



## Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

VORP NEWS - MAY 1987

Is VORP punishment? Is restitution punishment? I raise this question because how we answer it has a lot to do with the role the VORP volunteer assumes in working with both the victim and the offender. I have said VORP is not punishment and have been training volunteers to work with their cases with this in mind. We are asking and encouraging offenders to assume responsibility for their actions and to do it directly with the victim by recognizing the injustice in their actions, by paying restitution to restore the equity, and by assuring the victim that they do not have to worry about them doing it to them again. We invite and encourage them to choose to do this voluntarily, to make the reason they are doing it an internal motivation to "make things right" between them. When they come to us as a referral they view this as a punishment, something that is imposed, something they have to do. It becomes our job as mediators to invite and encourage them make the transition to wanting to assume responsibility and to "make things right" (this is a biblical definition of Justice). I think that restitution can be ordered and VORP could be imposed as a punishment. If we think of a continuum representing motivation for participating in VORP with imposed punishment at one end and internal responsibility at the other, our desire is that the offender will move toward the internal responsibility end of the spectrum. Some offenders move further than others.

The following story was written by Jonathan Neufeld who has been Program Manager for Tulare County VORP. The names and some details have been changed to protect identities.

I received a call from "Mr. Johnson," the victim, a couple of days after I sent out the victim letter. He wanted to know about restitution; when it would be coming, how it would be paid, etc. I told him I would be meeting with the offender and his parents that week and would get back to him to set up a meeting the following week.

When I met with the offender, "Bob", and his parents, "Mr. and Mrs. Hilt", Bob admitted responsibility for the incident, but there was more to it than that. He and some buddies had been drinking and cruising one Friday night, and they got into an argument in the parking lot along the main drag in town. Bob ended up throwing a beer bottle at a pickup truck and denting the door. He claimed that the victim's friend, who was driving the truck at the time, was not totally innocent because he provoked the action. Bob admitted, however that he had done a stupid thing and was willing to pay for the damages. The victim wanted \$180 for repairs and \$50 for a rental car for two days. Bob had some questions about the rental car. Was it totally necessary? I said he would have to ask the victim and decide then if he felt responsible to pay for it.

When I met with the victim and the young man who had been driving when the truck was damaged, Mr. Johnson was already somewhat impatient. He told me he had spent several hours of his time getting estimates and arranging meetings. He was upset about his new truck getting damaged, and was now becoming even more frustrated by the slowness of the justice process. I assured him we would meet and work out a settlement as soon as possible. He was willing to meet the offender and his parents, and assured me that none of the expenses estimated were inflated at all. The rental car was absolutely necessary, and he wasn't even including his own time spent getting estimates, for which he was not going to be reimbursed.

The joint meeting was held in my office at the Neighborhood Church. Bob and his parents were there, along with Mr. Johnson and "Ted", the driver of the truck. We spent a lot of time trying to agree on what happened, since Bob and Ted saw two completely different sides of the situation, and Ted's friends, whom Bob claimed were involved, were not

present to confirm or deny the story. Bob's parents shared some of the trauma they went through as a result of Bob's arrest and booking. Mr. Johnson also shared his anger at seeing his truck, which he had been taking such good care of, dented by a thoughtless and impulsive action.

Bob finally said that the details weren't that important. He had made a mistake and was going to make it right with Mr. Johnson. Bob's father echoed these thoughts. The \$180 for repairs was quickly agreed to, but Bob was still reluctant to pay the additional \$50 for a two-day car rental. (He had said earlier that he was going to quit the track team, on which he was a top athlete, and get a job to repay Mr. Johnson.) The extra \$50 seemed like an awful lot to him. Mr. Johnson said that the car rental was absolutely necessary, since the truck was being used every day. Finally Bob's dad turned to him and said, "Well son, what do you want to do?" Bob thought for a moment, then said, "What can I do? It's my money, my problem. I have to pay." As they were signing the contract, Mr. Johnson said he would try to take the truck in early on Friday morning and see if it could be finished by Saturday noon. If it could be worked out that way, Mr. Johnson said, he would send half of the rental car money back to Bob. Johnson said, that this was a good arrangement.

To conclude the meeting, I asked if there was anything left unresolved that we needed to deal with. Mrs. Hilt (Bob's mom) started talking about her experience of the incident, and ended up crying about her son's record and the pain of having to live with that.

My heart went out to Bob as I watched him stand to leave the meeting. He had done a lot of growing in the last hour. With one arm he tried to reassure his sobbing mother that things were going to be okay, and with the other he reached out to Mr. Johnson with a firm handshake and a promise to pay for the damage he had caused.

**VORP IN FRESNO COUNTY** - In 1983 we received 85 referrals, last year just over 300, and January through April this year we have received 172 referrals. Volunteers from local churches are working with at least 70% of these cases. This is a substantial contribution to the community. To support this case load we need additional support staff. With one additional support staff person we can increase our case load by approximately 40 cases per month, provided we have enough volunteer mediators. Our financial support comes from interested individuals and churches. If you are not giving, please consider a monthly contribution of \$10, \$20, \$50 per month or if more convenient making a one time contribution. Because of careful financial management and several voluntary service staff our budget is just over \$32,000. Your contribution will be used carefully. Financial statements are available on request.

Dan Federau has been helping with our bookkeeping and is leaving this month. Thanks Dan. We'll miss you. We welcome Sue Ewert who will be taking on his responsibilities.

**VORP IN TULARE COUNTY** - Jonathan Neufeld has ended his time with the Mennonite Brethren Christian Service program and VORP. We thank you Jonathan for your contribution in bringing this new program through its early infancy. Linda Line, currently a part-time seminary student and pastoral candidate in the Presbyterian Church, is our new program manager. Linda is a long time resident of Tulare County and committed to facilitating the local churches in serving victims and offenders. Linda is committed to the restorative focus of VORP. Tulare County VORP is also funded by interested individuals and churches and needs your assistance now. If you are a resident of Tulare County please consider giving now. If your church, SS class, or other organization would like to know more about VORP please contact Linda at 209-732-4953.

**VORP IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY** - Carl Hansen, an Episcopal Priest assigned to prison ministries, is providing the vision and leadership for VORP in San Luis Obispo County. We just completed the first volunteer training and Carl has been observing and learning our case management and other procedures. He has adapted them to SLO County, has had an orientation with county officials, and they are planning to make the first referrals this month. He and his advisory board are committed to facilitating churches in serving victims and offenders with a responsibility and restorative focus. If you live in SLO County please contact Carl for a presentation of the VORP program, vision, and opportunities for service. His number is 805-239-0901.



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Later this month I will be attending the National Gathering of VORP program personnel in Indiana. I have been asked to lead two sessions: "Values and Goals: What Are We Trying to Accomplish?" and "Case Studies" (focusing on methodology). Please pray for us as we come together from throughout the nation and with various viewpoints that we will seek God's purpose and direction for VORP.

Shalom  
Ron Claassen, Program Director