind lady who suggested we go to a Mennonite church in downtown Toronto. "What is a Mennonite church doing in downtown Toronto?" I asked. Visions of buggies dodging street cars on Queen Street danced through my head. Then I was told the church was across the street from Greenwood Raceway, and it all started to become clearer. "Okay, okay … I can visualize horses and buggies at the Raceway … maybe some Mennonites caring for the horses … but what about that gambling thing I heard about?"

I snapped back to reality and was introduced to a group of caring and sincere people with whom I could identify. They carried their faith through the week. They believed in a peace witness. They believed in helping people within their church, within their community, and around the world. The fact that I met my wife was due to her wanting to reach out to another community as an MCC volunteer in Toronto.

After that gentle nudge back to church I found my life slowly changing. I had seen a better way to live and to work. I did not have to be cynical and frustrated with my work; I simply had to keep everything in perspective. I had to handle one call at a time, do the best I could, and then do just a little bit more when necessary. The realization that maybe I was doing the Lord's work in my small way made me feel my load was getting lighter. The realization that life is full of people with hidden agendas no longer bothered me. A conscious effort to refuse to let the work or people drag me down was made easier with the knowledge that there were caring people in the city after all.

Then came the long process of trying to understand my place in this community of believers and my chosen profession. I have had a lot of help

along the way, but my first step was a long chat with God.

I was blessed with a strong witness from some men who had lived through the Russian revolution and WW II. They experienced fears and terror that tested their faith in ways I hopefully will never undergo. They were the first to say they had no problem with my occupation or my wearing a gun to protect society and their loved ones. They were prepared to do the same when their backs were to the wall. Their communities were threatened by anarchy and marauding bands of soldiers on both sides of a revolution and a war. Both sides had no respect for a German-speaking population in their midst. I had heartfelt conversations with men who felt they had to defend their families. They would keep a rifle in the hayloft, and if that meant the Lord would damn them to hell, then at least their families would be spared.

How does one respond to these stories? These people felt I would understand. One old man was in tears telling me his story. It was obvious he saw more, and possibly did more, than he wanted to tell. They understood the concept of wanting to protect their community. They did not want war; they would not pursue war. They just wanted bad things not to happen.

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True modern policing, as understood by Sir Robert Peel in the 19th century, does not include war. In the western experience the civil powers of police have a scope that includes crime prevention as paramount. In this framework officers are trained in the use of firearms to protect themselves and others from attacks that may cause death or grievous bodily harm.

But …

- No officer can be ordered to take a life.
- No officer is directly trained to dehumanize a target.
- No officer is psychologically trained to handle the taking of a life.
- No officer wants to take a life.

In almost every case where an officer does take a life, s/he needs

trauma counselling. Almost every officer giving evidence at a trial or inquest into the taking of a human life invariably says the same thing: "I did not want to kill anyone. I just wanted to stop the person from doing what they were doing. At the time lethal force was the only option open to me."

The absolutely smallest part of police work involves the gun. Unlike the military, with its goal of training to kill, this is not so in policing. Unfortunately, the most recognized universal symbol of policing is the gun. But cops will tell you it's the pen, not the gun, that really symbolizes policing. The pen is the weapon of first resort in nearly all police work because everything must be reduced to ink on paper at some point (in the modern context, the pixels on computer screens).

Almost every officer goes through an entire career never shooting anything other than a paper target a few times each year. The true reason for carrying the weapon is that it is a way to give the officer some reassurance and a semblance of authority and control in violent situations. Most officers would probably say they prefer not wearing a gun at all. It and its gunbelt does become a burden with its weight alone. (It's an old axiom that the gun belt remains the same weight even if you don't.)

Discretion is one of the most powerful tools a police officer possesses. It is a power much envied by others in the criminal justice arena. Although they all have some semblance of discretion, they do not have nearly the ability to invoke the power of the state that a police officer has. The decision to take action is tempered by the officer's ability to decide first if it is necessary to do anything at all. If it is, then s/he has to consider what action best suits the circumstances.

- Is a caution as effective in this case as a charge?
- What action can I take that will make the most lasting impact on changing this problem to something positive?
- How can I be assured of the effectiveness of my decision?

To make such decisions, I believe Mennonites are among the best people capable. They have a clear sense of community and are well rooted in issues surrounding peace witness. Many would be excellent peacemakers, and some would make amazing teachers for future generations of police officers.

The most pressing need in modern policing is to distance itself from the influences of the military-trained people who have dominated its ranks since 1919. Although Canada has progressed dramatically in this area, the United States has a more difficult task. An overwhelming number of US police officers came through the military's kill-or-be-killed training. During the strife-filled 1960s, American society would have been better served by suggesting police work as an alternative to the draft rather than jail. Even today, registering for military duty is, technically at least, a requirement in the US.

Given these circumstances, and understanding the necessity of being "in the world while not of the world," is there a place for police officers within faiths that embrace an Anabaptist vision? If so, how can these faith values enhance the position? What new levels of peace witness can be attained through this occupation combined with these values? How can these values be used to encourage officers to strive for a better community? With God's guidance and grace, we need to find answers.