

Is VORP soft on Crime?

I often get the feedback from someone who is hearing about VORP for the first time that, "This seems too soft. After all, we are talking about criminals here."

A few weeks ago in a conversation with James Rowland, recently retired director of the California Department of Corrections, we were discussing VORP and he asked about the criteria for referrals. I explained that the offender must say that they did the offense they are charged with, and before I could give the other criteria he said that that alone was an incredibly important, "hard," question. He explained that it is very likely that given the current system an offender may go all the way through the court process and serve a prison sentence without ever answering that question.

Admitting that we have done something wrong is not easy or soft. But VORP does not just invite the offender to admit it but to explain what it was they did, directly to the one offended and then listen to the impact that offense had on the victim. The next part is to make an agreement about how to make things as right as possible now between them. This might take the form of a restitution contract that is paid back over as much as several years. Finally they talk about the future, both how they might relate if they were to meet again and if the victim needs to worry about it happening again.

VORP is a process in which offenders take responsibility for the offense and make it as right as possible. This is not easy. VORP is a restorative process for both the victim and the offender. Maybe it would be helpful to say VORP is hard on the issue of the offense and the damage it caused and caring, "soft," on the persons involved. VORP incarnates the love of God.

Mediating VORP Case Was A Good Experience For Local Attorney

Our VORP story this month is told by Deborah Owdom who is a member of the First Congregational Church and an attorney.

Sixteen-year-old Jeff and Bob, his future brother-in-law, were playing catch in a schoolyard near their home. With no particular plan in mind, they broke the window of a school building with a baseball. They opened a door, entered, pried open a cabinet, and removed a telephone and microphone. Police apprehended them the same day and recovered most of the stolen property. At the initial meeting with Jeff and his parents, Jeff explained that right after the offense he and his father had met with the school's

vice principal. Jeff had returned the additional property and had apologized. When Jeff offered to pay restitution, the vice principal recommended VORP! At our meeting Jeff and his parents expressed their strong support for the aims of VORP. Bob, an adult, requested to be permitted to participate. After a separate meeting, he also made

a commitment to the program. The vice principal, who believed that it was very important to try to achieve reconciliation, agreed to meet with both Jeff and Bob.

Jeff, Jeff's mother, Bob, the Vice Principal, and I met at the school. Everyone was very serious and respectful. Jeff and Bob described their parts in the offense, their thoughts at the time, and their conclusion that their behavior had been wrong,

Good Bye and Hello!

This month we are saying good-bye and welcome. Beth Holck, who came to us on a one year volunteer assignment with the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program will be starting classes at the San Joaquin College of Law. We thank you Beth for your committed service and enormous contribution to our community and we wish you the best in your studies and as you integrate your mediation interests with your law training. Mark Bakker, also a volunteer with the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program will be joining us. I'll introduce Mark more next month. When you call VORP, if Beth answers, please help us thank her and send her off with blessings; if Mark answers, please help us provide him a warm welcome.

destructive, and senseless. Jeff's mother revealed the shock and disappointment experienced by the family; it has been particularly difficult because they were in mourning over the recent death of a beloved family member. The vice principal explained that upon discovering the offense, he and other school staff members had felt violated and frustrated. He mentioned that it was extremely expensive to the district to repair and replace school property that was vandalized or stolen; he noted the ultimate injury to other students and the public.

All participants discussed how victimization of one part of the community really victimizes all of it. *(more)*

Jeff and his parents expressed their strong support for the aims of VORP

It is encouraging that VORP is becoming known in the community as a resource for conflict resolution.

Story (continued from front page)

Jeff, Bob, and the vice principal agreed upon restitution for the repair of the window at an amount set by the school district. They further agreed that reconciliation required the restoration of the relationship between the school and the youths. Jeff and Bob adopted the vice principal's suggestion that they promise to be good neighbors by watching for suspicious circumstances at the school and reporting them to police and the school.

The meeting concluded with a resolution not to repeat the offense and a commitment to complete the restitution agreement. That agreement has now been successfully completed.

Taking part in this case was a good experience for me. I appreciate the sincere concern of the participants and their commitment to making things right with each other. It is encouraging that VORP is becoming known in the community as a resource for conflict resolution. It is interesting that even in a situation in which all participants were already committed to restitution and reconciliation, VORP could provide the mechanism to coordinate their efforts and facilitate their goals. Yet my most enduring impression is how the parties' meeting in good will to face and resolve their problems enriched their experience of justice. What might have been an exercise in punishment and bill paying was instead an opportunity to accept responsibility, forgive, and seek the healing that comes with making things right with one another.

Thanks Deborah!

Together We Can Make A Big Difference

There is a great need for more trained volunteer mediators to invite people to consider making things right between them and then to facilitate that process. The next VORP Volunteer Training Program will be Sept 10 and 12, 6-10pm each evening. Call Elaine or Beth to register.

VORP relies entirely on your contributions. Last month many of you must have been on vacation. Please remember that we do not have a large reserve to draw on. If each of you sends a small amount, together we can make a big difference. With your assistance, offenses that otherwise generate bitterness and isolation can be resolved with responsibility and caring, the way of Jesus. To offer this requires some staff coordination and that means some money is needed. Thanks for your serious and prayerful consideration.

Shalom,

Ron Claassen

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