

June 2004, *Equipping*

## “MENNONITE MOB...”



Some of you may have seen the article in April's *Saturday Night* magazine. If you missed that, you may have read the report on the article in *Canadian Mennonite* (May 3, 2004, p. 24). The cover article, complete with photos and lurid details, carries the eye-catching title: "The Mennonite Mob: An unholy alliance of drug traffickers, contract killers, corrupt Mexican police...and the brethren."

In a side-bar in *Canadian Mennonite* MCC worker Abe Warkentin, calls on Mennonites to recognize the truths in the article and increase efforts to help our sister church, the Old Colony Mennonites, deal with the very significant social problems they experience in Mexico and Canada, including the drug-smuggling activity in which *Saturday Night* claims some 5000 Old Colony members are involved.

Mennonite Central Committee has worked with Old Colony Mennonites in Canada for at least 25 years. In response to the "Mennonite Mob" article, MCC Ontario director, Arli Klassen, and two Old Colony leaders, Bishop Herman Bergen of Aylmer, Ontario, and Bishop Peter Friesen of Leamington, wrote a letter to the editor of *Saturday Night*. MCC is also initiating meetings with police and others to address the drug problems, especially in the Ontario communities which were the focus of the article.

For Mennonite Church Canada there is a particular interest in this story. On March 5 (in Winnipeg) and March 8 (in Mexico) we signed a partnership agreement with Conferencia Menonita de Mexico (CMM), a "General Conference" conference located in the region of Mexico from which the drug trade originates. I have written to the leaders of CMM expressing our concern about the article. I wrote, "In the spirit of our partnership agreement, we want to know if your conference is facing challenges in this area and if so, is there anything we might do to encourage and support you?" As I write this there has not been time for a response to be received. I do know from reliable sources that the CMM has intentionally, and apparently successfully, kept its members from engaging in the drug trade. I also know that they, with other Mennonite conferences in the region, have established a drug and alcohol treatment centre (see *Canadian Mennonite*, March 22, 2004, p. 16).

In an editorial comment in the May 3 issue, *Canadian Mennonite* Interim Editor/Publisher, Margaret Loewen Reimer, challenged us to "take this opportunity to ponder the dark side of Mennonite community. The ideal of being a 'separate people' can go terribly wrong and drive people to destruction. How does that happen? What is our responsibility?"

I challenge you, pastors and leaders of MC Canada congregations, as I have also been challenged, to think about the implications of this article for your congregation's and our denomination's ministry.

1. How do we minister to the people with drug, alcohol and other addictions in our congregations? Do you serve people in your neighbourhood who suffer addictions? I know that more than one of our churches provides meeting space for 12-step programs—and some of their congregational members are members of Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and similar support groups. What more can we do?
2. What is our responsibility to intervene with people who engage in socially destructive behaviour—drug dealing and other illegal or immoral activities? Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and other groups or individuals in our church are engaged in prison ministry. What more do we need to do? As Christian citizens in a democratic society, what is our opportunity and obligation to address social ills?
3. How do we relate to other parts of our Mennonite family? The article in *Saturday Night* might give many of us an opportunity to explain, once again, that there are lots of different kinds of Mennonites, and "they" are not part of "us." As in biological families, so also in our spiritual family some members behave, think and speak in ways that embarrass us. (And we sometimes embarrass them.) Can we acknowledge that they too are part of our faith community? Can we extend support and care? Are we open to receiving their support and counsel about our challenges and failures?

It seems to me that the drug-smuggling issue has given us an opportunity to act on an important scripture passage, Galatians 6:1-5:

*My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. (NRSV)*

May God's Spirit sustain you in your ministry.

Sincerely,



Dan Nighswander