

A VORP by any other name...

by Ron Claassen

The language that surrounds VORP and the Alternative Dispute Resolution movement is very interesting. In just observing it over the last 20 years, it has been interesting to see the words that have emerged as the dominant ones or the ones that have garnered the most attention.

In the beginning of VORP it was very clear that the "R" stood for reconciliation. Over time the same acronym was used but with the "R" standing for restitution or restoration and there may be others. At one of the Annual VORP Gatherings it was decided that the word "reconciliation" was too religious, or too directive, or too offensive or too ambiguous or too something else to too many people. The decision of the group was to change from Reconciliation to Mediation. The VORP Gatherings became the VOMA Conferences. The programs represented at the annual conferences now were VORPs, VOMs, VORs, and many others started to attend that had very different names.

We started a California VORP gathering for programs in California, mostly ones that we in some way helped to start. The group is growing and we now call ourselves the California VOP gathering to accommodate a diversity of program names. We continue to discuss our values and processes and I have found those discussions to be very rich and stimulating.

In the Alternative Dispute Resolution world, a book that has received a lot of attention has been the book Promise of Mediation by Folger and Bush. The key word in the book is "transformation." The

authors suggest that much of what is called mediation is nothing more than a variety of means to reach a settlement. They are generally referring to what happens as an alternative to civil court when people are put in separate rooms and the "mediator" shuttles between them trying to get a settlement. But I think their concerns are important for us working in the criminal justice arena to also consider. What they suggest is missed when this (a primary focus on settlement) is done, is the opportunity for moral growth. They indirectly suggest that moral growth is an appropriate goal. They suggest that moral growth is more likely to happen when the mediation focus is on "empowerment" and "recognition." Empowerment happens when the parties have the opportunity to make choices about participation, process, and finally any decisions that are made. Recognition happens when the parties begin to see how the other sees the problem and even begin to empathize with the other. This material has been widely discussed and is radically embraced by some and seen as highly impractical or even inappropriate by others.

It has been interesting to watch and participate in this discussion coming from our VORP perspective. To me, transformation seems like not a strong enough word rather than too strong. It seems like it doesn't, without explanation, say even what direction (toward hate or caring) one hopes for. The idea of mediation presenting an opportunity for moral growth has been central to VORP. The Christian language for this moral growth is related to ones voluntary choice to participate in forgiveness, repentance, restoration, and reconciliation with others and with God. Empowerment and Recognition are a great start down that road. In my understanding they alone don't get one to forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation. For forgiveness to happen, in addition to empowerment and recognition, the participants need to decide together how to restore the equity as much as possible and on a plan for the future that will prevent reoccurrence of the violation/injustice and how they will relate. If this results in an agreement, and if that agreement is kept, trust grows. Throughout this process, recon-

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VORP helps father, son heal rift after violent assault

by John Lawless
with Ron Claassen

Our story this month is from John Lawless. John is a volunteer mediator for VORP, and a member of Ashlan Avenue Church of Christ. Some names and details have been changed to protect identities.

When I first received this case I was a little reluctant because it involved a father and son. The charge was assault. On the night of the incident, Bill, the 16-year-old son, had become angry with his father, Don, because he told him he could not go out with his "friends." Bill reacted in anger and hit his father. When Sarah, Bill's mother and Don's wife, took Don to the hospital for treatment the police were called and Sarah rehearsed the incident for them. The police issued a warrant for Bill's arrest and he was taken into custody. Bill had his day in court and the sentence was handed down, including a referral to VORP.

I was a little reluctant because I wondered what I would be walking into. I have heard that when an outsider attempts to mediate between two family members if an altercation breaks out they may turn on the interfering outsider. I admit, I was a little concerned for my safety.

I had made several attempts to contact the offender and it seemed he was

avoiding me. When I talked to Bill's mother she said that she did not know anything about a letter from VORP or about VORP. I kept calling. When I finally spoke to Bill, he said he would be glad to meet but wanted to complete his community work first.

We set up a meeting, which I thought was going to be our introductory individual meeting with his mother present. When I arrived at the house, Bill, his father and his sister were present. I was still hopeful that I would be able to have an individual meeting with Bill and then meet with Don, but they preferred staying together so I improvised and held both introductory meetings at the same time. I accommodated their preference and told both Bill and Don about VORP. After the introduction both wanted to go ahead with the process.

I asked Bill to start. He was more than willing to relive the night of the incident. He said that some of his buddies were at his home and wanted him to go with them. Dad had said that they were not the kind of friends he wanted Bill hanging around with and he would not permit Bill to go. With the urging of his friends, Bill hit his dad and left with his friends anyway. He immediately added that he had apologized and was not hanging with those friends.

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Mediators needed!

VORP needs at least 30 more active mediators. If you have been trained before please consider becoming active again. You are welcome to attend the training again.

If you have not been trained before, the training will add a life long skill that will be of value to you at home, work, church, anywhere there is conflict.

The initial training is nine hours followed by on-the-job training as needed. The next training event is scheduled for November 12 & 13.

Please call the VORP office at 291-1120 for details.

'Future intentions' key to reconciling family members

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Don related an identical story to Bill's. Then he added that the reason he tried to keep Bill from going out was to protect him from undesirable friends, not to try to control his life. Don stated that Bill was a good kid and that he felt this was an isolated incident.

...should be about 'reconciliation'

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ciliation is occurring as they move along a continuum from wanting to hurt the other to caring for each other. It is also common for this growth in caring to extend beyond each other to include growth in caring about how what they do can improve their community, the world and the creator of the world.

It seems to me that all of this fits under the broad category of Restorative Justice. It is exciting to discuss it with anyone who is interested. Participation in this movement is a wonderful experience for me. It gives me a chance to integrate my deepest religious and spiritual beliefs with my work. It is very exciting to change and grow when we choose to do that. It is also very sad and painful when the choice is in the opposite direction.

I think the words we use are important and provide stimulating discussion that hopefully results in improved practice as well as moral and spiritual growth for all of us. I also recognize that there are times that we use different words to express similar ideas. It is also possible to use our words to hurt and divide us. My prayer is that all of us will consider how we deal with our conflicts, at home, school, congregations, work place, community, and the world, and choose to do those things that move us away from hurting each other and toward the caring side of the continuum. I call this movement, Reconciliation. Please let me know what you think.

After we completed this part of the process, I asked Don if he wanted to ask Bill anything about the incident. He said that the two of them had already worked it out and he felt their relationship had improved since then.

Next, I asked if there was anything else that needed to be done to make it as right as possible. Bill said that he had already apologized to his father and assured him that this would never happen again. He also said that he had stopped hanging around with the friends that influenced him. He added that he was planning to join the Navy after he completed high school.

I had a nagging feeling that Don had not said everything that was on his mind, so I repeated some of his concerns for Bill and inquired as to whether there were any other things he wished to say to Bill. After some silence he said, "Bill, I love

you, but I know that if you don't stay away from people like that they will lead you astray and you will get into trouble again." He continued, "Bill, I can forgive you because we all make mistakes, but if you decide to do this again, even though others urge you, you will be on your own. Your mother and I will not bail you out. Do you understand?" Bill said, "I understand and I plan to work hard in school so I can graduate on time."

Don repeated some of his earlier concerns and then out of the blue said with substantial feeling, "Bill, I am worried that you will hang around with those no good gangsters once too often and one day you will either be killed or paralyzed. Bill, I want you to succeed but it will take some time for you to rebuild the trust that we once had." After listening, taking it in, and summarizing, Bill again reassured his dad that things were different and that he would not let this happen again. He again assured his father that he was not hanging around with those same guys.

After some time of silence, they assured me that they were ready to put their agreements in writing. We noted that the violation and injustice had been recognized and that Bill has apologized. For the future, we wrote Bill will not hit his father again, he will choose better friends and he will continue to go to school and complete his education. Time will tell if Bill really changed. If sincerity is any indicator, Bill will make it. We agreed to a follow-up meeting.

After we completed the formal meeting I told both of them to be sure and contact VORP if they need help in the future. They both assured me they would. We shook hands and parted with smiles of satisfaction. I was glad that we didn't stop with the first level of agreement and went substantially deeper. It appeared that they now had a better foundation to build on.

Thanks John! Blessed are the peacemakers!

VORP relies on your contributions!

To take advantage of the good reputation of VORP and expand services, more financial resources are needed. We think the best source is from you who will hold us accountable to keep our focus on restoration and reconciliation.

\$20 per month from those of you who are not yet giving to VORP would allow us to double our case load. Please give it some serious consideration today. Your contributions are tax deductible.

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Fresno VORP
of the Central Valley, Inc.

2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, CA 93612 • (559) 291-1120

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