My vision is influenced by my Christian faith—a vision in which God calls all people to live in right relations with each other and with God. You might agree that this vision seems unattainable or unreal, or unattainable. I want to suggest, however, that vision, while unattainable, is the problem we are trying to solve because it gives us direction for our daily decisions. “Do the decisions we are making today lead us in the direction of our vision?” If no, we need to re-examine our decision. When we do this, vision, as we understand it, is subject to the fact of what is going on around us. If you are a police officer, an attorney, a restorative justice worker, or any professional, you are involved with people in conflict—whether you are a criminal justice professional or a pastor, a social worker, a mental health professional, and so on. These are people involved with people in conflict—indeed, any professional who is responding to the question, “What is I am doing now leading me toward the vision?”

The question that often arises when discussing the Restorative Justice vision is: “Do we need a retributive justice system along side a Restorative Justice system?” My response is “No,” because I don’t believe retribution ever leads in the direction of right relations with other and with God.

Does that mean I favor overlook- looking or minimizing offenses? Absolutely not. Right relations demand responsibility and accountability. Does it mean that the worst offenders would not be punished as much as they deserve? No, because not all people will voluntarily decide to be cooperative. But it would mean that officials entrusted to use coercion would always test their actions by whether they were respectful, reasonable and just (even to an ideal observer), and leading toward restoration of everyone damaged by the offense. The vision of right relations is the Restorative Justice vision.

My hope is that the decisions we make in our families, our workplaces, our places of worship, our community, and especially our criminal justice system—will bring dramatic results to Fresno and move us further in the direction of the vision.

TO RECONCILE BANK STATEMENT... VORP NEEDS YOUR HELP!

As 1997 draws to a close, VORP is working hard to overcome a substantial financial shortfall. Through the generosity of VORP News readers like you, VORP has met its financial obligations every year and has been able to begin each year with a small cash balance.

VORP needs more than $25,000 in November and December to end the year with a surplus. That’s less than fifty cents a day for each of our readers. If you are a regular contributor to VORP, please consider increasing your contribution by $15 or $30 in November and December. And if you are not a contributor, you can help us by sending a donation to VORP in the past, your gift this month would be especially important.

In a few weeks, families across America will gather together to express their thanks for God’s blessings and pray for God’s continued provision. As you celebrate Thanksgiving, we ask, too, for your prayers that VORP will have the financial and volunteer support we need to continue helping victims and offenders find healing, restoration, and reconciliation—shalom—in the aftermath of crime.
The events that followed surprised me. I wasn't contacted by police but by one of my instructors. He told me the police had recovered the computer, and they knew I had taken it. But the school actually wanted to help me—not put me back in prison—by working with me through an agency called VORP. They wanted to forgive me, and help me forgive myself, and they would allow me in some way to repay them through service for what I had done. Praise God. For once in my life, there were actually people who loved me enough to forgive me and help me through my problems.

I could not believe their loving, forgiving attitudes. Nothing in my experience prepared me for the honest, open, forgiving love the school showed me through VORP. I was so used to hostility, deceit, pettiness, evil, and hatred. I saw them as natural and came to expect them as such. I looked at the world through eyes that suspected, doubted, feared, hated, cheated, mocked, and were selfish and vain. In prison, I'd looked around that vile cell and think that I must truly be evil, petty, petulant, evil, and hatred toward society and the criminal justice system, they taught me to forgive by simply forgiving. Through their love, peace, and forgiveness, they set an example for me, and my life will never be the same.

Instead of returning to prison and making me a burden to society, costing taxpayers about $25,000 a year, VORP enabled me to become a productive citizen. I now have a beautiful Christian wife and a child due in November. Both my wife and I work and attend church, and I’ve done some volunteer work in the community. I will graduate from college next year with a BA in social work, and I look forward to helping people like me and serving God for many years to come. [Since then, he earned his degree and now works as a social worker. He and his wife have four children.]

In conclusion, I’d like to ask the question: “By what principles do we have a right to make prisoners of the poor, the uneducated, the minorities, whose consciences move them routinely toward the prisons?” “How can we actually assume that causing an offender to suffer will compensate a victim for the harm that was done?” The real issue is not a matter of being hard or soft on crime, it is a matter of choosing effective means for encouraging a person to change direction. Surely there are dangerous criminals who should be confined, and there must be penalties for crime. But the vindictive elements in our punishments which have characterized our response to the offender hurt everyone. Conversely, everyone is helped if our policies and programs are designed not to tear a man down, but to provide a situation wherein he can build himself up.

1998 MEDIATOR TRAINING DATES

1. January 23 & 24 Friday Evening & Saturday
2. January 13, 20 & 27 Tuesday Evenings
3. March 16, 23 & 30 Monday Evenings
4. April 17 & 18 Friday Evening & Saturday
5. May 7, 14 & 21 Thursday Evenings

Volunteer Mediators are the most vital part of VORP. Every day, VORP mediators help crime victims and offenders by inviting them to participate and assisting them in a process of “making things right as possible.” To become a part of this life-changing work, call the VORP office at 291-1120. The need is great!