



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Ron Wiebe: Visionary Prison Warden

“Ron was a remarkable man,” said Commissioner Ole Ingstrup of Correctional Services Canada. “He knew where he was going and was not afraid to boldly experiment with new methods in order to realize his goals. His struggle to improve his profession was driven not by desire for personal attention, but always with the goal of improving the contribution of corrections to public safety.”

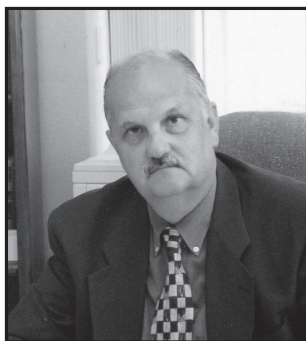
Ron Bruce Wiebe (1945–1999) was born and raised in Abbotsford, BC. His parents were William (Bill) G. Wiebe and Elizabeth (Janzen) Wiebe. Ron loved the Fraser Valley and referred to this area of Canada as the best place in the world. While growing up, he attended both private and public schools, studying at the Mennonite Educational Institute and graduating from the Abbotsford Secondary High School. His family attended the Abbotsford Mennonite Brethren Church (later re-named Central Heights Church) where he was baptized. Ron’s understanding of faith was consistently shaped by his inclination to ask difficult questions, sometimes to the frustration of his elders and teachers. This trait continued into adulthood and helped forge a solid theological foundation for everything he did.

After attending Briercrest Bible Institute (BBI) in Saskatchewan, Ron studied at Simon Fraser University (Burnaby) and finished with a

Master of Arts degree in Social Work from the University of British Columbia (Vancouver). He met his wife Shirley at BBI and—together with their two oldest sons Jeffrey and Jason—they spent two years in the Northwest Territories where Ron served as a community social worker. They returned to Abbotsford, where their third son Jordan was born, and lived there until Ron’s untimely death from cancer in 1999.

Ron enjoyed a lifelong career with the federal government at Correctional Services Canada. He brought his skills as a social worker to his first job, working with incarcerated men as a parole officer and he went on to hold a variety of leadership roles in corrections.

At the time of his illness and death, Ron was serving as warden at both the Ferndale Institution and the Elbow Lake Institution. In this capacity, he had a huge influence in implementing Restorative Justice programs to assist offenders in addressing the harm brought upon victims, thereby preparing for a more positive re-entry into the community. The Restorative Justice movement—with religious roots in Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching—advocates for justice that has to do with healing, reconciliation, and restoration, making things right with God and with one another.



Ron Wiebe (1945–1999)

Ron was instrumental in introducing the principles of Restorative Justice to federal correctional institutions, which led eventually to its application through the whole continuum—from serious violent crimes to institutional conflicts between offenders. Where appropriate, it led to more face-to-face encounters between offenders and their victims, in an attempt to gain greater understanding of the contextual dynamics of conflict and to begin repairing the emotional harm done by the offender.

Under Ron's leadership, the Elbow Lake Institution's programs focused primarily on Indigenous Peoples, engaging the services of Indigenous elders to provide both spiritual and cultural support to help offenders in their rehabilitation. Ron's ability to authentically respect Indigenous cultural ways led to many opportunities for collaborative work with community leaders, increasing the positive impact on the lives of Indigenous Peoples and their communities.

While Ron was dying, he had the opportunity to contemplate his work within corrections and record his observations and counsel for future corrections programming. His book, *Reflections of a Canadian Prison Warden*, was published by Correctional Services Canada in 2000. One of the many experiences he describes in the book is a significant Restorative Justice meeting in a healing circle with members of an Indigenous community that had experienced tremendous loss. It turned out to be a life-changing and healing experience for participants and witnesses to the process.

Tireless in his networking to raise awareness and gain support from the broader com-

munity, Ron regularly met with service clubs, seniors' groups, or civic officials. In fact, Ron added a sub-title to the prison's name, "Partners in Corrections."

Ron's seminal contribution to Restorative Justice led Correctional Service of Canada to establish a National Restorative Justice Award in his honor. The award is given to a worthy person or organization annually.

Beyond his career in corrections, Ron's influence extended into the community. He was active in sporting leagues and the development of the *Ag-Rec Centre*, a multipurpose site for sport, exhibitions, track and field, and community organizations. His work in this area was recognized by the Abbotsford Recreation Commission and they named a sporting complex in his honor: *Ron Wiebe Playing Fields*.

A committed member of Highland Community Church (MB), Ron and his family began worshipping there in 1980. He served as elder for many years and was the lead author of Highland's "Statement of Mission and Core Values" that continues to guide the church through to the present in worship, mutual caring, and service. Ron was passionate about having a strong foundational framework of leadership principles derived from Christian faith. Out of this heart for community, he mentored leaders at work, in the community, and the church. He modeled relational trust, values-based leadership, an appreciation for "soul-work," and a commitment to excellence.

For Ron, the greater emphasis was always on "doing the right thing rather than merely doing things right."



Profiles of Mennonite Faith: No. 59, Spring 2016.

Written by John Konrad and Nellie Taylor. For more about Ron Wiebe, see *Reflections of a Canadian Prison Warden. The Visionary Legacy of Ron Wiebe: An Unfinished Conversation* (<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/restorative-justice/003005-3100-eng.shtml>).

E-mail: jon.isaak@mbchurches.ca • www.mbhistory.org

Readers are invited to recommend stories for future Profiles and to contribute church and institutional records to the nearest Historical Commission archive (Hillsboro, KS; Fresno, CA; Abbotsford, BC; Winnipeg, MB).