Pastor shares in reconciliation experience at VORP Community Justice Conference

edited by Ron Claassen

Our story this month is written by a pastor who participated in one of our Community Justice Conference style VORP meetings. We are now receiving some non-violent felony cases before they go to court. If, in the Community Justice Conference process of recognizing the injustice, considering how to restore equity as much as possible, and considering the future, agreements are reached, the court then makes these agreements the Restorative Justice sentence. Because of the extra responsibility and opportunity, more people are in the meeting, including extended family of the offender, teachers, pastors, business people, police, probation, our community resource people, and as much additional support for the victim as they want. The story below is one of these cases told by a pastor who was present. To protect the identity of the victim and offender, some names and details have been changed and I am not including the name of this pastor.

A clergyman I get unusual requests all the time. A few weeks ago I was asked to accompany a student of the religion school to a meeting. She informed me that she had been involved with stolen money. I was surprised and a bit taken aback. This was one of my students who had learned the Ten Commandments just the year before. Well, here she was, asking for help, and it sounded like she was in a jam. She informed me that she was going to be a meeting between her, her parents, and the victims in the case, the Brown family.

My experience of the current legal system has taught me that often it does not correct the offense, nor make the person change. Given this, I was dreading the upcoming meeting. I was called a few days later by a VORP caseworker, Janet. She informed me of how the meeting was going to transpire. Both the victims of the case and one of the offenders, Sarah, were going to be speaking to one another in a supervised meeting. My responsibility was to be on the Sarah side in the meeting. I had remembered seeing something like this process on TV. I was bracing for what could be a very emotional and expressive meeting.

I was hoping for a good resolution to this for both the youth and the people who were robbed. I arrived at the meeting early and was met by the VORP mediator who seemed rather relaxed about the upcoming meeting. We were at a public library in an occupied room. As the time neared, I was a bit uneasy with what I was seeing. Finally, the doors opened and all the parties entered the room together. I felt a

2. How is restorative justice different from what we do now?

• It views criminal acts more comprehensively: rather than defining crime only as lawbreaking, it recognizes that offenders harm victims, communities and even themselves.
• It involves more parties: rather than giving key roles only to government and the offender, it includes victims and communities as well.
• It measures success differently: rather than measuring how much punishment has been inflicted, it measures how much harm has been repaired or prevented.
• It recognizes the importance of community involvement and initiative in responding to and reducing crime, rather than leaving the problem of crime to the government alone.

3. How does restorative justice respond to crime?

• It emphasizes recompense by the offender through reparation, fair treatment and habilitation.
• It establishes processes through which parties are able to discover the truth about what happened and the harms that resulted, to identify the injuries involved and to agree on future actions to address these harms.
• It establishes evaluation processes through which the community and government may consider whether new strategies to prevent crime are needed.

4. How does restorative justice seek to prevent crime?

• It builds on the strengths of community and the government. The community can build peace through strong, inclusive and righteous relationships; the government can bring order through fair, effective and parsonious use of force.
• It emphasizes the need to repair past harms in order to prepare for the future.
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bit uneasy since I knew only Sarah well. I had met her mother on Sundays but had only seen the father a few times. Here we were all around a large table wait-
ing to see what the outcome would be.

The VORP mediator started by explain-
ing the rules and how the meeting would proceed. I felt an uneasiness in the room. Having not been directly a part of the crime I wondered how they must feel. It was obvious on their faces that it was hard for them. It was taking a lot of cour-
age to be there and the VORP people had done a lot of preparation work for this case. After all were introduced, the victims were asked to relate what had happened. It was difficult to watch both people express their painful feelings.

The Browns shared their story of how their billfold was stolen from work. She had been paid earlier that day and had a large amount of cash in order to pay bills. Mr. Brown had recently been laid off from work and they were struggling to get by on one paycheck. The loss of $550.00 was a hardship for them. They were em-

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New book recognizes Fresno VORP as Restorative Justice leader

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• It seeks to reconcile offenders with those they have harmed.
• It helps communities learn to rein-

tegrate victims and offenders.

Dan and Karen and I are friends. They have been working with Chuck Colson’s prison ministries—Justice Fellowship and Prison Fellowship—for many years. I was asked to review and comment on Chap-
ner 5: Encounter. I thought it might be of interest to you who support VORP in the Central Valley that what we are doing is recognized as significant and being given credit. Discussing the meetings between victims and offenders they say:

“...These meetings give victims and offend-

ers the opportunity to pursue three ba-

sic objectives: to identify the injustice, to make things right, and to consider future actions.” The footnote here reads: “In the VORP of the Central Valley program in California, director Ron Claassen has helped develop mediator training that presents the basic components as they are discussed here. We are indebted to Claassen and this program for much of this section.” This contribution to which they refer has been made possible by those of you who have faithfully contrib-
uted both time and money to make our VORP and the following story of Restor-
ative Justice possible.

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