

The Quaker Committee on Jails & Justice (QCJJ): Acting on Canadian Friends' Justice Concerns

By Marc Forget

(from research in the CFSC records in the CYM archives; Sandra Fuller, project archivist)

Presented to the Canadian Friends Historical Association on September 21, 2003 by Charlie Kennedy, member of QCJJ.

Introduction

The Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice (QCJJ) is a committee composed of volunteer members whose long term goal has been defined as the abolition of prisons. The members of QCJJ believe that prisons and jails are basically expressions of violence, and of society's inability to resolve its problems. The vast majority of people presently in prison do not need to be there. QCJJ works toward finding and promoting community alternatives such as those labelled restorative justice. The minority who must be segregated from society because they threaten people's safety are still human and any institutions devised to contain them must respect the rights, responsibilities, and human dignity of both those incarcerated, and those employed to care for them. This is not possible under the present prison system.

The goal of abolition requires economic and social justice, concern for all victims (prisoners, guards, victims of crimes, families), and caring reconciliation among people. Abolition of prisons does not mean abolition of responsibility, but rather an acceptance of responsibility - the responsibility of the offender to alleviate, in some meaningful and creative way, the harm done by the offence. It is also the responsibility of society to those people, both staff and inmates, presently trapped in a violent system which breeds crime, rather than prevent it, as well as the responsibility to the victims of crime who are largely ignored in the present system.

While abolition is a long-term proposition, much work needs to be done now both in promoting the ideal of abolition and countering the negative consequences of the current system. To these ends QCJJ focuses on educating the public as well as supporting groups and organizations that offer direct services to prisoners and their families. The latter is achieved through the distribution of small grants to organizations such as Project Reconciliation in Kingston, ON; Christian Council for Reconciliation in Atlantic Canada; the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted nationally; and Out Of Bounds magazine on Vancouver Island.

A Rich Tradition

Quakers have been involved with jails and prisons since the 17th century when thousands of Quakers were persecuted and imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Historically, in not standing or swearing the oath in courts, Friends acted on their belief in the equality of all before God. Many died from the harsh conditions in prisons. An early Quaker, Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), sister of Joseph John Gurney who was a driving force behind a revival of Quakerism in 19th century England, visited prisons, and what she saw of the inhumane conditions led her to dedicate herself to justice and prison work. In the time since then, Quakers have often been in prison for their pacifism in refusing to go to war. As a group, Quakers have had experience as reformists both outside and inside the prisons.

Quakers visit prisons, not to convert people to Quakerism, but as people deeply committed to reconciliation in conflict situations. As a religious group, Quakers believe that there is that of God in every person.

Responding to that belief with regard to the justice and prison systems is challenging, and requires Quakers to try to change those parts of human institutions which seem destructive to individuals. Respect for that of God in

others makes Quakers realize that relationships through programmes are only meaningful and helpful where there is mutual growth and respect. Directly out of prison programmes come educational growth, political action, individual relationships. Some volunteers follow prisoners through courts, jail, prisons, and aftercare. In the course of their work, Quakers work with many other community agencies and resources.

Friends everywhere base their opposition to the death penalty on the testimony of the presence of God in every person, the belief in the intrinsic value of every human life, in the possibility of redemption for every human being. The spirit of this is best captured in the 1868 statement of John Bright, from *Christian Faith and Practice*:

The real security for human life is to be found in a reverence for it. If the law regarded it as inviolable, then the people would begin also so to regard it. A deep reverence for human life is worth more than a thousand executions in the prevention of murder, and is, in fact, the great security for human life. The law of capital punishment, while pretending to support this reverence, does in fact tend to destroy it. (Quaker Concern, Fall 1984)

Quakers have a long-standing concern for the abolition of the death penalty, believing in the uniqueness and sanctity of each individual life which no other person has the right to take away. Friends across Canada have been active in their efforts to have capital punishment abolished. Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends has made official statements to the Canadian government on this subject. When the 5-year test suspension of the death penalty in Canada ended in December 1972, a number of discussions concerning problems in criminal justice and the application of Friends Testimonies took place. As Friends struggled to come to grips with the issues, the American Friends Service Committee publication, "Struggle for Justice", was of considerable assistance. A working party was held at Grindstone Island in the summer of 1972. The CFSC Peace Secretary met with Government officials in the Federal Penitentiary Service to discuss the topic in detail.

In 1973 Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting (YSHYM) received a request from British Friends for support on their stand against capital punishment. The ensuing discussions rekindled an interest in justice and prison issues amongst members of YSHYM. Shortly after the request from British Friends, Richard Broughton and Joleigh Commandant took part in a workshop on prison abolition at Powell House in New York State. The inspiration and insights they brought back led to a Special Interest Group at YSHYM and to the creation of a Prison Committee the very next year.

Prison Committee, Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) 1974-1978

The Prison Committee of Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) was formed in October 1974. The impetus for the formation of the Committee was the anticipated meeting of the fifth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, scheduled to be held in Toronto, September 1975.

In 1975, the Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC) completed its transition from being an organization dealing largely with international service to one having equal commitments for concerns in Canada and abroad. In March 1975, CFSC provided to the Prison Committee of Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting of Friends a budget for 6 months' work which was used for part-time staff salary, speakers, assembling resource materials, and preparation for the activities of Canadian Friends around the UN Congress. As a result of this active involvement in prison work, other related groups, such as Church Council on Justice and Corrections (CCJC, which grew out of the Canadian Council of Churches) applied to CFSC for support for Alternatives, an educational tool which attempted to deal with crime and justice more positively. CFSC also contributed to projects undertaken by Halifax Friends and Montreal Friends.

The Prison Committee of Yonge Street Half-Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers), was a group concerned with the systems of criminal justice and corrections at all levels of government in Canada - federal, provincial, municipal. It obtained information about penal services, and set up library of resource materials, visited jails to assess effectiveness, made requests to government for improvements or alterations, and hired staff to provide more immediate action, particularly conciliation between inmates and administration. The Committee also established

helpful contacts with other community groups working in the area of penal reform such as John Howard Society, Prisoners' Rights Committee, Family and Friends Association, and the Probationary Service of Ontario. Letters were regularly sent to Members of Parliament.

In June 1975 the Prison Committee of YSYHM published its first Prison Committee Newsletter. Up to five issues per year were produced until 1978 when the Committee became Quaker Committee on Jails & Justice. For the following 10 years three issues of QCJJ Newsletter were produced every year, and since the late 1980s two issues per year have been produced. The QCJJ Newsletter is mailed to well over 300 recipients in Canada and around the world.

After its initial contract with CFSC for financial assistance in hiring a part-time staff person in April 1975, the Prison Committee requested financing for part-time staff person again in October 1976, and continued to receive financial support from CFSC until 1978 when it officially joined CFSC as a standing committee (QCJJ).

In 1977, the Prison Committee (YSHYM) experienced organizational changes which resulted in a new name, A Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice (AQCJJ), and the formation in November 1977 of several working groups which later became sub-committees: Direct Services, Political Action, and Education. These changes paved the way for a smooth working relationship once the Committee became part of CFSC, a move which was requested by YSHYM in May 1978 and approved at Canada Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, August 1978. In order to complete the transfer of the Prison Committee of YSHYM to CFSC, Ruth Morris was appointed clerk of the Quaker Committee on Jails & Justice (QCJJ) in November 1978.

For some of the early members of the Prison Committee of YSHYM, Friends such as Fred Franklin, Richard Broughton, and the late Ruth Morris, being involved in the work of the Committee helped deepen their commitment to prison issues, and was the beginning of many years of activism in the field.

Quaker Committee on Jails & Justice and Prison Abolition 1978 - 1984

In its first year as a standing committee of CFSC, QCJJ explored in depth the idea of prison abolition. Then-QCJJ member Bob Melcombe suggested that a statement on prison abolition be presented to Canadian Yearly Meeting. Bob proposed using a statement prepared by a group of New York State Friends for their Yearly Meeting. The idea of a minute on prison abolition was presented at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 1979, and was received with questions and reservations. During the following year QCJJ members visited Monthly Meetings to help with Friends' understanding. At CYM 1980 Friends still did not reach unity on prison abolition, but a minute was written and the matter referred to further prayer and discernment. At Canadian Yearly Meeting in 1981 Ruth Morris presented prison abolition as a vision, a dream to pursue. Instead of getting lost in detail and wording, the gathered Friends were asked whether they shared the vision. Following a period of worship, punctuated by compelling ministry, Friends reached unity. The minute reads:

We approve of the following Statement on Friends Response to Crime (see also Minute #21):
Friends, partly through their own experiences in the prisons of the seventeenth century, became concerned about the treatment of the accused or convicted. Friends witnessed to their concern for the Divine Spirit in humans by seeing prisons as an alternative to corporal or capital punishment. Subsequently, they worked for reform of these prisons. Today, Friends are becoming aware that prisons are a destructive and expensive failure as a response to crime. We are, therefore, turning from efforts to reform prisons to efforts to replace them with non-punitive, life-affirming and reconciling responses.

The prison system is both a cause and a result of violence and social injustice. Throughout history, the majority of prisoners have been the powerless and the oppressed. We are increasingly clear that the imprisonment of human beings, like their enslavement, is inherently immoral and is as destructive to the cagers as to the caged.

The challenge before us is to use alternatives based on economic and social justice and on the fulfilment of human needs. Some alternatives to prisons have already been developed and more are needed to bring

about reconciliation and healing within the community. Friends need to seek out, develop and support such programs. At the same time, we need to foster awareness in ourselves and others of the roots of crime and violence in society to ensure that our lives do not unintentionally reinforce these evils.

Prison abolition is both process and long-term goal. In the interim, there is a great need for Friends to reach out to and to support all those affected: guards, prisoners, victims and families.

We recognize a need for restraint of those few who are exhibiting dangerous behavior. The kind of restraint used and the help offered during that time must reflect our concern for that of God in every person. (Minute #93 Canadian Yearly Meeting, 1981)

Minute #21.

Abolition of prisons is a goal. Like disarmament, it may seem to many a concept that is unrealistic in today's world, and would require each of us to take risks and make commitments we may not be prepared to make. Nevertheless, we set abolition of prisons as an objective to be worked towards.

It is not unknown for Friends to have testimonies which we as individuals have difficulty living up to. We hold each testimony as a vision which helps guide us toward the Light. It is part of our ongoing responsibility as Friends seek in the Light for ways to make this vision a reality in our day to day lives.

While we are clear on prison abolition as a goal to be worked towards, we are not in unity as to the appropriate way to express this. Some Friends would like to see revisions made to the proposed statement, or feel it is too long. Some are not clear where it should be placed in our Book of Discipline, or if it should be put there at all. We were cautioned during our seeking not to let discussion of details cloud the Spirit. The important thing is that we be clear on what our vision is, and the commitment we are making in expressing it.

We lay this matter over for further seeking at our Wednesday morning session. (Minute #21 Canadian Yearly Meeting, 1981)

Following the adoption of the Prison Abolition Minute by Canadian Yearly Meeting, QCJJ began contacting individuals and organizations that also believed in prison abolition. This eventually led to QCJJ being one of the founders of the International Conference on Prison Abolition (ICOPA), and QCJJ organized the very first conference, which took place in Toronto in 1983. ICOPA conferences have since been held every two years (with one exception, the conference planned for 1999 had to be postponed and was held in 2000), and have taken place in Eastern and Western Europe, Africa, Latin America, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. Eventually the name of the conference was changed to the International Conference on *Penal* Abolition, to emphasize the fact that ICOPA members believed it was no longer just the prisons that should be abolished, but the concept of punishment as the only possible response to actions that cause harm.

Direct Services, Political Action, and Education 1984 - 1996

Court-watching and prison visits by QCJJ volunteers exposed the needs for educational, political, and direct service activities to further the work and ideals of the Committee. QCJJ tried to work concretely toward diminishing the function and power of prisons in three ways: Direct Services, Political Action, and Education.

Direct Services: - Going into prisons on a regular basis provides an opportunity to be allies with prisoners and offers mutual growth through these relationships. Jail visiting provides an awareness of the destructive

aspects of prisons on all people affected. Programs are held for women's groups, for men's groups, for those in protective custody.

Political Action: - Political actions work directly to achieve the needed changes toward abolition, with special concerns about the possibility of another vote on capital punishment. They include: demonstrations, meetings with politicians, writing letters to government representatives and to newspapers to raise awareness about prison issues, presenting briefs to public meetings, affecting changes in the area of bails and justices of the peace, working for alternatives to prisons such as victim-offender reconciliation programs, and for humane therapeutic programmes.

Education: - Quakers believe that education is fundamental to effecting social change. The move towards a prisonless society requires awareness among people of the reality of the present prison system, leading to a consensual demand for change.

The Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice (QCJJ) worked in the areas of abolition of capital punishment or the death penalty, abolition of prisons, and alternatives to prisons. QCJJ also worked in conjunction with organizations such as Church Council on Justice and Corrections, Prisoners Rights Group, Committee to Alleviate Prison Overcrowding (CAPO), and worked on special project to create pre-trial justice or bail, as well as with other issues connected to aboriginal peoples, violence against women, and youth.

A Stronger Focus on Education 1996 - present

At its fall 1996 General Meeting the members of QCJJ did a "visioning" process to determine how the Committee's resources could be used most effectively. Given the huge increase in prison population since the mid-1980s (5-6% per year) the members concluded that the most important task was to inform the public about the failures of the prison system, and about the existing, proven alternatives as well as new ideas. In the mid-1990s the concept of restorative justice (RJ) was coming into mainstream public consciousness, and new approaches to RJ were being implemented. It was decided that the primary focus of QCJJ would be on education, and the work would begin within the Friends community in Canada.

In April 1997 QCJJ was one of a few non-governmental organizations to be represented at "Satisfying Justice", the first national conference on RJ in Canada. The Church Council on Justice and Corrections (CCJC), of which Canadian Yearly Meeting is a founding partner (and to which QCJJ is its liaison), took part in organizing the conference, and because CCJC was becoming a very effective representative of the Christian community to the federal government, QCJJ gradually doubled its annual financial support of CCJC over the following three years.

QCJJ created a two-day workshop on justice, and in 1997-98 the workshop was offered to Monthly Meetings and Worship Groups across Canada. A workshop was given at Atlantic Friends Gathering in May 1997, and others hosted were by Monthly Meetings in places such as Victoria, Vernon and Argenta, BC; Calgary and Edmonton, AB; Toronto, Ilderton (Coldstream MM); ON; and Montreal, QC. Some resources were also produced and distributed, including a list of videos and a short bibliography on RJ, and a list of websites of organizations working in RJ.

In 1998 QCJJ began offering presentations on justice to students in a variety of fields of study in universities across Canada. To date these have included sociology students at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, NB; graduate students in education at the University of Toronto; philosophy students at the University of Calgary; law and criminology students at the University of Alberta in Edmonton; and criminology students at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver. Consistent with its focus on restorative justice, QCJJ became a member of the Victim Offender Mediation Association (VOMA, an international organization) in 1998, and subsequently offered sessions at VOMA annual conferences. A short workshop on justice was also offered at Friends General Conference in Wisconsin, 1998.

Following a 1998 request for assistance in purchasing some printing equipment, QCJJ initiated the creation of a section on peace, nonviolence and reconciliation in *Out Of Bounds*, Canada's premier prison-based magazine. QCJJ continues to support this section in *Out Of Bounds* with an annual grant.

From 1999 to 2001 QCJJ took part in creating and facilitating 2-day workshops on RJ for Parole Officers and prison staff for Correctional Service Canada (CSC). This was the first time QCJJ acted as a "contractor"; CSC covered all expenses and the cost of staff time.

In 1999 QCJJ produced a 20-page research document titled "Crime as Interpersonal Conflict: Reconciliation Between Victim and Offender". The document was presented at Dilemmas of Reconciliation, an international conference held in June 1999, and subsequently distributed to individuals and organizations around the world. Early in 2003 the document was published as a chapter in a book called "Dilemmas of Reconciliation", published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

In April 2000 QCJJ was part of the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC, the Quaker body with official status at the United Nations) delegation to the Tenth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders in Vienna, Austria. This was the third Congress where Friends and others made efforts to have RJ recognized as a viable alternative to the current system of punishment, and the UN Crime Commission subsequently developed guidelines for the use of RJ, which were officially adopted by the UN in 2002. Also in 2000, QCJJ offered sessions on RJ and penal abolition at the fourth world wide conference of the International Prison Chaplains Association, in South Africa. While in South Africa QCJJ staff gave a presentation on RJ at the Quaker Peace Centre in Cape Town. In summer 2000 QCJJ offered, on behalf of AFSC New England Regional Office, a 3-day workshop on RJ in an inner-city neighborhood of Boston.

A section on justice was established by QCJJ within the CYM Lending Library in 2001, making part of QCJJ's library available to Canadian Friends. In the same year a flyer titled "Satisfying Justice" was produced and distributed. A justice workshop for youth was developed, and subsequently delivered to a group of teens at CYM 2001 in Nova Scotia. A few months later a presentation was given at an international conference on human rights and prisons on how "criminals" are treated as a separate race.

In 2002 QCJJ took part in the production, by a Master's student in criminology at Simon Fraser University, of a documentary on RJ and prison abolition. The Committee also participated in the tenth ICOPA conference, held in Lagos, Nigeria (the first time ICOPA was held in Africa), and played an important part in the second national RJ conference in Canada, held in the Ottawa region in September 2002. In fall 2002 QCJJ took part in a federal government consultation on the establishment of a set of guidelines to regulate the use of RJ in Canada.

Prior to the implementation of the new Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA, which replaced the Young Offenders Act) on April 1, 2003, the Canadian government organized a 3-day informational conference in which QCJJ was invited to take part at no cost to the Committee. This invitation highlighted the recognition QCJJ has achieved nationally in justice circles. Later in the spring QCJJ gave a short workshop on RJ to a group of Circles of Support and Accountability volunteers in Ontario. In June QCJJ presented a short paper on a new way of evaluating RJ programs to the 6th International Restorative Justice Conference. QCJJ began delivering its restorative justice workshops to other nonprofit organizations such as John Howard Society.

Looking Ahead

QCJJ continues its efforts at informing Friends and the Canadian public on the current justice system and its alternatives. The QCJJ Newsletter is still published twice per year, and various other resources are made available to Friends and the public. The Committee is currently developing a document that explores the meaning of justice, in particular from Friends' perspective, that it will submit to the Editorial Committee of the Canadian Quaker Pamphlet series.