

'Some of my best friends are in jail.': Criminals and Reconciliation – LMF May 7, 2006

Christians and criminals have one thing in common: we're both people with *convictions*. ... My task is to talk a little today about the wider picture of M2/W2 *convictions* in criminal justice. *Maureen Donegan*, on staff and also a colleague through her work with Catholic Charities, will tell us some stories and bring a challenge. There is a literature table at the back.

Please help me understand! In the last election, every major party in Canada wimped out by calling for *harsher penalties in response to crime*. If you raise or are raising kids well, please answer me: is/was it *punishment* or *embrace* that wins/won them (you) over? Is the final biblical word for God *love* or *hate*? Is there *any* scriptural word for God that means *hate*? How often in the Gospels did Jesus call God (loving *abba*) *Father*? How often did he call God (harsh sentencing) *Judge*?¹ What has been *the dominant image of God* in (Christian) Western culture since the eleventh century?²

Can one teach flying from a submarine? Can one teach citizenship from a (demeaning) punitive institution? Can one find *a single reputable criminological/sociological study* that concludes crime may best be stopped through ever-harsher punishments (and society remain "civilized")? Does one find a pile of academic studies that establish two tenets: "(1) prison rarely rehabilitates, rarely deters, and often increases the risk of recidivism, and (2) a strongly punitive and law-and-order approach to complex criminal justice problems in general brutalizes prisoners, prison staff and society at large."³

Ottawa Citizen columnist Dan Gardner wrote recently (February 24, 2006): "Two flies cling to the side of a stagecoach as it rolls across the desert, trailing a thick cloud of dust in its wake. One fly looks back. 'Wow!' he says. 'Look at what we're kickin' up.' ... **Crime policies don't control crime rates.** The broad state of social development does... Nobody wants to hear this, of course, because it means there are **no quick fixes and no way to win elections by beating crime.**"

In Peter McKnight's "The sham of mandatory sentences" (*The Vancouver Sun*, Saturday, May 6) we read of the Conservatives' "**profoundly destructive justice policies**".

McKnight says mandatory sentences will result in:

- skyrocketing rates of HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) infection, and with them, a dramatic increase in health care spending. Such rates are already at 10 times the national average in prison, will greatly increase since incarceration more than doubles the risk of HIV infection.
- drastic increase in prison use and cost;

¹ I counted them three times. Are you ready for the two numbers in order of the questions?: 177 and 0.

² You guessed it! See: *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harold J. Berman, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 1983.

³ Criminologist Matti Joutsen, former Director of the European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, presently with The Ministry of Justice, Finland, is summarizing the professional studies in the field. The answer is: *Yes!* Why don't we *get this* in North America? Crime has been *politicized* and "*mediatized*".

- significant increase in use of illicit drugs;
- huge increase of imprisonment of addicts and of their consequent greater danger and cost to society, untreated, upon release;

McKnight concludes: “While **Stephen Harper** might be proud of himself for gaining widespread support through his tough-on-crime demagoguery, he really **ought to be ashamed, for his war on drugs is nothing less than a war on Canadian society.**”

Finally there is another *reality*: the vast majority of those living in the democratic West – in particular the self-proclaimed ‘*law-abiding*’ like... well, Mr. Harper and Mr. Toews, *and us!*, are what Canadian criminologist Thomas Gabor calls: “*opportunistic repeat offenders.*” He writes at the outset of his 1994 book, ‘*Everybody Does It!*’: *Crime by the Public*: “I wanted to take issue with the hypocrisy displayed by many citizens who routinely condemn what they consider to be our leniency towards convicted criminals, **while they justify their own illegalities.**”

The subtitle for his book that surveys the worldwide criminological and sociological literature might have been right out of the Bible: *There is no one righteous, not even one.* Gabor’s research allows that *maybe* 10% of Western society is crime-free.

I think we’re onto something when we choose instead what Saint Paul dubs “*the most excellent way*”. Almost as if a Higher Power were trying to teach us something like... “*Love your enemies/[criminals/terrorists, etc.]*”?

The essence of the Gospel, *the* central New Testament *concept* in fact, is *reconciliation*. The two classic texts are Romans 5:6 – 11, and II Cor. 5:17 – 21. By word and example, Jesus and the New Testament call us to:

- Embrace, or offer to embrace “the least of these” – neighbour and enemy – limitlessly (*70 times 7*) to invite them into our circle of friends;
- Model God’s embrace of us in Christ;
- Live out now “Kingdom Come” for which we pray; a “new creation” in fact *today* – this is the day of salvation and healing of personal and socio-political brokenness towards God, ourselves, others, the cosmos: *theologically, psychologically, sociologically, and ecologically/cosmologically*;
- Become the actual embodiment of God’s *justice* here and now.

We with M2/W2 Association – Restorative Christian Ministries take our stab at this mind-boggling mandate by recruiting, training, deploying and supervising about 400 volunteers annually to:

- Effect reconciliation and build social bridges with prisoners and ex-prisoners through our **prison visitation** programs;
- Effect reconciliation with high risk sex offenders returning to our community through a program called **Circles of Support and Accountability** (CoSA) by which untreated sex offenders are challenged daily to not reoffend, and are buffered in turn from police and community harassment and rejection;
- Nurture parents in social isolation to raise their children as pro-social and secure in the crucial early years of 0 to 6, through two “**Parent to Parent**” programs in

Chilliwack and Abbotsford, and in the older years through a “**Parent Mentoring**” program in Abbotsford; all operated through funding and close cooperation with private and government professionals and agencies, including Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) and Public Health Nursing.

- We also offer **spiritual care/chaplaincy** services in Abbotsford to staff and clients of MCFD.
- We offer first-rate regular **training** for all our volunteer activities.
- We hope to develop **further programs** for ever-increasing numbers of Mentally Disordered Offenders (MDO’s) entering into, or diagnosed, in our prisons, including a very high proportion of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disordered (FASD) offenders.
- We are working increasingly with the **victim community** impacted by serious and violent crime.
- We also publish, teach and train regularly about **restorative justice** nationally and internationally.
- We keep on dreaming!

We do all this through 16 full and part-time staff, and several other volunteer coordinator staff, to make a present complement of 20 personnel.

This is our fortieth year of operation. We are growing and going for the gusto of Kingdom Come reconciliation work. You are all invited to our Annual General Meeting June 14 and to our fortieth anniversary celebrations at the end of October.

Thanks for LMF’s financial support over the years. And thanks to those who personally have been involved.

Maureen.