



Intersections

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Winter 2015

Volume 3, Issue 1

Compiled by Esther Epp-Tiessen and Titus Peachey

Conscientious objection

2 International law and conscientious objection

by Esther Epp-Tiessen

3 Country profiles of conscientious objection

by Jae-Young Lee, Anna Vogt and Ruth Hiller

6 Privilege, right and responsibility: peace and Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada

by Royden Loewen

8 Conscientious objection: a U.S. veteran's perspective

by Evan K.M. Knappenberger

10 When peace church members enlist

by Conrad Stoesz, Dot Hershey and Don Hershey

11 Conscientious objection, race and class

by Ertell Whigham

13 Mennonite women as conscientious objectors

by Marlene Epp

14 The making of a COMT

by Mary Groh

15 Web resources

Conscientious objection to war is a long-standing and central conviction for the Anabaptist groups who constitute MCC's core supporting constituency. Rooted in a commitment to Jesus' way of peace, nonviolence and love of enemy, conscientious objection is a dynamic and courageous practice that is always adjusting to new contexts and pressures.

The term conscientious objection came into prominence in the early twentieth century. It is generally understood as the principle of refusing to participate in military service because of moral, ethical or religious convictions. Conscientious objectors (or COs, as they are frequently called) refuse to perform military service on the basis of this principle. Historically, conscientious objector status has been considered in the context of military conscription, but there is growing recognition that individuals who voluntarily join the military may also develop a stance of conscientious objection.

Early Anabaptist confessions—and most Mennonite and Brethren in Christ confessions today—uphold a commitment of refusing to “bear the sword.” Over the centuries, Anabaptists suffered persecution, imprisonment and even death for their adherence to this principle. Those who live in Canada and the U.S. today find legal acceptance of their CO stance and options for alternative service in the event of conscription. This development, coupled with the rise of *volunteer armed forces*, means that the issue of conscientious objection has lost some of its urgency in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.

Today, the cutting edges of the CO movement are found in settings of conflict around the world; among those who withhold the military portion of their taxes; and within the U.S. and Canadian military structures where young objectors often face rigorous examination and intimidation. In many countries, conscientious objectors also face potential jail time and/or harsh treatment for their refusal to use violent force. In a number of these contexts, MCC seeks to provide encouragement and support to those taking a stance of conscientious objection.

This issue of *Intersections* explores conscientious objection from numerous perspectives. It includes some of the history of conscientious objection within the Anabaptist family in Canada and the U.S.; stories of individuals

and communities struggling for legal acceptance of conscientious objection elsewhere; reflections on the role of gender and race; information on evolving international norms; and suggestions for resources that will aid more in-depth learning. We hope you will be inspired by the faith and courage of those who have withstood—and those who withstand today—the powerful legal, cultural and economic pressures to enlist in military service.

Esther Epp-Tiessen is public engagement coordinator for MCC Canada's Ottawa Office. She has also served with MCC in the Philippines and with the peace programs of MCC Ontario and MCC Canada. Titus Peachey is coordinator for peace education for MCC U.S. He formerly served with MCC in Laos.

International law and conscientious objection

Laws providing for conscientious objection to military service vary from country to country. Both the U.S. and Canada have traditions of allowing recognized COs to perform an alternate service in lieu of military service. In many countries, however, individuals who identify as COs may face persecution, prosecution and imprisonment. For this reason, some have sought refugee status in other countries.

Over the decades, however, advocacy at the United Nations (UN) has resulted in growing recognition of conscientious objection as a right under international law. In 1998, for example, the UN Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution urging states to consider granting refugee status to COs who leave their country of origin out of fear of persecution due to their refusal to perform compulsory military service when no appropriate alternatives are available. The decision acknowledged that individuals may *develop* conscientious objections while performing military service.

In 2013, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution affirming that conscientious objection to military service is recognized in international law as derived from the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. According to this resolution, states are under the obligation to make laws and implement procedures to provide for conscientious objection to military service. They are to make information about conscientious objector status and how to apply for it readily available to conscripts, volunteers and those already in the armed forces. Moreover, they are to allow for selective objection—a situation in which a CO objects to participation in a specific war but not all wars. Also in 2013 the UNHRC released guidelines related to the protection of individuals seeking refugee status in countries other than their own because of fear of persecution. As these developments indicate, the status of conscientious objection within international law and practice continues to evolve.

Esther Epp-Tiessen is public engagement coordinator for MCC Canada's Ottawa Office.

Learn
more

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. *Conscientious Objection to Military Service*. New York and Geneva, 2012. http://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/conscientiousobjection_en.pdf

Country profiles of conscientious objection

The right to claim conscientious objector to war status varies greatly among different country contexts. These profiles from the Republic of Korea, Colombia and Israel illustrate the very real struggles and risks currently faced by young people, reminding us that saying *no* to war still remains a costly choice.

Republic of Korea (by Jae-Young Lee)

In the Republic of Korea (commonly referred to as South Korea), military service is mandatory for all young men. There are no legal provisions for conscientious objection. According to the United Nations, of 723 COs imprisoned worldwide, 669 (or 92.5 percent) are incarcerated in South Korea.

Sang-Min Lee, a member of Grace and Peace Mennonite Church in Seoul, is the first South Korean Mennonite to refuse military service because of his commitment to Christ. He came to this decision over a period of seven years through study, reflection and the encouragement of people around him. Initially he was actively involved in a non-Christian NGO called World Without War. One of the reasons he came to Grace and Peace Church was because he had learned that the Mennonite church would support his decision to become a CO. Sang-Min was sentenced to 18 months in prison on April 30, 2014 and is currently incarcerated. He could be released after 15 to 16 months' imprisonment. He will have a criminal record upon his release.

Being a Christian pacifist in South Korea is a very difficult thing, because opposition to military service in South Korea is seen as a betrayal of one's country and as sympathy with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK, or North Korea). Conscientious objectors and their families experience ostracism and isolation.

There can also be division within families. For Sang-Min, a major dilemma in identifying as a conscientious objector for peace has been becoming a "peace-breaker" within his family. Sang-Min's father is a pilot and former major in the country's air force who does not agree with his son's views. He believes that the serious political tension between North and South Korea makes conscientious objection inappropriate.

However, in past months the father has visited Sang-Min in prison several times and demonstrated patient listening and respect for his son's beliefs. Members of Grace and Peace Church have met Sang-Min's parents, talked with them about "what is a Mennonite," and explained that some Christians who try to follow Jesus' teaching on peace and justice will do so to the point of becoming prisoners. The father has slowly accepted Sang Min's decision.

Even though this journey will not be short, there is hope that this "unexpected incident" called conscientious objection may reveal God's plan of peace and reconciliation for Sang-Min and his family.

Currently, Grace and Peace Church has no members who are of military age; consequently conscientious objection is not a burning issue. However, Sang-Min's personal journey has influenced church members to think about what it means to be Christian pacifists in Korea. Sang-Min definitely

“ There are no legal provisions for conscientious objection in South Korea. According to the United Nations, of 723 conscientious objectors imprisoned worldwide, 669 (or 92.5 percent) are incarcerated in South Korea.

has challenged all church members to shape their faith identity as Korean Mennonites.

Colombia (Anna Vogt)

Jhonatan David Vargas did not know that what he was doing was called conscientious objection until he had been in the army battalion for three months. Jhonatan, a member of a local Foursquare church, however, was sure that he did not want to learn how to kill or belong to an armed group.

“ Justapaz works to ensure that the rights of every young man to object are respected, that appropriate legislation is implemented and that obligatory military service is abolished.

His case exemplifies the challenges that Justapaz, a Colombian Mennonite agency, faces when working with COs in Colombia, where there is no practical way to access the right of conscientious objection. Justapaz played a pivotal role by advocating for inclusion of this right in the Colombian Constitution of 1991. In the nearly 25 years since, Justapaz has been demanding that the right to conscientious objection be regulated.

Each eighteen-year-old man must serve one year in the army unless he receives a deferral. The majority of youth have no idea that it is possible to say *no*, meaning that education and political advocacy are both important parts of Justapaz's work. As there are no regulating bodies, laws or norms set in place, each case becomes a unique navigation through the complex Colombian legal system.

As a student, Jhonatan believed that he would be granted a deferral. However, the army told him that his seminary studies were not eligible and he was illegally incorporated into the army. While there, he refused to fire a weapon or swear allegiance to the flag, an important ceremonial part of basic training. When Justapaz learned of the situation they worked to rally international support for a letter writing campaign to pressure national authorities and used their national networks to work on legal strategies, including with the Constitutional Court.

When given routine home leave, Jhonatan refused to return to the army in the hope of being declared a CO and, with the help of Justapaz, his family started a complex legal process. The military, however, declared him absent without leave (AWOL) and, on September 4, 2014 during a routine ID check, Jhonatan was arrested. Justapaz again put its advocacy machine in action.

Justapaz's work involves not only advocacy, but all of the challenges associated with living in Latin America's most militarized society. Objecting and accompaniment are risky as they are actions that expose and threaten military control: both individual COs and Justapaz often deal with threats and the very real possibility of retaliation.

Context analysis and self-protection strategies are fundamental parts of Justapaz's work. Anything can happen: during the writing of this article, Jhonatan was arrested and the Constitutional Court ruled in his favor, ensuring his release. He is now officially recognized as a conscientious objector to war and military service. Each new event requires new strategies. Yet the end goal remains the same: that the rights of every young man to object are respected, that appropriate legislation is implemented and that obligatory military service is abolished.

Israel (Ruth Hiller)

Refusal to do military service in Israel is a complex issue. Many assume that all Israelis are required to serve in the army, and many do. However, a growing number of Israeli citizens choose not to enlist.

It is important to note that military service is required only of Jews and secular Palestinian Arab Druze men. It is not required of Christians or Muslims, who make up 20% of the population. While the government attempts to maintain the myth that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is an army of all the people, there are huge efforts to conscript ultra-Orthodox Jews, or *haredim*, a sector which has been exempt from military service since Israel's establishment. The *haredim* maintain that their contribution to society is through their study of Torah, which they consider greater than military service. They consider compulsory military service a form of religious persecution.

There are also attempts to conscript Israel's Palestinian citizens. Participation in the Israeli army is regarded by many Palestinians as equivalent to treason, since Israel still occupies Palestine. Nevertheless, some Muslim and Christian Palestinians (including Bedouins) with Israeli citizenship do volunteer for army service. It has yet to be proven that participation in the military by non-Jews provides connections that will further careers or other opportunities such as integration into mainstream Israeli society. Druze villages, where residents do conscript, are subject to overcrowding, poor infrastructure and house demolitions. Presently many Bedouin villages in the Negev are also subject to repeated destruction—the homes of former Bedouin soldiers are not spared.

While conscientious objection is at present a marginal phenomenon in Israeli society, there are signs of its growth. For example, some young Jewish COs, aged 16-20, calling themselves the *Shministim* (high school seniors) have declared their refusal to serve in an occupying army. In 2014 a group of 140 *Shministim* signed a public letter and sent it to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, clearly stating their intent to refuse to do military service. They wrote:

We, the undersigned, intend to refuse to serve in the army and the main reason for this refusal is our opposition to the military occupation of Palestinian territories. . . . The problem with the army does not begin or end with the damage it inflicts on Palestinian society. It infiltrates everyday life in Israeli society too: it shapes the educational system, our workforce opportunities, while fostering racism, violence and ethnic, national and gender-based discrimination. We refuse to aid the military system in promoting and perpetuating male dominance. . . . We refuse to forsake our principles as a condition to being accepted in our society. We have thought about our refusal deeply and we stand by our decisions.

Such a declaration means that these teenagers, upon their induction dates, are possible candidates for immediate incarceration that could last for many months. But in addition to the possible threat of going to jail, these young people are also subject to continued harassment by their teachers, peers, communities and the military. Their families may tell them how disappointed they are in the choices they have made, and some leave home due to the high tensions created.



Korea Anabaptist Center: <http://en.kac.or.kr/>

Write a letter of encouragement to Sang-Min Lee: <http://www.martyrstories.org/co-letter-campaign/>

Justapaz: <http://www.justapaz.org/>

New Profile: www.newprofile.org/english

Through acts of civil disobedience and their desire to apply democratic values and to change society, the *Shministim* are a growing group of young people who bravely oppose Israel's occupation of Palestine at all costs and believe in a better and more peaceful future for Israelis and Palestinians.

Jae-Young Lee is currently Executive Director of the Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute and a director of the Korea Peacebuilding Institute. He is also a leader in the Grace and Peace Mennonite Church. Anna Vogt works with MCC Colombia partner Justapaz in Bogota. She is from Dawson, Yukon, Canada. Ruth L. Hiller is a co-founder of New Profile, the movement to demilitarize Israeli society established in 1998 to support and counsel anyone considering not doing army service.

Privilege, right and responsibility: peace and Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada

At the core of Mennonite identity in the U.S. and Canada is the practice of peace. It goes by various names, including nonresistance, pacifism and nonviolence. Even within an historic peace church, however, peace has not been a static term. Over their 300-year history in the U.S. and Canada, Mennonites have seen peace, in sequence, as a “privilege,” a “right” and then as a “responsibility.” But the three terms have overlapped, and in some respects all three exist today.

The privilege of military exemption

The story begins in 1683 as Mennonite victims of persecution in Europe sought the privilege of military exemption in Quaker-run Pennsylvania. Deferential to authority, they were “absolute pacifists.” As an English missionary in Lancaster County put it, Mennonites always chose “to leave their Properties and Liberty exposed to the first Invader, than bear arms in their Defence” (MacMaster, 229). Local lore recounted the cost of this idea; Mennonites were in some ways the privileged—encroaching on the lands of Native Americans—but as the 1764 murder of the entire John Roads family shows, they came to be known in time as a people who would not defend themselves under any circumstances (Dyck, 200). In 1775, during the American Revolutionary War, Mennonites petitioners declared that because of “the Doctrine of the blessed Jesus Christ” and “finding ourselves very poor [in spirit]” they were “not at Liberty in Conscience to take up arms to conquer our Enemies” (MacMaster, 256).

Following the War of Independence, some Mennonites headed to Canada, embracing its 1793 Militia Act offering commutation fees in lieu of military service. The United States adopted a similar policy in 1862 during the Civil War with the first federal American draft. Mennonites, thus, were more worried about youthful volunteers joining the war than being compelled to fight.

In the meantime new waves of Mennonite and Amish immigrants from western Europe in the 1830s and from New Russia in the 1870s bolstered the old idea of group privilege. Both groups encountered modernizing governments who were re-imagining the state as a “nation” and heralding “universal military service” as its handmaiden (Loewen and Nolt, 13). In the New World they found frontier land to buffer them from these changes. Especially in Canada the newcomers found a British system

Learn
more

Bush, Perry. *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonites Pacifism in Modern America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Driedger, Leo and Donald B. Kraybill. *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994.

Dyck, Cornelius J. *An Introduction to Mennonite History*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Epp, Marlene. “Heroes or Yellowbellies?: Masculinity and the Conscientious Objector.” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 107-117.

Juhnke, James. *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989.

still recognizing group “privileges.” In 1873 a federal Order-in-Council exempted them from military service, an arrangement that remained in effect through the First World War.

The right to alternative service

During the First World War, events in the United States changed the meaning of pacifism. A universal military service act in 1917 granted draftees the “right” to seek personal exemption. But it was only a limited right, lightly enforced by a Secretary of State who declared that “war was the purest mission that a nation ever espoused” (Juhnke, 230). Hazings, threatened hangings and the death of two young Hutterite men, Joseph and Michael Hofer, from mistreatment in a military camp in 1918 revealed the limitation of the supposed right to personal exemption.

World War II enshrined the idea of “rights” for pacifists in both countries. Conscientious objectors now were exempted if they could demonstrate personal religious scruples. COs then joined the Civilian Public Service in the U.S. or performed Alternative Service Work in Canada, mostly as forestry, soil conservation and mental health hospital workers. Even within this system were the seeds of a new view on pacifism. Robert Kreider spoke of being restless as a CO, longing to do work of “real . . . national importance” (Kreider, 19). In both countries some 35 percent of all Mennonite draftees answered the call to arms. Pilot Henry Pankratz of Canada spoke of his service as the “highlight of my life” (Regehr, 36) while Roland Juhnke of the U.S. declared “a sense of duty to my buddies” (Bush, 271). Mennonite COs, on the other hand, faced taunts of being cowardly “yellow bellies” and ethnocentric rural bumpkins (Epp, 110).

The responsibility to peacebuilding

After the war many Mennonites considered more engaged ways of expressing their pacifism. In November 1950, at an MCC-supported conference at Winona Lake, Indiana, Mennonite thinkers overrode the word “nonresistance” for a new imperative, the “responsibility . . . to the total social order of which we are a part” (Driedger and Kraybill, 85). During the 1960s and ‘70s, in the midst of the Cold War, the Vietnam War draft and the Civil Rights Movement, Mennonite thinkers recalled their own “radical” and “revolutionary” Anabaptist heritage (Klaassen). Reflecting a broadening acceptance of engaged pacifism, MCC opened advocacy offices in both Washington, D.C. (1968) and Ottawa (1975). The first Washington office director, Delton Franz, spoke of the chance to “sensitize the powerful to the impact of their actions on the world’s powerless” (Loewen and Nolt, 316). Later organizations, including Mennonite Conciliation Service and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), pushed for international justice through action (Miller, 16).

Later, even these ideas broadened. Mennonite peace workers increasingly challenged the binary opposition of “personal” and “political” peace, demanding that peace confront all of life, including consumer greed and the attending need to defend one’s possessions. At the same time, some Mennonites began to re-envision the very idea of conscientious objection. During the Vietnam War, MCC had provided a way for U.S. draftees to perform alternative service in many settings, including Vietnam. However, some draftees chose not to register with Selective Service as an act of noncooperation with and as a prophetic witness to the system. In 1969 the Mennonite Church decided to support such noncooperation, while Canadian Mennonites hosted U.S. draft resisters and deserters.



Klaassen, Walter. *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973.

Loewen, Royden and Steven M. Nolt. *Seeking Places of Peace*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012.

MacMaster, Richard. *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America 1683-1790*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985.

Miller, Joseph S. “A History of the Mennonite Conciliation Service, International Conciliation Service, and Christian Peacemaker Teams.” In *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding*. Ed. Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach, 3-29. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Regehr, T.D. “Lost Sons: the Canadian Mennonite Soldiers of WW II.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992): 461-480.


Ruth, John Landis. *The Earth Is the Lord’s: A Narrative History of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001.

More recently, Mennonites in the U.S. have participated in broader efforts to counsel military personnel seeking CO status as a way of linking privilege and responsibility. Similarly, in the 1990s the Ottawa Office of MCC Canada felt the responsibility to advocate on behalf of soldiers who developed a conviction of conscientious objection while in service. Additionally, some Mennonites began to practice “war tax resistance” as a new form of conscientious objection that aims to address the system, while also asserting the rights of the individual.

Conclusion

After 300 years in the U.S. and Canada, many Mennonites still held to the old “two kingdom” theology and a nonresistance of the “quiet in the land.” Still other initiatives highlighted “responsibility.” Attention to conscientious objection continued, particularly in the U.S., but it occurred within a much larger framework of proactive and “responsible” peacemaking. Clearly a fundamental shift had turned an historic peace church from attending to a question of “privilege” to one of “responsibility.”

Royden Loewen is Professor of History and Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg.

 **The challenges of war and conscience in war are still very real to many Americans. Many soldiers are struggling and suffering for their new-found beliefs against war and military service.**

Conscientious objection: a U.S. veteran’s perspective

Since the U.S. military moved away from a policy of conscription, several generations of Mennonite pacifists have become somewhat apathetic on questions of conscientious objection and military service. The issue of conscience in war—once a key ethical matter central to the Mennonite faith—has lately been labeled as political, a marginal and somewhat irrelevant distraction from the other pressing needs of an active congregational life.

The challenges of war and conscience in war, however, are still very real to many Americans. Many soldiers are struggling and suffering for their new-found beliefs against war and military service. The Mennonite community should not be indifferent to their struggles. Not only does the pacifist church have an opportunity to unmask the ideology of militarism by standing with recent COs, but in helping to secure the rights of supposedly-volunteer soldiers in the present day, Mennonites will be securing those same rights for a time when the draft once again comes knocking to take their children off to the army camp.

The plight of the Iraq War CO

In late 2006, my friend Amy was deployed to Iraq with the U.S. army. She was a sensitive and educated person, but she was also a good soldier and a professional linguist. While in Iraq, Amy experienced the soul-crushing violence of military occupation and war. Like many thousands of fellow soldiers in the supposedly “all volunteer” U.S. military, she began reading in her spare time, and she knew deep down that the occupation she was participating in was wrong. In 2007, Amy wrote an essay on why she was considering herself a conscientious objector to war, and turned it in to her commander in an attempt to be recognized for what she was: a CO.

Because Amy had never once loaded her weapon in the war, and because it was a prop required for passage on the base, she did not immediately turn her rifle in to the commander, who then used this fact to deny Amy her conscientious objector status. In effect, the military told Amy that her deep convictions against war and militarism were just passing feelings. She was then punished for daring to waste the army's time with her frivolous feelings. The day Amy's unit returned from the war, she was told that she would be re-deploying in six months for another year-and-a-half in the occupation. Soon Amy showed up at the peace center where I was working, AWOL: a fugitive from the military. Based on my own assessment as a soldier in the war, the vast majority of the soldiers who applied for conscientious objector status between 2004 and 2008 were turned down like Amy.

Pacifist appraisal of modern conscientious objection

So what does it mean for Mennonites that during the middle stages of the occupation of Iraq, hundreds or even thousands of American soldiers were ready to jettison their careers and explore the nuances of conscientious objection? A lesson to religious pacifists who want to monopolize conscientious objection: that someone like Amy should come to a world-altering conclusion about violence and militarism without a traditional religious conversion demonstrates the universality of nonviolent truth. The nonviolent God moves in a theodicy of grace through the experience of brokenness, war and violence to renew the covenant of wholeness. By failing to engage those soldiers who struggle in a conceptual language different from ours with the transcendent truth of God's nonviolent way, Christian pacifists share in the guilt and sin of the world that forces young people to do violence against their will and better judgment. War is, after all, really a failure of human imagination. Human violence is a demonstration of humanity's unwillingness to trust the will of God the Creator, to suffer-with and to love enemies.

Comfortable Mennonites, whose children go unthreatened by conscription and war, sometimes talk of peace as if it were some distant eschatological fairy-tale, and not an urgent, vital need. To people like my friend Amy, peace is tangible and present, what some pacifist theologians have called the "moral grain" of the universe. My deep and abiding hope is that Mennonites will embrace veterans and military personnel in the spirit of Christian love and peacemaking, partnering with us to explore the realities of the God of peace. Together, let us worship the Lamb who reigns nonviolently, and let us proclaim God's peace.

Evan K.M. Knappenberger is an Iraq war veteran and a Philosophy and Theology major at Eastern Mennonite University.



For a timeline of peace church and broader efforts to obtain provisions for conscientious objector discharges from the U.S. military, see:

<http://civilianpublicservice.org/storycontinues/hotline/advocacy>

Brock, Rita Nakashima and Lettini, Gabriella. *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.

Center on Conscience & War:
<http://centeronconscience.org>

GI Rights Hotline: <http://girightshotline.org>

“ In the historic peace churches, when young people choose military service the impact on family and the faith community can be painful.

When peace church members enlist

In the historic peace churches, when young people choose military service the impact on family and the faith community can be painful. These contrasting stories challenge peace churches to consider the meaning of community when strong disagreements arise.

Who is my neighbor? (Conrad Stoesz)

In 1939, as the Western world edged ever closer to war, Mennonite leaders in both Canada and the U.S. met to discuss what their response should be. They were guided by a belief in non-resistance, an important thread through many migrations and hardships, as well as a strong commitment to community. It was the community that provided the emotional, financial, spiritual and physical help enabling Mennonites to pioneer in difficult new contexts, overcome hardships and help keep people on the right spiritual path.

In the Second World War Mennonite leaders went to great lengths to advocate for a system of alternative service in Canada and the U.S. as a way of ensuring that drafted young men could uphold the church's pacifist convictions as conscientious objectors. However, some Mennonite men chose not to enroll in alternative service, but to enlist for active combat. To the church which had suffered, migrated and worked hard for conscientious objection, their actions represented a slap in the face and were contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

In southern Manitoba, Peter Hildebrand was one of these men who did enlist. His parents Peter and Katharina were not proud of their son's decision, but they cared deeply about him. They quickly learned they would need to carry their burden alone. Their friends and family did not want to talk to them and they felt shunned. When the Hildebrands received a telegram saying that Peter was missing in action, Katharina internalized her grief, sitting in her rocking chair for weeks on end ruminating. No friends or family came to console her. In one month she became hunched and her red hair turned white. The faith community that was supposed to care for the vulnerable failed Katharina, as well as others like her, when they most needed support.

The Hildebrands were overjoyed when they learned their son Peter had been found alive in Europe. But the deep physical and emotional scars were with Peter for the rest of his life. Like many Mennonite war veterans, he never did return to his Mennonite church.

A journey of Mennonite parents with a Marine son (Dot and Dale Hershey)

As we were preparing to leave for church one Sunday morning in February of 2000, our son, a high school senior, asked us, "Would you disown me if I joined the Marines?" He quickly made it clear that he had already signed with the Marines and had every intention of following through with that commitment. We were shocked, but sensed it was a time to put aside differences and give him all the support we could find within ourselves. He saw himself being a peacemaker in the Marines, so the day he left for boot camp we together planted a peace rose to symbolize our differing views of peace.

We attended his boot camp graduation as a way of showing our parental support for him. He was then sent for further training just before the U.S.

invasion of Iraq. Our son would sometimes call in the middle of the night because he was also concerned and fearful. He would ask if we would be able to honor and support his sacrifice if he were sent to Iraq. Would we be able to accept the flag from his coffin if he were killed?

Meanwhile, we were not comfortable discussing our son's military service with our Mennonite congregation, where teachers and pastors taught peace and nonresistance. Children from the congregation went to Botswana, Nepal and Bolivia to serve others and did not train to kill. Despite this, many people in our congregation provided us with love and support. Some sent notes to our son, letting him know they were praying for him and that he was loved and missed.

Once while on leave our son told us he was going to attend church with us. We hoped he would not come in uniform, but that was exactly what he did. He wore his Marine dress blues and was ready with his holy war arguments. He expected things to go badly. However, much to his surprise, two hours later he was still talking to members of the congregation. He was being received with warmth and compassion, hugs and handshakes, and genuine acceptance as a child of the church. This was an important event for him and an important event for us.

Fourteen years later we have a strong relationship with our son and we can agree to disagree on the role of the military in our society. This past year, for the first time, we were able to call him on Veterans Day and let him know we were thinking about him.

Conrad Stoesz is Archivist for both the Mennonite Heritage Centre and the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg. Dot and Dale Hershey live in Manheim, PA and are members at Akron Mennonite Church.

Conscientious objection, race and class


Ertell Whigham is a former Marine recruiter and currently serves as Executive Minister of Franconia Mennonite Conference in eastern Pennsylvania. The following is an interview with Whigham about how race and class factor into military recruitment and conscientious objection in the United States.

What are young people who grow up in settings of poverty looking for after high school?

I did military recruiting in both rural and urban settings of poverty. I found that youth were looking for opportunities that would help them advance beyond the low-income status of their parents. With few family resources, many of them could not anticipate going to college. But they wanted to “belong” and to have a position of respect in their community. In some cases they simply wanted to leave a bad situation at home and were looking for a way out.

How do young people in settings of poverty tend to view the option of military enlistment?

As recruiters, we found that it was fairly easy to take advantage of the needs expressed by these young people. In many ways, our pitch to the young people was predatory in nature. For youth who felt like they were

 I did military recruiting in both rural and urban settings of poverty. I found that youth were looking for opportunities that would help them advance beyond the low-income status of their peers. For youth who felt like they were on the edges of society due to poverty or racism, we could offer stability.

on the edges of society due to poverty or racism, we could offer stability. We could provide a job, food, clothing and a roof. We could offer travel, training, sharp uniforms, money for college and status. Compared to the minimum wage jobs with little option for advancement that likely awaited many of them, the military offers looked pretty good.

When you later became a pastor of a Mennonite church in a setting where many families struggled with poverty, how did you work with youth who were looking for post-high school options?

“ For someone who doesn't have good non-military options, conscientious objection exacts a high cost. It may mean being stuck in a difficult environment with little opportunity for financial stability.

It was a very labor-intensive effort. We set up mentorships for young people as early as middle school. We helped them visit a college campus. We provided modest scholarship money and helped them investigate grants. We helped them make a connection with a business person in the area of their career interest. We created employment opportunities in our child care center that would at least help them earn some money while they were thinking about future options. Several members of our congregation offered a room in their homes for young people who just needed to get out of a difficult home situation. We made sure they knew that they had a church family that they could depend on.

We did all this in addition to helping young people understand that Jesus' way of peace does not fit with the military mission. For if we wished to persuade our youth that they should not enlist, we had to be able to offer another meaningful option for their lives.

One of the biggest challenges is with immigrant families. Many of them feel a deep debt of gratitude for the opportunity to live in this country, and see military service as a way to repay this debt.

So, how does conscientious objection to war look to youth who don't have good options for job, school or career?

For someone who doesn't have good non-military options, conscientious objection exacts a high cost. It may mean being stuck in a difficult environment with little opportunity for financial stability. Military enlistment may also be costly, but this is usually not on the young person's mind or in the pitch the recruiter normally makes. This is in sharp contrast to youth who have resources for college, travel or skills training. Conscientious objection to war does not exact the same cost from these youth.

Many young people grow up in a context where nonresistance or nonviolence as a way of life is simply not a part of the culture. In many settings, a young person who responds peacefully to aggression is viewed as weak and can become easy prey to bullying and harassment. The church can offer strong, peaceful role models and become a place of sanctuary, but if peace and nonviolence are not reinforced elsewhere in a young person's life, including the home, the teaching may seem irrelevant. If peace does not seem relevant when a young person is on the street, it may well seem irrelevant when listening to the well-spoken pitch of a military recruiter.

In my recent experience with veterans' groups, I've learned that veterans can be some of the most effective communicators in support of peace and nonviolence when talking with youth.

The challenge to our churches is this: make peace relevant to all of our youth and offer meaningful alternatives to military enlistment.

Ertell Whigham is the Executive Minister of Franconia Mennonite Conference in eastern Pennsylvania. He was interviewed by Titus Peachey, MCC U.S. Peace Education Coordinator.

Mennonite women as conscientious objectors

Shortly after the Second World War began in 1939, women in Ontario organized their local sewing circles into the Nonresistant Relief Sewing Organization. In describing the humanitarian assistance and moral support given to conscientious objectors in camps and war sufferers overseas, secretary Clara Snider said: “We are representing a common cause and stand for the same principles. . . . United we stand, divided we fall.” American Edna Ramseyer, writing in 1943, reflected a similar desire that women be included in the discourse on nonresistance and conscientious objection. She asked: “Have you ever wished that you could prove your convictions on peace and war as your boyfriend, husband, brother, or son has? . . . Girls and women of the Mennonite church groups! Our Christian responsibility, to our God, the world, the church, our boys . . . is tremendous. The challenge is before us; the projects await us; the question is, do we as girls and women want to serve?”

These Mennonite women were not called up to serve their country militarily, but they nevertheless chose to identify as conscientious objectors and to provide an ‘alternate service’ to their country and to humanity. Indeed, they served *voluntarily* while Mennonite men were *required* to provide service to the state in eras when military conscription was enacted. And while men were confronted with the question of what they ‘would not do’ during war, women considered what they ‘would do’ in the midst of conflict. What they did was offer a ‘positive peace’ in the form of material and moral relief and service to those who suffered from the violence of war.

Mennonite women, and others from historic peace churches, expressed their conscientious objection in both world wars of the twentieth century by providing material relief and voluntary labour, both to their own men in work camps for conscientious objectors (COs) at home and to war sufferers overseas. During the Second World War, a church-administered work program for COs in the United States called Civilian Public Service (CPS) drew women into labour as nutritionists, nurses, cooks and other roles within the 151 CPS camps established across the country. In Canada, the Alternative Service (AS) work program for COs was government-run, and so women were not as involved in the camps. Yet Canadian women declared a pacifist stance by sending care packages and letters to their own sons and husbands in AS camps and by entering paid employment in order to support their families in the absence of male wages.

Mennonite women’s organizations across Canada and the United States prepared clothing, bandages, food and other relief goods to be sent directly overseas and held sales and other events to raise money to support organizations engaged in wartime relief. Relief workers in England suggested that women in Canada and the United States adopt the slogan



Epp, Marlene. *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2008.

Epp-Tiessen, Esther. *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History*. Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2013.

Goossen, Rachel Waltner. *Women against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941-1947*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Graybill, Beth. “Writing Women into MCC’s History.” *In A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*. Ed. Alain Epp Weaver, 239-262. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011.

Marr, Lucille. “Paying ‘The Price of War’: Canadian Women and the Churches on the Home Front.” *In Canadian Churches and the First World War*. Ed. Gordon L. Heath, 263-283. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014.

“ Mennonite women were not called up to serve their country militarily, but they nevertheless chose to identify as conscientious objectors and to provide an alternative service to their country and to humanity.

“Non-Resistant Needles Knitting for the Needy” to underscore the “magnificent opportunity” that their work represented. A 1940 report on Mennonite Central Committee’s relief clothing program for war sufferers in Europe described the relationship between relief and peace thus: “In the face of war’s havoc there is need for a positive testimony of peace, love, and compassion toward the suffering.”

The voluntary ‘positive peacemaking’ of women was literally embodied as numerous young women went overseas themselves, during and after the war, to work in orphanages and refugee centres and to distribute food and clothing. Arlene Sitler of Ontario was one woman who took up this opportunity: she affirmed the material relief provided by Mennonite women, suggesting that through their giving “the bonds of peace and Christian fellowship may become stronger throughout the world.” Women continued to demonstrate a ‘positive peace’ in the decades after the Second World War, volunteering for overseas relief work or domestic voluntary service in high numbers. Between 1940 and 1970, for example, nearly twice as many Canadian women did service with MCC as Canadian men (Epp-Tiessen, 63). Moreover, during the Vietnam War draft in the U.S., when most of the 89 men in MCC service in Vietnam were there to perform the required alternative service duty, 39 women were there completely voluntarily. Women have also demonstrated a keen commitment to active nonviolence through their participation in Christian Peacemaker Teams.

If notions of Mennonite nonresistance, as expressed by male church leaders, shifted from a passive to an active pacifism in the latter part of the twentieth century, it could be argued that such a shift had already been anticipated in the words and actions of Mennonite women.

Marlene Epp is professor of History and Peace & Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.

The making of a COMT

A lifetime journey led me to make the moral choice to become a COMT—a “conscientious objector to military taxation.” World War II was raging when my journey began. I grew up in a Canadian city amongst patriotic people of British origin. Young men who were neighbours, relatives and even fellow church members were enlisting to help defeat Hitler. Some of them lost their lives in that endeavor. Even my beloved teacher came to school one morning in the splendid uniform of the Canadian navy.

Meanwhile, my Mennonite parents, teachers and wider church family were shaping my mind in other ways. The war savings certificates promoted at school got no approval at home—my first lesson in conscientious objection to military taxation. War costs money, but the government was not getting any from our family. In my baptismal instruction class I struggled with the doctrine of nonresistance. It sounded heroic for the sixteenth century, but definitely not cool in the 1940s. When my father served as pastor at an alternative service camp for COs, I became more aware that, while most of society was on the track rushing to war, some heroes refused to board that train.

The church schools where I received my secondary and college education strengthened my commitment to Christ and his teachings. When I taught

with MCC's Teachers Abroad Program in Kenya in the 1960s, I learned about the Kikuyu Christians who paid dearly at the hands of the Mau Mau for their unflinching commitment to the same nonviolent Jesus. Back in Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s, the Cold War and anti-nuclear movement drew me and members of my faith community into Ban the Bomb demonstrations and marches. One day we heard Edith Adamson speak about what Quakers in Victoria, BC were doing to protest Canada's use of their income taxes for military purposes. Adamson made it clear that, if we expect our young people to stay out of the army, we should be just as categorical about keeping our money from funding the army.

Adamson's organization, eventually known as Conscience Canada, encouraged people to withhold the portion of income tax intended for military purposes, deposit it into a trust fund and lobby the government for a Peace Tax Fund to be used only for peaceful purposes. This was "fiscal" rather than "physical" conscientious objection to war. The idea captivated me and I decided to become a COMT as soon as my income from teaching piano lessons rose to a taxable level.

For at least 15 years I annually followed Conscience Canada's instructions on how to file my income tax, withholding a specific percentage and sending a letter explaining as persuasively as possible the reason for this action. I received responses from successive Ministers of Finance informing me that my actions were illegal, along with cold letters from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) telling me I owed them money. The CRA probably considered my "debt" too insignificant to try to recover, but after my 65th birthday, it annually withheld a Goods and Services Tax refund due me until the full amount was erased. I suffered no great harm from all those years of civil disobedience.

Currently, the only legal way to avoid paying taxes for military purposes is to keep one's income low and/or increase charitable donations up to the limit. But even for the pensioner who receives a refund after filing, the conscience is not perfectly at ease. We can downsize our income, but our monthly old age security allowance depends on investments in corporations which fuel the military. We are inextricably involved, so it seems.

We COMTs need to find new ways of inviting others to make the moral choice of conscientious objection to military taxation. We need to find new ways of appealing to legislators for the legal means of redirecting our taxes for peaceful purposes. We need to find new allies in those who object to lavish military spending.

Mary Groh lives in Toronto. She has been president of Conscience Canada since 2010.

Web resources

Civilian Public Service (CPS): <http://civilianpublicservice.org>

This website features the stories and experiences of conscientious objectors in the United States, focusing especially on WWII and the Vietnam War. The main body of the website consists of a wealth of material on WWII and includes two databases:

- a searchable database of the nearly 12,000 CPS workers
- a searchable database of the more than 150 CPS camps



Conscience Canada: <http://www.consciencecanada.ca/>

National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund: <http://www.peacetaxfund.org/>

National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee: <http://nwrcc.org/>

Stories, images and primary source documents abound on the website, bringing to light the deep meaning and tensions that surrounded this experiment in honoring the conscience of a minority during a time of war. A significant legacy of the CPS experience in the U.S. is the reform in mental health that arose out of the work of CPSers in state hospitals.

The Story Continues section of the website features the experiences of conscientious objectors (Mennonite, Brethren and Quaker) who served in Vietnam during the war. Video interviews and diary excerpts are a primary feature.

In addition, the site includes stories of the post-WWII Seagoing Cowboys, the American Friends Service Committee's early work in Gaza, MCC's bomb removal project in Laos and the GI Rights Hotline's present-day assistance to conscientious objectors in the U.S. military.

The site is a great tool for families, archivists and students who want to learn more about this rich history of struggle to witness faithfully for peace in a time of war.

Alternative Service in the Second World War: <http://www.alternativeservice.ca>

For those unfamiliar with conscientious objection and also those wanting to learn more, this website is an excellent resource about the Canadian experience of conscientious objection and alternative service during the Second World War. Created as a teaching tool for use in public schools, it holds a wealth of information of interest to a wide audience. The website, developed by the Mennonite Heritage Centre of Winnipeg, describes how during the Second World War COs sought to serve their country in a way that was congruent with their faith. It engages the tough questions that a skeptic or a person first learning about conscientious objection might raise.

The website uses a wealth of secondary and primary sources to tell the stories of individual COs. Primary sources include letters, photos, newspaper clippings and audio-recordings. Visitors to the website are invited to add names to the incomplete list of COs provided.

The website also describes the work performed by COs as their alternative service, such as tree-planting, fire-fighting, farm labour and work in hospitals and mental institutions. It evaluates the impact and ongoing legacy of this work and demonstrates how many COs chose a life-time of service.

Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly is published by Mennonite Central Committee's Planning, Learning and Disaster Response Department. Editors are Alain Epp Weaver and Bruce Guenther. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

Email mailbox@mcc.org or call 1-888-622-6337 (in Canada) or 1-888-563-4676 (in the U.S.):

- If you would prefer to receive this newsletter by email
- To subscribe or unsubscribe to this newsletter
- To change an address

A donation of \$10.00 per subscription is suggested. MCC welcomes contributions to its work.

Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly can also be accessed on the MCC website at mcccanada.ca in Canada or mcc.org in the U.S.

ISSN 2376-0893 (print) ISSN 2376-0907 (online)



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ