

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

From lament to social transformation

ON FEB. 5, the headlines of Paraguay's major newspapers announced the good news: After being kidnapped and held for ransom for nearly four months, two young Mennonite men, Franz Hiebert and Bernhard Blatz, had been set free in a forest in the northern part of the country.

Yet the joy associated with the release of the young men was mingled with ongoing uncertainty. Hiebert and Blatz were only the latest in a series of kidnappings carried out by a group known as the Paraguayan People's Army (EPP), a pro-Marxist paramilitary organization with Catholic roots claiming to defend the rights of indigenous people in the country. Since 2013, the EPP has been involved in 16 kidnappings in rural areas, especially targeting Mennonites because of their wealth, their relative isolation from Paraguayan culture and their aggressive agricultural practices. Hiebert and Blatz were released only after their families complied with the kidnappers' ransom demands.

The seeming impunity with which the EPP has carried out these actions has generated deep frustration and fear, especially in the face of the Paraguayan government's seeming inaction, ineptness or even complicity in the violence.

Their story again raises basic questions about the role of the state in a healthy society. Throughout their history Anabaptist-Mennonites have had a profoundly ambivalent relationship with the state. We have tended to regard civil

authority as a "necessary evil"—acknowledging its function in providing order and security while lamenting the violence that seems inevitably to accompany that role. In countries such as Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, Mennonites and their neighbors have often suffered when weak or corrupt governments have allowed violence and anarchy to prevail.

Surely, we think, the state must do something to stop these killings.

Yet we also are wary when the state calls on military or police force to impose order or when the exercise of its authority infringes on religious liberty or individual freedoms.

A week after the story broke about Hiebert and Blatz's release, headlines in the United States announced yet another school shooting—17 more people dead at the hands of a teenage gunman wielding an assault rifle.

Relatively speaking, U.S. citizens enjoy considerable security. Yet the international community looks on with bewilderment at the extraordinary number of civilian mass shootings here and our fascination—bordering on obsession—with guns. In the weeks since the school shootings, we have witnessed the familiar cycle of bewilderment, fear, frustration and outrage. Surely, we think, the

state must do something to stop these killings.

Last October, the Mennonite Church of Congo (Communauté Mennonite au Congo)—the largest Mennonite denomination in a country that knows well the human costs of lawlessness and violence—sent condolences to our members for the lives lost in the mass shooting in Las Vegas. "Our dear brothers and sisters," they wrote. "It is with great sadness that we have learned of the carnage inflicted by an enemy of liberty that claimed the lives of 59 peaceful American citizens and wounded many more. [We] share the pain of the Mennonite churches in North America and all the American people. We unite our grieving hearts with yours... We are joined in prayer with you."

To be sure, the contexts of Paraguay, the United States and Congo are different. But all of us cry out when innocent people suffer; all of us yearn for a sense of order and security; and all want to bear witness to the gospel of peace in our cultures of violence.

Thank you, brothers and sisters in the Congo, for your expression of solidarity.

But the question for all of us remains: How do we turn our laments into social transformation?



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.