



NEWS

of the Central Valley, Inc.

November 1997

'Vision' crucial for moving in direction of Restorative Justice

by Ron Claassen

The 1997 Restorative Justice Conference, Pushing the Envelope of Restorative Justice: The Fresno Model, was held in Fresno on October 17 & 18. The conference was attended by nearly 100 people, including 20 Fresno probation officers, seven from San Luis Obispo, and others from around the state.

I was one of several people invited to share my vision for Restorative Justice. Following are my remarks.

When we talk about vision, we are talking about a desired state of affairs that is not yet reality and may seem very distant and remote. Sometimes we discount the value of vision because it seems impractical, unrealistic, or unattainable. I want to suggest, however, that vision, while unattainable, is very practical. Vision is important 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. Without vision, we are subject to the fad or funding winds of the day, but if our vision is clear, our direction is certain.

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 unrealistic; I would like to suggest that it is also very practical.

Restorative Justice is the kind of justice that leads toward this vision of right relations. Central to the Restorative Justice vision is the belief that when there is conflict—even the kind we call crime—everyone involved is at a crossroads. Our response can lead us down a path that increases tension and where people feel less safe and less cooperative with each other. If so, the response is leading us away from the vision and is not Restorative Justice. It is also possible for our response to conflict or crime to lead to reduced tension and healing for those injured by the offense, to greater respect for each other, and to actions that are more cooperative with each other and society. Such a response leads in the direction of the vision. It is Restorative Justice.

Am I doing Restorative Justice? One way to find out is to ask if what I am doing now meets the criteria of being respectful, reasonable, and restorative for all. Whether I am in a position of authority, or entrusted to use coercion, or whether I am leading a cooperative process, if what I am doing meets these criteria, it will lead toward the vision. So whether you are a police officer,

social worker, mental health professional, pastor, VORP mediator, probation officer—anyone involved with people in conflict—you can always ask and respond to the question, "Is what I am doing now leading me toward the vision?"

One 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 each other and with God.

Does that mean I favor overlooking or minimizing offenses? Absolutely not. Right relations demand responsibility and accountability. Does it mean that we would no longer need police or courts? 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 (even to an ideal observer), and leading toward restoration of everyone damaged by the offense.

If we fail to use coercion, exercise authority, or lead a "cooperative process" in ways that meet these criteria, we are moving away from the Restorative Justice vision.

"So," one might ask, "where should we start?" A simple suggestion is to ask, each time there is a conflict or a crime, if the parties are willing to seek a constructive response using a cooperative method, rather than assume we must use coercion or outside authority. If they are willing, the parties should be given the opportunity and supportive assistance to develop and carry out such a response in an appropriate, safe setting.

Today [at the conference] we have heard of several projects (from social services, probation, Boys & Girls Clubs, schools, group homes, court, public defender, district attorney, Fresno Metro Ministries) that move us in the direction of Restorative Justice. I believe lasting, large-scale change can start in many ways. Locally, a series of decisions has already been made that are leading us in the direction of the vision. Now might even be the time for legislation.

In New Zealand, legislation requires that all juvenile offenses, except murder and rape, be referred to "Family Group Conferences" in which primary and secondary parties to the offense use a cooperative process to decide on an appropriate response. According to New Zealand judge Fred McElrea, our 1995 keynote speaker, this Restorative Justice option has led to an 80 percent drop in juvenile court cases over five years—despite requiring that both victim and offender agree on the "sentence."

Another vital way that change begins is with each of us—with the decisions we make in our families and with our co-workers. If Restorative Justice principles become a way of life for us at home and at work, I think it won't be long until those principles are reflected in community systems.

My hope is that the decisions we make during the next few years—in our families, our work places, 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.

Ex-OFFENDER CREDITS VORP FOR MAKING HIM PRODUCTIVE CITIZEN

by a Fresno VORP Ex-offender
with Ron Claassen

This month's story first appeared in the May 1987 newsletter, approximately two years after the offense and the initial VORP meetings. I am reprinting the story because I am often asked if VORP can help people make lasting change. The answer is best expressed by the ex-offender who wrote the story.

At 28 years old, I was totally out of control and unable to stay out of prison. Of those 28 years, eight

were spent in one institution or another, and I was in prison once again, facing a lengthy sentence. One day while in the shower, the only privacy I had in prison, I fell to my knees and began to cry. As the water hit my chest and face, I raised my hands toward heaven and begged God to save me, help me, come into my life, and show me what to do. He did come into my life, and I continued faithful to Him while in prison, witnessing and attending church regularly.

Upon my release, I attended a Christian college for about a year and a half. At first, I did well and served God, but I began to drift from the college community. I moved off campus, and I became more distant from the fellowship I so desperately needed to maintain my faith. One day, I got into an argument with a co-worker on campus. Having served most of my adult life in prison, my new life was hard to adapt to. In a moment of confusion and anger, I slipped back into the life I had known for 28 years. I entered the school one night and took a computer from the school without permission (burglary), violating the trust the school had placed in me.

The police ended up with the computer and a witness stating I had taken the equipment from the school. I would rather have died than return to prison. For once in my life I had made some positive progress but now, because of one stupid mistake, I would lose everything once again and return to prison—probably for four to six years. I would lose my wife to be, my education and financial aid, and my friends, and I would humiliate my family once more.

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 haven't made 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.

See 'VORP helps...,' page 2

VORP helps ex-offender swap life of crime for life of service

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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 to help me forgive myself, and they would allow me in some way to repay them through service for what I'd 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 suspect, doubt, fear, hate, cheat, mock, and were selfish and vain. In prison, I'd look around that vile cell and think that I must truly belong in this dirty and dank place. Where else could I be? The college and VORP proved me wrong.

As a new Christian, I had read the New Testament. I had read Jesus' teachings that if a man slaps your face, you should offer him the other cheek; if a man takes your coat, you should offer your cloak also; and if a man demands that you go a mile with him, you should offer to go two miles with him. These stories got me through the violence of prison, but they didn't seem like reality to me—only nice little fairy tales to help me escape the realities of prison and the real world. How could I believe people like that actually existed? I had never met one.

The faculty at the college made these Scriptures real for me. I had slapped their face, and they turned the other cheek; I took their coat, and they offered me their cloak also. I forced them to go a mile with me, and they offered to go two. The school and VORP changed my life. They showed me that there are people like the ones in the Bible—people

who care about you, love you, and are willing to forgive you. Though I had terrible bitterness and hatred toward society and the criminal justice system, they taught me to forgive by simply forgiving me. Through their love, peace, and forgiveness, they set an example for me, and my life will never be the same.

Instead of returning me 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 conditions 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 as right as possible."

To become a part of this life-changing work, call the VORP office at 291-1120.

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