



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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The hostility in the world is reduced a bit every time a VORP volunteer mediator helps a victim and offender resolve the offense and negative feelings between them. It might seem insignificant but if it does it is because we lack vision. Consider this. In Fresno County, our criminal justice officials estimate that each year there are approximately 4,000 cases that could be handled through a VORP process (if there were enough church and community volunteers to handle it, meaning less than one per church per month). That would mean that approximately 16,000 people per year in Fresno County would be involved in an experience of restorative justice. There could be a VORP in every community. It would mean that millions of people each year would experience resolving a conflict through a cooperative process that brings people together and restores both parties rather than one that separates, determines a winner and loser, and puts one down in a futile attempt to raise the other. This would not be insignificant.

As you read the following experience, imagine how our world would feel if this was happening more often and in every community. The following VORP experience is shared by Ellie Bluestein, a long time supporter of the VORP idea and a recently involved VORP mediator.

Working as a VORP volunteer mediator is a tremendously positive experience for me. I am learning to be more patient and less judgmental in dealing with people whose lives are very different from mine. In a recent case of two teenage boys who vandalized a candy machine we reached a marvelous reconciliation. The welfare mother of one boy feared that there would be hundreds of dollars of restitution and was so relieved when the owner of the business offered to let the boys work off the restitution that she agreed to bring the boy there every afternoon (for three weeks) to work half an hour cleaning up the laundromat. In the case of the second teenager the boy had an opportunity to tell how sorry he was and that he would never get into that kind of trouble again. The owner not only allowed him to work off the restitution by cleaning the place, he offered the possibility of a future part time job if the boy was interested and did a responsible job. Whether or not the boy decided to work for the owner, he got the message that he was being given another chance, that people still had faith and trust in him. It was obvious that the boy took very seriously the consequences of what he had done, but it was clear also that there was understanding and forgiveness on the part of the victim. It was a very satisfying resolution. I could tell that the victim was feeling good about being able to give the boys an opportunity to work through their mistake.

Thanks Ellie

Retributive Justice	Restorative (Biblical) Justice
Crime defined by violation of rules-i.e. broken rules	Crime defined by harm to people and relationships-i.e. broken relationships
State as 'victim'- real victim's needs and rights ignored	Victim's needs and rights central
Guilt indelible	Guilt removable through repentance and reparation
Accountability = taking ones punishment	Accountability = taking responsibility
Balance righted by lowering offender	Balance righted by raising both victim and offender
Justice divides	Justice brings together

From Howard Zehr, Changing Lenses (Herald Press, 1990)

It takes some staff to coordinate the efforts of our volunteers with our criminal justice officials. Our staff is made up of young people who are recent college graduates who are willing to live on a subsistence allowance to make it possible for our VORP to have a high quality staff on a small budget. Elaine Enns and Beth Holck have both come to us through the Mennonite Voluntary Service program. They bring skills, ability, enthusiasm, energy, and dedication. It is a pleasure working with them.

Beth just arrived last month and intends to work with us for a year. She is a graduate of Bethel College in Newton Kansas. Beth says, "VORP contains several levels of attraction for me. VORP gives the participant the sense of bridging disparities and creating a more peaceful community. As alternatives such as VORP become feasible, the entire community is energized to begin imagining what other options might exist for criminal justice and social institutions in general."

Sept 18 & 23 and Oct 23 & 30 are the next two regularly scheduled volunteer mediator training sessions. Each training consists of two evenings, 6-10pm plus on-the-job training as needed. Training is open to anyone who is interested. Some mediators have a lot of formal education and others don't. The training sessions are designed to help you learn the process and skills to lead a successful meeting. The number of cases that can be handled is directly related to the number of people who are willing to be trained and work with cases. If your church has a group of 15 or more who would like VORP mediator training we would be glad to work with you. Call Elaine or Beth.

Another way you can support reconciliation is through your financial contributions. We value all contributions and are totally dependent on them. We receive no government or other public financial support. When you give you are making it possible for people to consider restoration and reconciliation as a way of resolving the "crime."

One victim said in a police report "the offenders been caught and should be shot." After the VORP meeting he told the offender "you're not such a bad guy." Several months after the meeting, holding his head high the young man who had accepted responsibility for the offense said to the victim as he gave him the restitution check, "I earned it all myself." The victim said, "I think we can be civil with each other when we meet in the future." You could be involved in helping this happen much more by being a volunteer mediator, giving financial support, or if you live in another community, support your VORP or start one.

Shalom
Ron Claassen

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