

What is forgiveness?

The Peacemaking model

Second in a series of papers on restorative justice by Ron Claassen, Co-Director of the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University and Founding Executive Director of Victim Offender Reconciliation Program of the Central Valley.

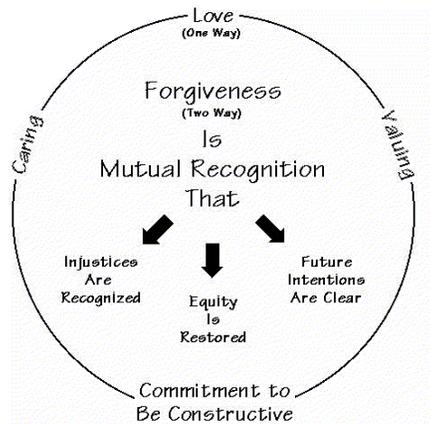
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Since 1987 I have been visiting a group at the Solano State Prison in Vacaville, California, that calls itself the Victim Offender Reconciliation Group (VORG). At first there was just one group on Complex A, but later another group was developed on Complex B.

Some men in the group have been there since the program started, and others rotate in and out. Each group has a steering committee of inmates and a prison employee who is the leader/sponsor (currently Mike Brewer). VORG's purpose is to develop an understanding for the impact that crime has on victims and victims' families. They do this by inviting victims' groups to bring in victims (not the actual victims of these inmates) to share with them the impact that crime had on their lives. They listen and learn to empathize. The inmates have also invited a group to work with them on learning to respond to stress and conflict in nonviolent ways.

Each time I visit, the inmate steering committee asks me to present my VORP Peacemaking Model and to lead a VORP roleplay. The "Peacemaking Model" is my description of a process that occurs when there is movement from a situation where people are angry and upset with each other to the place where things are better or at least improving between them.

The Peacemaking Model



When agreements are made and kept, trust grows.

The Peacemaking Model ©1996 Ron Claassen

It starts when at least one side decides to be constructive in the relationship rather than to continue in the destructive direction. In biblical language, it is called love (agape). This love doesn't mean that the person has warm and gushy feelings for the other in the conflict. It just means that they have decided to be constructive.

The process of making things as right as possible - in biblical language, forgiveness - involves three elements (although the order and ways to accomplish them may vary among cultures and in different situations):

Recognizing the Injustice (in biblical language, confession). Recognizing the injustice includes mutually recognizing what happened, who did what, what impact did it have and perhaps is continuing to have. Restoring the Equity (in biblical language, atonement). Restoring equity is always some combination of restitution and grace. In some cases it can be 98 percent restitution and two percent grace, and in others it may be 98 percent grace and two percent restitution. It cannot be predicted and can only be decided by those involved. Anyone outside would be guessing. In the Christian faith, we believe that atonement in our relationship with God is 100 percent grace.

Clarifying Future Intentions (in biblical language we call this repentance, which most literally means turning). Intentions must be clarified in order to prevent reoccurrence of the injustice. An outsider can be helpful in making suggestions, but the ones involved are the ones who can decide what it would take. When people who are angry and upset with each other decide to be constructive with each other, mutually agree that the three steps have been completed to the best of their ability, and then keep the agreements that have been made, trust grows between them.

The very first time I presented this model at the prison to about 50 inmates, I was very nervous. When the session was opened up for comments and questions, the first comment was, "This is Good News." When I asked why, he said, "usually we are asked to recognize the injustice but never offered any hint that there might be a possibility for, or help, or an organized structure to do the other two."

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I visited the prison again in late March. This time, at the beginning of the meeting, a prison official, Mike Brewer, and an inmate leader invited me in front and they presented me with a check. VORG had held some fund-raisers, and they wanted to donate the proceeds to help victims and young offenders through VORP. I expressed to them that I had been more concerned about VORP finances in February than I had been for over six years. Their help was indeed a gift that I felt was directed and inspired by God. Thank you again, VORG group on Complex B, for your generous and very timely contribution.

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