

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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We now have an additional empathy with those who experience burglary and vandalism. Our office was broken into and vandalized, it appeared that what they were looking for was money. My desk was broken into and some papers were scattered about. Candles were used to provide light. The wax was the biggest inconvenience as it was dripped on papers as well as on the desk and the floor. I would like very much to meet with the offender to ask some questions and to recover the \$20.00 that was taken (a restitution payment that had not been processed since the case was completed late in the day).

I have just returned from a meeting of directors of VORP programs from various parts of the USA. The conveners of the conference were the group which had been serving as the resource center for information and consultation for persons and groups interested in starting a VORP in their area. My travel there was made possible by a travel stipend from MCC Office of Criminal Justice. The conference brought together 18 directors. The conveners estimate that there are at least 30 VORPs in various stages of development and they have sent out information to many more that have indicated interest.

Interest in VORP seems to be getting into high places in government. Howard Zehr, director of the MCC Office of Criminal Justice, was requested by a US Congressional Committee to submit testimony and to appear to give verbal testimony and answer questions on VORP. His written testimony included a case example from our program. He reported that the chairman of the committee, John Conyers of Michigan, was very interested and met with him after the formal session to get further information.

At the conference I attended, a major item of discussion was related to the goals of VORP. When we just listed goals there was a lot of agreement. However, when it came to prioritizing them there was some disagreement. It seems that the programs that are church based or coming from a Christian perspective generally place reconciliation as a primary goal. Other programs see VORP primarily as an alternative to incarceration. All agree that both are good goals and worth the effort. This is a major item, however, since this does determine to a large extent where funding will come from and which cases will be accepted. We have taken cases in the following categories: burglary, vandalism/mis- chief, petty theft, battery, arson, forgery, receiving stolen property, hit and run, grand theft, auto theft, joy ride, property damage, defrauding an innkeeper, throwing objects at a vehicle. Some of these were an alternative to incarceration or reduced incarceration time. Others were clearly an early diversion and would not have ended in incarceration. Reconciliation has been our primary goal.

One of our offenders who agreed with the victim to work off the amount owed by working for his business has just completed his work and has done such an outstanding job that the victim offered him work this summer. Reconciliation is happening.

I became involved in VORP because I think that it provides a way to meet some of the real needs of victims and offenders that are not being addressed in the system and at the same time educate church people to the injustices that both victims and offenders experience. VORP offers the opportunity to invite the church to become involved in the justice and healing process. I think that church volunteers are best equipped to do this since they have experienced reconciliation and carry that spirit and hope with them into the meetings.

