True justice is merciful

by Ron Claassen

Rather it was a process of managing the conflict in a way that provided maximum encouragement and support so it can be transformed.

The story of Joseph and his brothers as recorded in Genesis is a good example. The violation was serious and the road to reconciliation was a long one. As my colleague Dalton Reimer has pointed out in his extensive work on Genesis, it starts with examples of violence, retribution, and “eliminating the opponent!” and ends with an detailed example of true love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. As Dalton points out, Genesis, through its wonderful stories of how families responded to conflict, provides us with all of the options. It also clearly indicates God’s preference for restoration rather than retribution.

So, rather than love and mercy being the act of a judge or victim who offers or advocates for leniency in the face of a harsh punishment, love (an unconditional commitment to be constructive) and mercy are then encouraged to invite support as they feel appropriate.

In addition to Tom’s invitations, as called for in our CJC process agreement, Jay invited a probation officer, police officer (who had to cancel at the last minute), some other community representatives, (in this case two) and then the victims and their support persons. (We do it in this order so that the victims know who is coming to the meeting and they are then encouraged to invite support people as they feel appropriate.)

Jay met with each of the victims. Pete, the owner of the stolen car, was upset because it had caused him a lot of grief and he wasn’t sure he wanted to put this kind of energy into what he perceived as a church he had recently begun attending. Tom said he was willing to accept responsibility and work constructively with the group.

VORP Community Justice Conference leads to mutual understanding, restitution, community service

Our story this month is written by Ron Claassen. Ron, as VORP Director, is helping to design the process and train VORP’s most experienced volunteers to lead VORP’s Community Justice Conference (CJC) cases. Jay Griffith, VORP case manager, and Ron have been working together to coordinate and facilitate the first experimental cases. Names and some details have been changed.

The case involved two offenders and two victims. The one offender was an adult (19 years old). After this offense he was involved in another offense and has been sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The offender referred to VORP. Tom (17 years old) admitted that he was driving a stolen car when stopped by police and he admitted that he was with the other offender when he broke a window in a pickup and attempted to steal items from the pickup.

When Jay met with Tom and his parents, they discussed what had happened and how a CJC process would work. They were asked to identify some extended family members or friends or other advocates from school or church to be present. They decided that in addition to his parents he would invite his grandmother and a mentor/friend from a church he had recently begun attending. They decided that in addition to his parents he would invite his grandmother and a mentor/friend from a church he had recently begun attending.

See “VORP Community…,” on page 2

Volunteer Mediators Needed!

VORP mediators learn and practice peacemaking skills they can use in the home, workplace, and congregation.

The next training is scheduled on November 7 & 8. Call 291-1120 for details.
everyone arrived on time. It felt tense as everyone decided where to sit. After introductions, we discussed and agreed to the purpose and groundrules. Our process would be to recognize the violations (what happened and its impact), and then to search for ways to make things as right as possible with victims, community, and offender and family.

We started by reminding everyone of the value of very accurate communication. We invited someone to summarize Tom, then invited Tom to start by describing what he had done. In each case, the victim he was addressing did the summarizing. Then each victim was invited to describe how they experienced the offense and its ongoing impact.

Pete described his experience first. We reminded Tom that he would be asked to summarize for each of the victims. When Tom was unable to summarize Pete, his father briefly demonstrated for him how to do it.

Then Pete repeated the most important parts. Tom listened carefully and really caught the seriousness of the impact of the offense on Pete and his family. It was especially difficult for Tom to summarize when Pete said that because of the offense, he had replaced the car two years earlier than he had planned. The new payment was placing a significant burden on his entire family. So every month, when writing the check for the car payment, the pain of the offense is felt anew.

The main concern expressed by Mary and Alex was that they were somewhat fearful, even now, that their truck had been single out and then summarized both the fact and their feelings.

A very significant moment came when Alex said that he didn’t want to ask for any restitution because he thought Tom seemed like a pretty good guy and he didn’t want the entire town to lose a decent boy. At that point, Tom, without hesitation, said that he felt the need to pay at least his fair share. Grandmother, who owns a business, offered enough employment to Tom to earn the restoration, and offered to help him find a job in the community. Tom was especially difficult for Tom to summarize when Pete said that because of the offense, he had replaced the car two years earlier than he had planned. The new payment was placing a significant burden on his entire family. So every month, when writing the check for the car payment, the pain of the offense is felt anew.

The probation officer was asked how he thought the restitution should be handled. He said what was important was to decide what would seem appropriate and fair to them. They soon came to agreement.

After deciding that Tom should pay half the out of pocket costs for each victim, the discussion turned to community service, for the purpose of making things right with the community. The community representatives suggested that the hours of service should be divided one-third to each victim and one-third to the community at large. A consensus emerged that service to the victims was a recognition of their intangible losses. In addition, the desire of the entire group was that the ongoing contact would encourage development of a positive relationship. The adult mentor/friend and one of the community representatives agreed to be the mentors for the restorative accountability persons in working with Tom on the community/victim service.

The quiet tension at the beginning of the meeting changed into very friendly conversation. We all signed the agreement. We decided to meet again in six months to assess and hopefully celebrate the progress. The group decided that an appropriate way to end the meeting would be with a prayer. The community person who had arranged for the meeting at his church, closed the formal meeting in prayer. Everyone expressed appreciation to VORP, the court, and all others who made it possible for them to have the opportunity to work it out this way. When I left, victims, parents, community representatives, and offender were still talking. Tom said he was feeling a lot better.