

**Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends
Minute 79, Justice is Possible**

August 20, 2010

79. Consideration of minute from Quakers Fostering Justice: Kate Johnson presented a draft minute on behalf of Quakers Fostering Justice of CFSC, entitled “Justice is Possible: Compassionate Response as the Foundation of Public Safety.” We approve the minute, as follows, with deep appreciation.

Justice is Possible:
Compassionate Response as the Foundation of Public Safety

Canadian Friends call for and agree to work towards a radical transformation in the way Canadians deal with crime. We know that mainstream law enforcement, through the courts and correctional systems, currently does little to alleviate the suffering of victims of crime, and equally little to rehabilitate the perpetrators. The ineffectiveness of this system also leads to pain for those who work on our behalf within it. Violence, pain, and suffering are real and affect us all.

Friends in Canada have held longstanding concerns with prisons and we called for prison abolition as a response to crime in 1981 at Canadian Yearly Meeting, Minute 93. We recognized that addressing economic and social justice concerns would reduce crime. Punitive approaches are guided by coercion, misuse of power, and fear, fostering additional trauma. The predominant focus on punishing offenders commits the great majority of the system’s energy and resources to legal processing, prisons and incarceration. Justice for survivors and communities becomes unlikely.

When those who have been harmed lament their pain, we know justice has not been achieved. Friends believe there is that of God in all people, those harmed and those who have caused harm. Therefore, we feel an obligation to respond compassionately to alleviate pain and tragedy, and recognize the many who cry injustice and are not heard. Alongside our longstanding concern for the dehumanization created by prisons and punishment, we raise up our concern for those who have been harmed.

Crime’s lasting legacy is the torn fabric of people’s lives. We believe the system needs to focus on the harm caused by crime in the context of all the lives it has disrupted. We believe that harm to people and relationships is the main outcome of crime, and that the burden of this harm is borne mostly by its survivors and their communities, who in the current system are little more than passive witnesses to the proceedings.

We call for Canada to transform into a country where our first response is to help those affected by crime, encouraging them to embark on healing journeys. We recognize the complexity of human relationships that often confounds simplistic and static labels of victim and perpetrator. This change in focus will transform our pursuit of justice to one that fosters peace in our communities.

Populations who are vulnerable to victimization and imprisonment in Canada include the mentally ill, brain injured, developmentally delayed, and those who struggle with addictions. Indigenous peoples, the poor, and those who are less educated are also vulnerable.

The current “justice” system allocates minimal resources to support of victims of crime and their communities, while the punitive system has enormous resources and is rapidly growing. This growth is happening although crime rates in Canada continue to fall and are lower now than at any time in the past 30 years. There are adequate measures currently in place to keep in prison the few who are truly dangerous. Many careful approaches exist to help re-integrate the more-than-95% of prisoners who once again become our neighbours. Yet the current federal government has passed or promised legislation that will increase public spending by more than

\$8 billion to expand prisons. They predict new legislation will increase incarceration by over 30% in the next three years. We protest this use of our precious resources and call for those monies to be redirected towards supporting the social and practical needs of those most affected by crime in our communities, and addressing the social injustices, which both foster criminal activity and inhibit the development of effective community support for its victims and survivors. Further, we are greatly alarmed at the dismantling and under-resourcing of the rehabilitative programs that have been working.

Given that most crime is unreported, mainstream legal systems are largely irrelevant to addressing crime. According to reliable data from Statistics Canada, less than 35% of violent crime is reported to police. Less than 5% of crime that occurs in Canada results in convictions. Less than half of those found guilty are incarcerated, most for non-violent offences. We believe that an appropriate response to unreported crime is to create a system that will encourage people to seek justice, not increasing the incarceration of the vulnerable.

Justice is possible when those harmed become the centre of restorative and transformative approaches that foster, with Divine assistance, transformed relationships that are safe and healthy for all involved. These approaches must be guided by a concern for safety for all, while promoting honesty, compassion, and emotional and material support for all who are touched by crime.

Our work will be tempered and inspired by our vulnerabilities as we remember our own experiences of both being hurt and hurting others. Canadian Friends will offer our voices and actions to encourage institutions, governments and communities of people to recognize their vital role in restorative and transformative work, emphasizing that people and communities are deserving of a central focus in this collective quest for justice. We will look for examples of policy alternatives within nations and peoples whose compassionate responses to crime lead to even lower incarceration and crime rates.

This then is our vision: Justice is done when those most affected by crime are satisfied that things have been made as right as possible, when the affected communities learn from the past, and are confident in their ability to undertake, with compassion, expectancy, faith, and hope, the task of building and sustaining peace.

We have a long, long way to go.
So let us hasten along the road,
The roads of human tenderness and generosity.
Groping, we may find
One another's hands in the dark.

Friend Emily Greene Balch (1867-1961)