

Creating Space for Dialogue

by Ron Claassen

Claassen is the West Coast affiliate of Mennonite Conciliation Service and directs the Fresno County, California VORP Program. Beginning in July, he will also serve as co-director of the new Institute for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific College.

In a period of thirteen months, my community of Fresno, California experienced 15 police shootings. Three of these resulted in deaths, all of Hispanic youth. On January 1, 1985, Raul Rangel Jr., a teenager, was carrying a gun and threatening suicide. The family called the police for help. Somehow he was not contained inside the house. When police felt threatened, they shot and killed him. Within twelve minutes after the call to police, Rangel had approximately 35 entry wounds.

On January 24, 1986, Ronnie Lopez, another teenager, was shot and killed by police. Lopez was in his house with a gun. A neighbor called his mother, who was at work, and the police were called. The police arrived first. By the time his mother arrived, approximately 10 minutes later, Lopez was dead on the doorstep of his home, with one bullet through the heart. Lopez was a cousin to Rangel, their mothers are sisters. In between these incidents, another youth, Anthony Garcia, had also been killed by a shot in the back of the head. No other shots were fired.

Each incident generated a great deal of public concern and calls for "justice." Shortly after Lopez' death, the media coverage and citizen demonstrations became intense. It was at this point that I was asked to intervene as a "mediator." This article will describe and reflect on the processes which evolved.

The first "mediation" involved bringing the Chief of Police and several support officers together with the two sisters, whose sons had been killed, and their support group. These meetings were shortly after the second death. They were very private.

The second "mediation" was about a year later. It involved facilitating a public forum attended by over 300 people, in which members of the Hispanic community addressed the city council on their concerns about "the excessive force of the police against the Chicano community."

I believe I was called on to get involved in these "justice" concerns in the community because of my own involvement in the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP). In Fresno County, those of us involved in VORP had been working since 1982 at developing the structures, the training, and the credibility to make it possible for volunteers to work at justice and peacemaking concerns primarily with victims and offenders of crime.

The initiative for the first meeting, between the Police Department and the two mothers, came from Chief of Police Max Downs, in a request to Metro Ministry. Walt Parry, director of Metro Ministry and a trusted person in the community, asked me if I would be willing to convene and facilitate such a meeting. After hearing a mixture of support and discouragement from people whose opinions I sought, I agreed. Parry agreed to work with me as a support person. I had never led a meeting like this before and I prayed a great deal during this time.

Since the Chief had initiated the meeting, I wanted to meet first with him and any others he wanted to represent the Department. We met with him and five of his immediate subordinates. I said that if we were to have a meeting, it was important that everyone come voluntarily, that we have a common purpose, and that everyone agree to ground rules. Then I read the ground rules and purpose I had developed:

Purpose: To seek peace and justice for both sides. To give opportunity for family and police to meet face to face,

to express and recognize feelings and experiences, to ask questions, and to clarify concerns.

1) The first meeting will be one hour in length and everyone agrees to stay for the duration. (The last 10 minutes will be devoted to deciding when and with whom future meetings might be held.)

2) All agree to allow the facilitator to regulate the conversation. (Fairness is important. The discussion may be interrupted by anyone to discuss fairness of process.)

3) All agree to allow the facilitator to ask for clarification and to work together to make our points as helpful and clear as possible.

4) All agree to summarize or restate the comments of the others at the request of the facilitator.

5) All agree that there will be no name calling and that they will avoid those statements which each of us knows will get the other side immediately angry. We will not avoid the issues, but will try to raise them by describing experiences rather than by judging and condemning the other side. We all know how to push the other side's "buttons" and will try to avoid this.

6) The facilitator may caucus with either or both parties if it seems helpful.

7) No tape recorders.

8) No press.

9) No attorneys representing someone present. (We recognize that a family friend who is an attorney might be present and might at a later time represent one of the parties.)

After some discussion, I explained I would need to hear from each of them individually that they would support this purpose and abide by these ground rules. Chief Downs immediately assured me that he was in agreement and that this meant they were all in agreement. I told him that was probably the case, but that I would need to have approval from each of them individually before I could proceed. He agreed; all of the others also individually agreed.

Parry and I then met with the mothers, Mrs. Rangel and Mrs. Hernandez, and about five support persons, including family, a pastor, and a friend who is also a civil rights attorney. Again, I laid out and we discussed the proposed purpose and ground rules and I asked for approval from each individual. The civil rights attorney immediately slammed his papers on the table. He saw the ground rules as obvious and just another example of racial discrimination. He said that if they were Anglos, there wouldn't be a chance in the world that I would spell out the rules in such detail and then ask each individual for agreement.

I deferred to Parry, who told of our experience at the police department. After hearing this, the attorney said that he agreed with the ground rules and recommended going ahead with the process. All agreed. After discussing some concerns and possibilities for the meeting, we amended the first part of the purpose statement to read "That this meeting lead in a direction of greater understanding so that the shootings of Chicano youth in particular and all youth will not happen in the future. The bigger purpose being that justice will be experienced by all people." I later called the Chief and he agreed to the amended purpose statement.

Our first joint meeting was at a church in the area of the shootings. Mrs. Hernandez, whose son had been shot only about one month before, didn't come to the first meeting. We talked about whether we should go ahead. The Chief said that he wanted to be clear that he was not trying to force anyone to meet. I caucused with the family group, then left them alone to make their decision. They soon decided to go ahead.

We sat around a table and each person wrote on a folded card the name by which they wished to be addressed. After introductions, I again asked each person if they were in agreement with the purpose statement and ground rules. They all agreed. After getting permission to refer generally to the two sides as "police" and "family," I asked someone from the family to share an experience or concern.

Mrs. Rangel explained how she felt when the police had recently surrounded the house of an Anglo who had a gun, waited him out for 8-10 hours, and ended the incident peacefully without even firing a shot. Her son had been threatening to kill himself and she had called the police for help. Within twelve minutes, he was dead. I asked the Chief to summarize, and there was some discussion on the idea of containment.

The Chief shared what it feels like to be an officer, called in to help, finding yourself looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. There is no time to wait. This was summarized by someone from the family, and there was discussion of the concern of guns in the hands of youth and how police respond to perceived threats from someone with a gun.

Towards the end of the meeting, everyone acknowledged the low trust between the Hispanic community and the police and that this was a growing problem that needed to be turned around. Everyone agreed that the discussion had been helpful, that there should be a second meeting, and that Mrs. Hernandez should be invited again.

Before the second meeting, I called Mrs. Hernandez and we talked for nearly an hour. She was particularly distressed at how police and the press had labeled her son as a neighborhood bully and drug addict.

It was a classic case of fear escalating into violence.

She came to the next meeting and shared that when her son would drive truck with his uncle, he would call home to let her know if he was going to be late. Just about a week before he was killed, he had been with her and several of his friends in their living room. He had walked over to her and hugged her and told her how much he loved her. She appreciated it when members of the police team summarized this.

We also discussed an incident that had almost escalated into a major problem. Police had driven by the Hernandez home several times and slowed down. The first couple of times, Mrs. Hernandez told another son and his friend, who were painting the house, to turn down their radio. About the third time, out of fear, she brought them into the house, closed the drapes, and watched the police by peering through the curtains. The police had received a call of loud noise at the Hernandez home. The first couple of times they drove by, they had seen the boys painting, thought the noise wasn't that bad, and had gone on. Then they received another call and went by again. This time they noticed the boys had gone into the house, had drawn the curtains, and were peering through. Out of fear, the police interpreted this as being called into an ambush situation. ("Kill a cop" had been threatened at some demonstrations.) They called in reinforcements and met about two blocks away to discuss their strategy. Mrs. Hernandez took the boys with her to Mrs. Rangel's house. She saw the police gathering and tried to talk to them, but they saw her coming and moved to another location. She called Chief Down's office to talk about what was happening, and the incident stopped. It was a classic case of fear escalating into violence.

Also discussed were the problem of drugs in the community, the general lack of trust between police and youth, and some possible steps toward working on these. The police committed themselves to reviewing policies and procedures in light of these discussions. At the conclusion of the second meeting, all agreed that the problem was larger than this group alone could address.

Soon thereafter, the incidents disappeared from the papers and the demonstrations ceased. Had I helped privatize the incidents and minimize them? Or had this process of "mediation" set in motion new channels of dialogue on how "justice will be experienced by all people?" ●

Editor's note: Claassen's article will continue in our next issue of CQ. This later piece will detail some of the public discussions, and eventual systemic changes, which arose following the more private mediation.