



Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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There was a time when it seemed to be perfectly logical to look up and think that the sun and stars revolved around the earth. This was because the "lens" the people looked through to help them make sense of their universe was one that defined the earth as the center of the universe. Because of some critical thinkers and keen observers, we now look up and it makes sense to us that the earth rotates about its axis each day and our earth rotates about the sun. The "lens" we look through to help us make sense of our universe changed.

Howard Zehr, guest speaker at our VORP Gathering and Celebration, used the above illustration to point out that there have been times in our history when we have viewed "reality" in one way and later viewed "reality" in a different way because we made a major shift in the "lens" which we used. Howard is the Director of the MCC Office of Criminal Justice and author of the just released book, CHANGING LENSES: A New Focus for Crime and Justice. He proposes in that book that what we do in Criminal Justice and the way we all look at it, makes sense to us because we use a particular lens and that if we were to use a different lens, we would do some things differently because what we are currently doing would not make sense.

Howard describes two distinct "Paradigms of Justice" which he calls Retributive Justice and Restorative Justice. If we use our Retributive Justice lens, we view crime as law breaking and a violation of the state. It then makes sense that the victim is the state and that the primary parties are the offender and the state. Justice focuses on establishing guilt and punishing the offender. If we use our Restorative Justice lens, we view crime as a violation of people and relationships. It then makes sense that the people harmed are the victims and the primary parties are the victim and the offender. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation and reassurance.

Howard's book is very thorough and well documented. He is a Christian and History Scholar. He examines the Bible and history to help us see what we are currently doing in Criminal Justice, how we got there, and why we need to examine our lenses and consider making a Paradigm Shift. CHANGING LENSES is currently in stock at the Fresno Pacific College Bookshop. The publisher is Herald Press.

In addition to Allen Guenther's thoughtful and provocative devotional helping us reflect on our motives for involvement in VORP, another highlight of the evening was hearing from two people who had participated in VORP as victim and offender. They were simply asked to share whatever they would like from their experience with VORP.

Bill's Perspective: Some Friends and I took some birds. [They turned out to be prize show roosters worth about \$2,000.] VORP gave me a call and asked if I'd like to meet with the guy. I said yea. I felt real bad about having taken the birds and thought it would be good to work something out with him.

We're pretty good friends now.

I sometimes have trouble making my payments. Rudy's a real great guy. [Rudy follows up on restitution agreements and when someone is late starts from the assumption that they want to keep their agreement and pay and asks them how he can help.]

This is a real good program. I'm glad that it is here and that I did make friends with Dave. I like this program.

Liz's Perspective: We have a 20 year old son and last year he was really beat up by three guys. Last fall he was taking 17 units at Fresno City College. Right after he was assaulted he was not able to go to his classes and he was accidentally dropped from his classes. He had headaches and chest pains and he also wasn't able to go to work at his two part-time jobs. He did get back into his classes.

He was pretty upset. My husband and I talked to friends and a lawyer to see if we could help out. He was really angry and his friends wanted to get these guys. He was getting discouraged and we didn't know what to do.

He and his friends kept getting more upset and wanting to get these guys. I kept holding them off. I'd hear them saying "we could find out where they are. We could catch them in a dark corner. We could do something to their car." Things like that.

VORP contacted us and we agreed to a meeting. It went pretty good except the offender's father got a bit out of hand. We met at a fast food restaurant and what the mediator didn't know was that one of my son's friends was sitting in the corner; he was there to check things out. After the meeting the offender and his father had left and we were standing outside talking to the VORP mediator. My son's friend came over and said that "we know who he is, we're going to get him." My son said, "no, just forget the whole thing. We're not going to do anything. I feel really sorry for him. For a kid to have a father like that, that's punishment enough."

After that the whole thing was dropped and they never talked about revenge again. I thought that was great!

We also agreed to a restitution contract and we are getting compensation for the medical expenses not covered by our insurance.

VORP was just great!!

Thanks Bill and Liz!

I think that it is very helpful to view reconciliation not as an all or nothing choice but as a continuum with greater hostility on one end and greater caring on the other. What we notice in most cases and what we can see in the testimonials above is that there is significant movement because of the VORP process in the direction of caring.

"Blessed are the peacemakers. For they shall be called the children of God." This includes the individuals who made the referrals, those who set up the paper work, those who gave financially to make VORP possible, those involved as participants in each case and the VORP mediators who worked with these cases (Gretchen Schmidt and Mark Gudgel).

Many more cases could be worked with but there are not enough trained mediators. The next training is August 2 & 9. Each session is from 6-10pm. If you decide at the end of the training to work with cases there is no fee for the training. If you decide to not work with cases there is a \$15 fee to help cover the expenses. In either case, we think it is worth it because you will be better equipped to be a peacemaker in other settings as well.

The other limiting factor is finances. We have been running just a little short all year and are now owing approximately \$2,000 in back expenses. I know that summer is a time for vacations and extra expenses for all of you. I pray that as you are enjoying some time for rest and relaxation you will also consider being a peacemaker by giving a little to make more stories like the ones above possible. Each time this happens it reduces the anger and hostility in our world just a little. Added up it could make a real big difference.

Shalom
Ron Claassen

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