

How should we respond to kidnapping?

On July 27, Francisco Wiebe, a 17-year-old member of the Rio Verde Old Colony Mennonite community northeast of Asunción, Paraguay, was kidnapped while harvesting corn in a field near his home. He is being held for a ransom of \$700,000. The kidnapping, carried out by the Paraguayan Popular Army (Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo, or EPP), a paramilitary political group with ties to FARC in Colombia, is the second high-profile kidnapping among Old Colony Mennonites in Paraguay. Abraham Fehr of the Manitoba Colony has been held in captivity by the same group for more than a year.

The incident, which has drawn international attention, calls to mind similar abductions that have occurred in recent years in other Mennonite communities in Mexico, Belize and Colombia. Indeed, Wiebe's story is far from isolated. In 2006, Tom Fox, a Quaker volunteer with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in Iraq, was kidnapped by a group linked to Al-Qaeda and eventually murdered. Two years later, Al Geiser, a volunteer service worker in Afghanistan, was held captive for 56 days. By far the most dramatic recent incident in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family was the abduction in 2014 of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, the vast majority of whom were members of the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria).

These stories—and thousands more in other settings around the world—raise a host of painful questions. In addition to the obvious concern for the well-being of the victims, one of the most immediate questions faced by the grieving family and community is how to respond to the kidnapers' demands, especially under the pressure of imposed deadlines. Most nongovernmental organizations—including Mennonite Central Committee—have a clear policy against paying ransom money. Complying with the demands of the kidnapers, the argument goes, rewards the perpetrators and only encourages further hostage taking. Families and local communities, however, often find that logic cold and unpersuasive. How can one argue about policy or finances when a human life is at stake? Although Wiebe's family is unlikely to raise \$700,000, the Rio Verde Colony—perhaps with the support of other colonies in Paraguay—probably could. Should they do so?

Those questions immediately lead to equally vexing debates about other alternatives. Should a Christian community, committed to the gospel of

peace, encourage police or military action against the kidnapers? In March 2006, a multinational military force in Iraq freed the three remaining CPT hostages, apparently without bloodshed. Shortly thereafter, CPT issued a statement expressing joy at the release of the captives; but the statement concluded that “the illegal occupation of Iraq by multinational forces is the root cause of the insecurity which led to this kidnapping and so much pain and suffering in Iraq. The occupation must end.” Al Geiser's rescue by U.S. Special Force soldiers in October 2008 resulted in the deaths of several militants. Currently, there are many voices in the Paraguayan press—Mennonite and otherwise—calling upon the Paraguayan government to use whatever means necessary to rescue the victims and eradicate the EPP as a threat to civil order.

All of which raises, in turn, an even deeper set of questions. What exactly do Christians committed to the way of Jesus expect from their local police—or their governments or the United Nations—in terms of civil order? Anyone who has witnessed the violence that ensues in weak or failed states is tempted to sing the praises of lawful order, even if that order ultimately rests on the state's monopoly of lethal force.

Yet we also know that the state's monopoly on power can easily justify all manner of violence in the name of peace, often against the weakest members of society. Does violence in the hands of “legitimate authorities” somehow cease to be violent? Moreover, any account of the EPP's presence in eastern Paraguay would need to acknowledge the complicity of government officials in narco-trafficking, the dispossession of indigenous farmers from their land, uneven access to health, education and social services, and the reality of Mennonite economic dominance in the region, particularly in the area of soybean, corn and milk production. None of which can justify the kidnapping of Francisco Wiebe. But healthy, stable societies must attend to issues of justice and equality along with the concern for order.

Some Mennonites in Paraguay have responded publicly to recent events by raising the possibility of emigrating, though the destination remains unclear. In the meantime, the response of the Rio Verde community has been to gather regularly for prayer.

What would be your counsel to the families of kidnapping victims? **TM**



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