

## Trust, forgiveness revisited in light of current events

by Ron Claassen

In the light of national and international events recently, I thought it might be interesting to review two of the basic principles that guide VORP. It just might be that we can gain some insights regarding possibilities for much larger systems.

The national and international situations that I have in mind are the bombings of the embassies and the counter attacks, the situation with our president, and the situation in Cambodia (this is heightened for us because our son and daughter-in-law, Kevin and Jennette, are now living in Cambodia serving with Mennonite Central Committee).

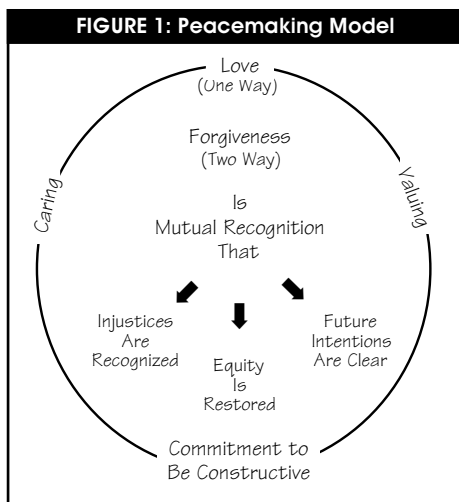
Principle: Trust grows when agreements are made and kept and trust goes down when we are unwilling to make agreements or when agreements are made and not kept.

In our last E-mail from Cambodia, they were requesting our prayers that the leaders would be willing to talk and make some agreements. This principle would indicate that trust will continue to go down until they are willing to talk and make some agreements. They also asked for prayers for the people of Cambodia. They said that they have talked to several who cannot ever remember living in peace.

This principle would tell us that trust will continue to go down between those responsible for the bombings until they talk and make some agreements. Generally, the one with the greater power is least interested in talking.

One of the general agreements that we have is that people will not intentionally deceive us. When that happens, trust goes down.

Principle: Forgiveness (the process of making things right) occurs when, in a constructive context (Love—agape), there is mutual agreement that injustices have been recognized, equity has been restored, and agreements have been made for a peaceful and just future. (See Peacemaking Model: Figure 1.)



Love (agape) is not the same as love (eros) or love (philia). I think that Love (agape) is best understood as a commitment to be constructive. Because of lack of space here I will not try to define what it means to be constructive but, whether one is being constructive, must be judged by someone who cares deeply about both sides. So, movement toward forgiveness must start with at least one of the parties moving them-

selves to the constructive end of the continuum (see Figure 2 on page 2). Notice that it is very possible to remain high on the issues (those things that are important to us) and to be high on the Commitment to be Constructive continuum. That would be represented by being in quadrant #1 in Figure 2.

A few questions this raises in the situations we are considering might be: Are any of the

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## VORP relies on your contributions!

VORP relies on your contributions! VORP could double or triple its case load if we had the finances to employ the necessary support staff. While we probably wouldn't turn down a real large contribution, we think that VORP is most stable when hundreds of churches and individuals contribute in varying amounts. VORP has the potential to influence how justice is done.

If you are supportive of Restorative Justice, please give what is appropriate for you. \$120 per year (\$10 per month) per individual receiving this newsletter would allow VORP to triple its case load. If you are not already contributing, please start this month.

## Offender 'makes things right' after school vandalism

VORP Participants relieved to put incident behind them

by Jill Yergensen and John Lawless with Ron Claassen

Our story this month is from two Fresno State University students, Jill Yergensen and John Lawless. Approximately 50 students last year took the VORP training as part of their course of study.

The offender and three buddies jumped over the fence at a local high school and broke a window in one of the classrooms. One of the offenders (our client denied it was him) went into the room. Our client (the only one of the four that was caught) heard a police car. He warned the other three offenders and they ran, but he was caught.

The first meeting was set up over the phone. We met with Samuel, his mother and sister. The mother did not speak much English so Samuel interpreted. We described the VORP process to him and his mother. The meeting lasted about one hour. Samuel and his mother said they would like to participate in the process and make things as right as possible.

We phoned Mrs. Wilson, a representative of the high school and identified ourselves as volunteer mediators with VORP and that our function was to help determine how an offender can help to "make it right" with a victim. Mrs. Wilson was very agreeable to meeting with us. At the meeting she was very re-

ceptive to meeting with the offender. She was familiar with VORP and the process as she had worked with VORP personnel in the past. She indicated that the school was not as interested in financial restitution as they were in making an impact on the offender to help him not make further poor choices.

The joint meeting was then held with the mediators, Mrs. Wilson, Bob (head grounds keeper of the school), Samuel and his mother. We met in a small conference room. We confirmed that everyone was there voluntarily and the purpose of the meeting was to help "make things as right as possible." We stressed that if an agreement could not be reached the case would go back to probation. Everyone seemed willing to work things out. We reviewed the ground rules together which they had previously agreed to in the individual meetings.

Samuel began by stating his role in the offense. He explained he was one of four boys who went out in the middle of the night and ended up breaking a classroom window at the school. He said he was a follower and really did not want to get involved. His role was the "look out" person. When the window was broken, the alarm went off and the police arrived immediately. The three other boys managed to jump the fence and get away and the police detained Samuel. He went to

juvenile hall for a few hours before being released to his mother.

After Mrs. Wilson and Bob asked a few questions, they summarized Samuel's statement. It was then Mrs. Wilson's turn to describe what they had experienced. She told Samuel of the inconvenience of responding to a vandalism call at 3:00 a.m. Having to pay their grounds-keeper double time, and how violated the school felt to have their property destroyed. She also had concerns about the boys injuring themselves on the broken glass or the possibility of getting shot at by police officers not knowing if they had a gun or not. Samuel listened to Mrs. Wilson and to Bob and then summarized. After hearing and understanding the impact of what he did, he was anxious to say sorry.

After talking about how to restore the equity and about the resources available to Samuel and his mother, it was decided that Samuel would write a letter of apology to the school. The letter was to be two pages long and was due before the end of the month. Samuel agreed to write the letter and send it to the school. He took a card with the address of the school on it.

Near the close of the meeting we asked Samuel what his future intentions were. We

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# Recognizing injustices, restoring equity, ensuring accountability keys to resolving current crises

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parties willing to make the move to the constructive end of the continuum? Who would be able to make this move first? Who could walk along side them to encourage them to make such a move?

Forgiveness, as I understand it, is a process of "making things right." It is not a pronouncement that leaves one in the superior position. It does not mean that if one says, please forgive me, that the subject is closed and the forgiveness must be automatically granted. Rather, it is a process where the offending and injured parties all agree that the injustices are recognized, agreements are made to restore equity as much as possible, and the intentions are clarified to create agreements and provide accountability for a peaceful and just future.

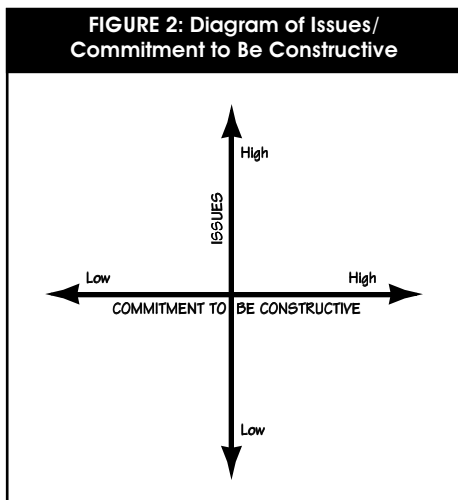
The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa gives us hope that

something like this could happen in Cambodia also. Bishop Tutu, one of the leaders of the Trust and Reconciliation Commission, says that working toward reconciliation through a process of responsible forgiveness is the only way to stop the cycle of violence. What does

this mean for us in relation to bombings? I think we need a process that recognizes the injustices, restores equity, and develops agreements and accountability for a peaceful and just future. This would apply to our situation with our president also.

To get started in the direction of forgiveness and reconciliation always requires that someone suggest the idea. It is not unusual for each side to think that the other side could

never be reasonable and constructive. Even in most VORP cases, at first the idea appears foolish or impossible. But it is never impossible. I believe that this is the way that God wants us to resolve our conflicts and repair the damage of injustice.



## School vandalism resolved through VORP

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clarified this by asking him if he ever planned to do something like this again. He said he had learned his lesson and that he was not going to break into the school again, and actually he would not break into anyone's property again. He seemed sincere. His mother had earlier produced a bill for \$50 for court costs. She said that Samuel was helping with household chores in order to help pay for this. Mrs. Wilson and Bob were impressed by this.

A follow-up phone call was arranged for two months later. At that time VORP called Mrs. Wilson to confirm that Samuel sent the letter. A phone call was also placed to Samuel confirming his completion of the agreement and congratulating him.

### Impression of John Lawless, Mediator

VORP is a much needed source of healing in the community. It is amazing that each case

I have mediated I have noticed that before the meeting both sides are nervous and ready to back out of the process. Those who follow through and stay with the program experience a wonderful transformation. Once the injustice has been recognized and once both stories are out on the table the opposing parties begin to lighten up. It is a relief to put the incident behind. I recommend the VORP process for anyone who is planning to be a social worker.

### Impression of Jill Yergensen, Mediator

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the mediation process. Direct involvement with VORP was a tremendous learning experience for me. I believe that if victims and offenders utilize the VORP process, giving them a chance to speak for themselves, emotional issues can be resolved more effectively. Then they will more likely be able to move on with their lives and not hold onto destructive "baggage."

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## LEARN TO BE A PEACEMAKER

The next VORP volunteer mediator trainings are scheduled to be held in Fresno on:

- October 19, 26 & November 2
- November 13 & 14

If you agree to mediate three VORP cases, the cost is only \$20; otherwise, the cost is \$100.

Call the VORP office at 209-291-1120 for information or to register.

Personally, I was quite moved by this case. The victims really seemed to care about the young offender. They were more interested in him making good choices in the future than their own losses. They offered him words of advice that he seemed to listen to. This young boy was also very fortunate to have a caring mother and sister who wanted to detour him from the wrong path.

This case went so well because all parties were willing to participate. I look forward to becoming more involved with VORP. I realize that all cases will not be as easy as this one, but I now feel better prepared for the next challenge.

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