Policing the local community

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South Australia police rescuing a boy

The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions



- Attributed to **Sir Robert Peel** the "Father of modern policing"

Restoring a theology of community policing

Almighty God has shown himself to be deeply interested in the peace, safety and security of local communities. Requiring his people living in Babylon to *seek the "shalom" of the city* (Jeremiah 29:7), God establishes the authorities who will *commend* and *bring punishment* (Romans 13:3,4) to promote good order and to curb anti-social behaviour. Thus the authorities including the police are worthy of prayer, encouragement, pastoral care, and reform. The work of modern policing was in fact shaped by enlightened Christians who called for positive action instead of violent responses to wrongdoing. Such views upheld the value of enriching the soil instead of immediately axing the unproductive tree, as described by Jesus (Luke 13:6-8) of whom it is written: *"A bruised reed he will not break ...."* (Matthew 12:20).

Accordingly, modern policing was formed in 1829 by Christian reformer and statesman Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) who promoted security without the deployment of military personnel. Unlike soldiers who apply immediate and decisive force, the police were to provide a persuasive and community-based response that did not summarily resort to violence. Known eventually as the *Police Service* (not *Force*) it recruited respected members of society. They wore uniforms resembling ordinary clothing to be worn both on and off duty and which concealed the truncheon. "Walking the beat" where they lived, the police knew the people and were addressed most respectfully by name and rank as they watched carefully to commend or admonish the local children.

While it may be hard to restore the foundational approach of community policing, there is great scope for God's people to pastor the police, to partner with them, and help the police interact more positively with wider society.

Pastorally supporting the police and their families

Ministering to *respect* and *honour* the authorities who *give their full time to governing* (Romans 13:6-7), God's people may develop pastoral programs to support the police and their long-suffering families. Many officers experience enormous stresses and fear, and are sometimes verbally abused, spat upon, bashed and shot. Police in the line of duty may have to inform parents a child has died in a car accident. They routinely deal with attempted and completed suicides, and with persons who are mentally unstable or drug affected. They are often frustrated by legal difficulties including delays, apparently inadequate penalties, and failed prosecutions. But pastoral ministry by God's people may help to reduce the risk of harm to the well-being of police and their families.

Pastoral responses may occur as God's people create opportunities to support believing or unbelieving police. The often thankless tasks of policing can be enriched and encouraged by the creative ministry of Christians:

- Giving cakes and other gifts to appreciate the police and their families;
- Appointing a chaplain to the local police station or local policing region;
- Inviting officers on patrol to attend the after-church coffee break;
- Facilitating and supporting a local Police Christian Fellowship;
- Establishing a regional *Police Officer of the Year* award scheme;
- Attending police commemoration ceremonies.

Ministry to the police may enrich their important vocation and help to tackle issues of recruitment, morale, resignation, drug use, and corruption. Such ministry is also fundamental to the police taking seriously the teaching given by God's people that civic authorities should apply the wise precepts of divine justice. This will help police secure the peace with high standards of conduct.

Adopt-A-Cop

Commencing in the mid 1990s in the USA, the Adopt-A-Cop scheme began linking police with churches. As God's people meet with the police and their families, an appreciation of their challenges enables pastoral support and prayer. Police and their families can be blessed by the care and concern given in thanks for their service in the public good. Accordingly, the San Jose Chief of Police (Louis A. Cobarruviaz) has commended the Adopt-A-Cop scheme:

> *It is truly unusual for police officers to be contacted on a positive basis .... From personal experience I can tell you just how important these expressions of encouragement and prayers are during difficult times.*

Partnering with the police

Besides praying and caring pastorally for police, God's people can work in partnership with their endeavours and help facilitate their interaction with society. The challenge is to regain awareness that under God's blessing the peace and security of local communities depends on the prudent activity of police who rely on the cooperative assistance of upright citizens. Accordingly the people of God can form and sustain Neighbourhood Watch groups to encourage the police and to help identify criminal activity within the region.

Churches can operate kids clubs and youth groups with a positive police presence, and may provide mentors to encourage young people in need of positive input, who are referred by the police. Christian input may also help train police to defuse potentially explosive situations, through negotiation and gentle persuasion. The people of God can help police remember that the badge is no warrant for belligerent conduct, but an emblem of community confidence that prompts officers to always treat the public with respect and courtesy.

To help restore the founding vision of community policing, God's people may highlight the promise made by graduating recruits. So greeting cards sent to officers could reproduce the police pledge, along with an indication that the church is praying that the pledge would guide the conduct of each officer. Further, police in jurisdictions in the Westminster tradition serve the Crown. So members of the Australian Federal Police swear (or affirm) as follows:

> *... I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her Heirs and Successors according to law, that I will faithfully and diligently exercise and perform all my powers and duties ... without fear or favour, affection or ill will ... that, whenever performing duty in the Australian Capital Territory, I will cause Her Majesty's peace to be kept and preserved, and prevent, to the best of my power, offences against that peace, and that ... I will, to the best of my skill and knowledge, faithfully discharge all my duties according to law.* [*So help me God!*]

Receiving obligation from the Sovereign's Coronation Oath, those officers display the **Australian Federal Police Badge** in several places upon the uniform. Their badge features the Edward Crown, surmounted by the Christian cross - which symbolises service and grace, as well as the rule of law.

Encouraging Christian service within the police

God may be honoured as his people aspire to serve in the noble profession of policing the local community. This is because Almighty God has established governments and raised up civic authorities to promote peace and good order. Among *every authority instituted among men*, police have a role *to punish those who do wrong, and to commend those who do right* (1 Peter 2:13-14), and ideally God's people have the qualities of heart that will prosper the role:

- To *punish* wrongdoers requires restraint when (for example) instructing people to cross the street legally; but it demands severity if they rebel.
- To *commend* law-abiding members of society requires generosity of heart when (for example) praising motorists who drive with sobriety.

As the policing of society is a God-honouring vocation, Christians may aspire to join and reform the police. Applying God's wisdom, his people may uphold the principles held by the Christian founders of the police including Sir Robert Peel and the first police commissioner - evangelical Anglican Charles Rowan. Christians within the police may especially be encouraged by the name of the *Metropolitan Police Service* in London, and (in Australia) by the motto that helps to inform the *Queensland Police Service*: "With Honour We Serve".

As Christian police excel and willingly offer themselves in the line of duty, they give a civic application to the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ, who declared: *"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life"* (John 15:13). Police who are devoted to duty, especially within dangerous contexts, may earn respect that commends their spoken witness to colleagues and the public. Having tactfully disarmed tense situations and prevented escalation, testimony may be given to Christ who is the ultimate example of patience and forbearance.

Furthermore, as Christian police excel they may be promoted to positions of leadership, enabling them to assist with the reform and renewal of the work. Enunciating the key principles that were foundational to modern policing, Christians may explicitly glorify our Lord Jesus who said regarding leadership: *"I am among you as one who serves"* (Luke 22:27).

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