



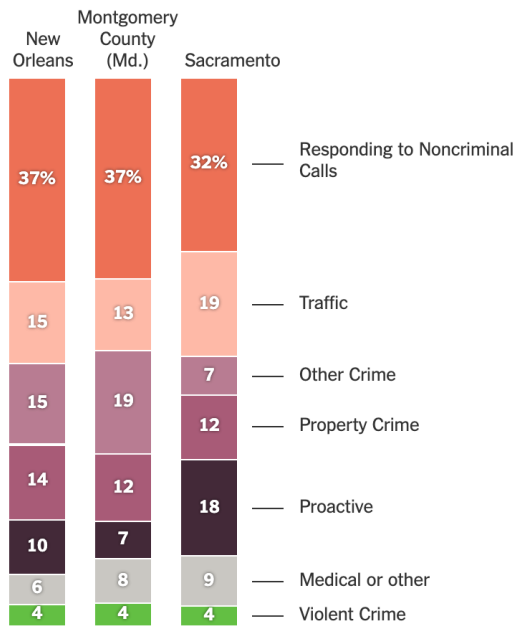
Conference Minister's Corner

Defund the Police: An Anabaptist Idea?

By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman, Conference Minister



I've spent the last 10 years looking the aftermath of state violence right in the eye: bodies and psyches irreparably damaged by car bombs, rape, machetes, and gunshots. This violence happened to my clients through no fault of their own, often based on their race or ethnicity. These uprooted lives became fellow Coloradans and given a specific status: refugees. Refugees were invited here by the U.S. government for their safety, and each one hoped that the violence could become a distant memory left behind in their home country.



HOW POLICE SPEND THEIR TIME

But as Americans turn on the news recently, we've been horrified (though probably not shocked) to see the same story of state violence finally getting airtime in our country - lives ended before their time, communities terrorized. In 2015, a quarter of those shot by the police were having an emotional or mental health crisis at the time of their death¹. And from 2013-2017, Black people in the U.S. were more than three times more likely than White people to be killed in a police encounter². The recent Derek Chauvin guilty verdict was something, but it felt a little bit like a hiccup in the long labor pains birthing justice. Not only individuals, but the entire system they represent needs to change.

Various ideas are circulating of what to advocate for. One idea is defunding the police - in fact, Mennonite Church USA has just come out with [a curriculum with that title](#). But is that too extreme? What about reforming or reimagining the police?

So, I've been trying to wrap my mind around the topic of state violence against American citizens on American soil and what we can do about it.

I started close to home by asking a couple questions to resident expert Mike Martin, who has done a lot of work to imagine alternatives to violence as a solution to problems on an individual, community, and national level through [RAWtools](#).

Amy: *What exactly is meant when folks call for the police to be abolished?*

Mike: When it comes to talking about police abolition, people can have the impression that we flip a switch and have a turn-key system to replace it. Police abolition looks more like grassroots organizing to allow transformative justice practices to be learned in communities that allow neighbors to facilitate their own conflict resolution. Abolition can also look like sending social workers and mental health professionals in place of police officers to respond to situations. Or in my work with RAWtools, not only do we turn guns into garden

¹ Stephanie Russell-Kraft. "Alternatives to police exist. You just haven't heard of them." Sojourners March 2021. sojo.net/magazine/march-2021/alternatives-police-exist-you-just-havent-heard-them

² Harvard School of Public Health. "Black people more than three times as likely as white people to be killed during a police encounter." Accessed May 7, 2021 at www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/blacks-whites-police-deaths-disparity/

tools, but we offer training for de-escalation, circle dialogues, and mediation skills as proven alternatives to violent conflict resolution.

We need not be afraid of these positive steps as a threat to our communities, but more of a maturation of how we respond to complex situations that need healing and care instead of guns and ketamine.

Amy: *Why would Anabaptists want to be involved in this work?*

Mike: If I commit to an ethic of nonviolence, it is insincere to allow someone else to use violence on my behalf. We may not like how police abolition sounds, but our Anabaptist faith is deeply rooted in and already active in this work.

Mennonite Church USA's new curriculum entitled *Defund the Police?* helps explain just how deeply rooted our Anabaptist faith is in this work. The free 8-part curriculum is offered on MC USA's website [here](#). With videos, articles, scripture-based centering exercises, etc. it seems very accessible and could be facilitated by anyone interested in the topic—no particular expertise required. It's designed for those just learning about this for the first time, those already convinced that defunding the police is a great idea, and those prone to argue against the idea...so basically everyone. Some of the churches in our conference are already making plans to offer it as a Sunday school class or Zoom group.

Here are a few highlights from a webinar with the creators of the curriculum (their words are paraphrased here):

—The ultimate goal of this work: create a society in which public safety functions to create safety for all and not just a select few.

—Police are only responding to violent crime 4% of the time (and in some cities, much less). Who else might be better equipped to respond to (at least) 96% of calls, i.e., mental health emergencies?

—This is not a new idea for Anabaptists. It has been pretty consistent in Anabaptist history to not bear the sword for the state for a couple reasons: we've already given our allegiance to God and we therefore can't serve two masters, and committing violence forfeits our belief that all people are made in the image of God. We try to defund the military all the time via war tax resistance, etc. If the military polices the world, police are policing us: our communities—so this is a domestic and international form of the same kind of state violence.

We don't simply refuse to take up state violence as Mennonites—we also call the world to a different way, and we imagine what that world might look like. We work together with others towards the reign of God.

—This is about people, their stories, and their lives. Center the people who are affected by this system day in and day out. Bring yourself back to the people who have been lost, the families forever changed. Keep seeing the people, because that's how we see God.

While we can't get into every argument for or against defunding the police in this article, are you up for learning more? Whether you've been convinced of this for years or are incredibly skeptical, consider engaging with this topic. [MC USA's Defund the Police? curriculum](#) could be a place for you and your congregation to start.