

## Zero Tolerance Policy Harmful To Reconciliation Process

Zero Tolerance seems to be the popular phrase these days. If we examine what really happens when we implement a Zero Tolerance policy, for example a school setting, we simply move the point at which discretion is made to a lower level. Instead of the principal or board or specially appointed and trained group using their discretion to make a decision on an appropriate course of action, it is made by the person who observes the misbehavior. They now know that if they report the indiscretion, it will result in expulsion or other severe consequence. This policy puts a great deal of pressure on those at the lower levels.

A Zero Tolerance policy, I think, is driven by our fears and concerns about misbehavior and a desire to tighten up our punishment system. Our punishment systems (school, home, criminal justice system) are set up to provide warnings and no punishment or a small amount of punishment first and then with each succeeding violation to increase the severity of the punishment. Unfortunately, this punishment method focuses on the rule violations and misses the real violation.

If however, we would recognize that rules are written to protect and enhance human relationships, we would do things very differently. The basic difference would be that we would say that violating another person is never appropriate and the first time you do it you have an obligation to recognize the injustice, restore the equity with the one offended as much as possible, and make accountable agreements to not repeat.

The Christian religion says that "if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness."

VORP encourages and assists churches in their mission of reconciliation with victims and offenders. Isn't that what we really want? We want those who misbehave to recognize that what they have done is wrong, we want them to do something to make things as right as possible, and we want them to change their ways and not repeat the violation.

## Miracle Happens At The Ladies Quilting Group

■ Our story this month is from Howard Enns, who spent four months as an intern in the VORP office. The following is a case which Howard assisted two young boys in the process of recognizing the injustice of an offense and taking steps to make things as right as possible.

The women looked around in shock. Every week a group of ladies from a local community group had met to create things; crafts, quilts and other items that were sold annually to raise money for the community. Now their hours of work had been destroyed - their crafts and supplies torn and scattered throughout the trailer and the grounds. There had been a rash of break-ins in the area and seeing this just fulfilled their fears.

"Where were the parents?" "How did such young kids do this kind of damage?" "We put hours of our time and energy into creating these crafts." "There was such lovely work and detail..." These were the type of comments I heard during the individual meetings. The parents of the two young boys who had done the damage shared these concerns.

I arrived 20 minutes early for the joint meeting. I watched as car after car pulled into the parking lot. From the three I had originally met with, the representation of the community group grew to 15. Everyone who was connected to the incident wanted to be involved. They all had a stake in what happened.

There was a lot of tension and anger over what had happened. I checked with the boys and their families and talked to them until I was certain that they were willing to move ahead even with the increased number of people who had come.

Since most of the people present had not been at the individual meeting, I spent the first part of the joint meeting talking about this issues involved and how to be constructive, using the VORP peacemaking model. Then, we chose three representatives from the community group and arranged the rest in a half circle behind them. From then on it was very much like a regular joint meeting (we occasionally checked in with the larger group).

When I asked the two young boys if they were ready, the one boy said very determinedly, "Yes, I'm ready to make things right." This comment caused a ripple to go through the larger group and the tension notably went down. The nine year old boy who made this comment showed amazing understanding of making things right for a boy of his age. We had worked hard on this understanding during the individual meeting, and it was a great feeling when he expressed this understanding.

**"Yes, I'm ready to make things right."**

It was equally satisfying to see the anger and frustration of loss on the women's faces change through the process of the meeting to one of assurance that they had been heard and that there would be restitution.

We worked through recognizing the injustice. The community representatives talked about their feelings and the boys confessed to what they had done, explaining exactly how they did it, and took responsibility for their actions. After the meeting was over there was respect and admiration for the boys in facing up to what they had done.

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Each of the boys was responsible for \$300. They came up with a written contract that worked out to \$150 cash and 35 hours at \$4.35 an hour to be worked off by serving at community functions and work around the hall.

One of the results was a lessening of tension within the community. People within the community were very hurt and angry over what had happened. There was also a lot of fear. Confronting that fear, and the boys who had caused it, and

finding out that they were willing and committed to make things right opened their hearts. There was reconciliation, not just between the two offenders and their victims but between the community and their families.

As one of the victims said afterward, "We've seen a miracle here today." The miracle of reconciliation.

Thanks Howard!

## WE NEED YOU...

You could become a VORP mediator!! The next training sessions are scheduled for July 22 and 23; Sept. 8, 15, and 22; Oct. 14 and 15; and Nov. 15, 22, and 29. The materials fee is \$15 for those who plan to work with at least 3 cases. The training fee is \$75 for others. Call Barbara or Linda (291-1120) to Register.

**VORP RELIES ENTIRELY ON YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!! IF YOU HAVE NEVER MADE A FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTION TO VORP BEFORE, NOW IS A VERY GOOD TIME TO WRITE A CHECK AND RETURN IT IN THE ATTACHED ENVELOPE!!!!**

Shalom

Ron Claassen

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