

The Clergy Journal

*Your practical guide to church leadership
and personal growth*

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Volume LXXVIII
Number 6
April 2001



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Restorative Justice and the Dynamics of Faith

by Jean E. Greenwood

The theological enterprise is always at risk of remaining theoretical, artful, and inspiring, yet ultimately insipid if not brought to life in the concrete. We live and work in community, in the realm of interpersonal relationships, and we all know intimately the joys and challenges of being together, given our differences. Who among us has not felt pain in relationships? Who has not felt regret and remorse as one who evoked pain? Still, while we preach reconciliation and restoration, we may have few compelling personal experiences to fuel our convictions.

My experience with restorative justice has put flesh on the bare bones of my theology of reconciliation and vigor into my convictions. I feel as if I've moved from simply preaching reconciliation to participating in it, facilitating it, and living it in fuller measure. It began in this way.

On Palm Sunday as I greeted people after worship in my south Minneapolis congregation, several choir members flocked around me, quite upset. Someone had broken into the locked choir room and stolen money from purses. As it turned out, the offenders were not idle neighborhood kids but our own youth, whom we discovered had also been dipping into offering plates for several years as eager volunteer ushers.

We were stunned. Subsequent church conversations revealed a striking polarity in perspectives: "Send them to court. Kids need to be taught a lesson. They get by with murder these days – parents are so permissive!" countered by "They're just kids. Remember when we were young? Let's move on. After all, we're a church – we're about love and forgiveness."

As their new pastor, I pondered the delicacy of the situation. How could we address the theft in a serious way that would bring healing to the church, the youths and their families, preserving the integrity of these relationships, while integrating the diverse views within the congregation? What was our responsibility as citizens, as a community of faith?



**WE are MEMBERS
ONE of ANOTHER**
ROMANS 12:4

What was the opportunity embedded in this crisis?

With much research, deliberation, and prayer we decided to move forward with a mediation process, which we hoped would hold together both accountability and compassion. After thorough preparation with all parties involved, we gathered around a table in the church library one Sunday afternoon – the youths, their parents, mediators, and representatives of the board, choir, and staff. One at a time we described our experiences and expressed our feelings. We listened and learned.

The hard words came first. Church members were angry, outraged – they had taught these youths in Sunday school. They felt betrayed and violated, no longer safe at church. Yes, they had lost money, but, more importantly, they had lost trust. Then we listened as the youths apologized. They expressed remorse that they had hurt people and affected the church, and seemed bewildered by their own actions.

Then the energy shifted as a board member confessed to his own youthful shoplifting that no one ever discovered, imagining how it felt to be confronted like this with one's errors. He understood guilt and shame and felt for the boys.

An agreement came easily as the youths offered to pay the church back and perform community service for the church, and all of us offered to work with them on their tasks. As the mediation ended we hugged each other with



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broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph 2:14). We see Jacob and Esau coming together after years of enmity, and in Egypt, Joseph with his brothers finally addressing the betrayal that had exiled him.

One element of reconciliation may be *restitution* – taking personal responsibility to repair the harm we have caused. Leviticus 6:1-7 offers this directive: when you sin by deceiving a neighbor or by robbery, when you realize your guilt and want to restore what you took, you need to repay it in full, adding a fifth to it, and then make a guilt offering to God. In Luke 19 we read of tax collector Zacchaeus welcoming his self-invited guest Jesus to his home and, in a spontaneous gesture, announcing he will give half his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold anyone he had defrauded.

Undergirding the paradigm of peace, of course, is the call to *love and compassion* for all, for all are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). "*Religion that is pure... is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress*" (Jas 1:27). We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, emulating the Samaritan who cares for the man robbed and beaten along the road (Luke 10:29-37).

For Jesus, love extends even to enemies (Matthew 5:43-46), which he also illustrates on the cross, "*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*" (Lk 23:34). *Forgiveness* embodies love and compassion in interpersonal relationships, building toward reconciliation, restoration, and peace.

We find abundant support for restorative justice in our faith traditions. The ways of peace are laid out for us. Peacemaking is our sacred opportunity and our holy responsibility. And in our faith experiences, individually and communally, we find the strength and courage, the capacity to love and be loved, that enable us to honor our calling to live in peace. With Paul we say, "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*" (Phil 4:13).

Restorative Justice: Planting the Seeds of Transformation

At the core of a restorative, relational response to crime lie the seeds of transformation for all of us. As a mediator, privileged to hear the stories of victims and offenders, I am humbled to realize their stories could have been mine. In a sense, their words reflect the stories of all of us, for we have all been victims, hurt or violated by others, and we have been offenders, whose words, thoughts, and deeds have caused harm to others. Yes, we are together in this experience of being human, and we are more alike than different.

What fills me with awe and hope is to witness those so distressed, so wounded, who find within themselves the courage to tell their stories with dignity, the power to move forward in their lives, and most remarkable of all, the capacity to empathize with those from whom they feel alienated, to love one's "enemy." Sometimes one experiences a stirring movement of the spirit, and one is never the same.

Helen, a feisty 83-year-old, answered her door late one Christmas Eve to find several young men before her, one of whom pulled a gun and shot her. She survived, the bullet

remaining lodged in her head, but lost so vision, and became depressed and lonely. I no longer felt safe coming to visit her and her. Helen stayed at home more and became more isolated. Many nights were spent in the rocking chair, keeping her dog.

I visited Helen, heard her story, and discussed the possibility of mediation with 15-year-old Manuel, her younger brother of the one wielding the gun. It was to target Helen's house for robbery because she'd yelled at him for teasing her dog. He said he was unaware his dad had a gun.

"Is this mediation stuff just to rehabilitate the offender?" I asked Helen sharply. I assured her that was not the case and urged her not to proceed if she didn't see any possible benefit for herself. She pondered it and called me later that day, "I'll do it – maybe he deserves another chance."

On the day of the mediation, Manuel, with his mother and social worker, waiting in the room while I went to meet Helen and her daughter. Helen planted herself in the doorway, soberly eyeing Manuel. She barked, "Come here you rascal!" He stood up warily and moved slowly toward Helen. She reached out, grabbed him, and wrapped him in a big hug. She sat him down at the table across from her, and, holding his hands, talked to him for half an hour. She said she loved him and forgave him, and that she wanted him to have a good life: "I believe you're a good kid at heart and you can be successful in life. I wish you were my son." She told him that God loves him too, and gave him a piece of religious sheet music to remind him. There was not a dry eye in the room.

Then Manuel spoke through his tears, "I am so sorry. I didn't know this was going to happen to you. I know how it would feel if this had happened to my Grandma." Helen and Manuel agreed to stay in touch. They exchanged addresses and phone numbers, and did contact each other. Manuel sent Helen a Mother's Day card. I learned later that Helen's son had died in prison.

This is sacred ground, where pretenses and defenses fall away and we find ourselves in the truth of our humanness and our common humanity. It is there that grace may find us and we discover in our hearts a readiness to heal and be healed in restorative connection with others.

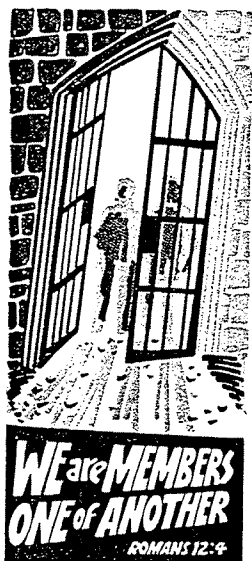
We remember that we have the capacity both to harm and to heal, and that the only sensible and helpful response to human error, to crime, is to repair the harm with compassion for ourselves and others. This is how the fabric of community is strengthened for the benefit of all, how people are restored and faith is incarnated.

Restorative justice is an exciting development in the field of criminal justice, with rich ramifications for the wider arena of human interaction. It is hopeful, potentially life-giving, and transformative. It is time for the church to get on board. ❖

Many victims
are surprised
by their own
compassion
and ability to
forgive.

Restorative Responses: From Vision to Action

by Jean E. Greenwood



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Wait! Before we add restorative justice to our long list of good causes warranting involvement or augment our pile of guilt, perhaps we can take a look at the possibilities presented by this exciting development in our midst. One can speak of the faith community's responsibility, and one can speak of the opportunity. While both are relevant, we often neglect the opportunity, though it carries, perhaps, greater motivational potency.

The pertinent question is, "Can restorative justice enliven our congregation and invigorate our faith experience, even as it benefits others?" Engagement in restorative justice energizes people of faith because it moves us from theology to praxis, bringing us to the heart of human experience where faith is incarnated in the dynamics of real life.

What is needed in communities of faith is the fresh vigor and vitality that comes from personal involvement in things that really count. Seeing that one has made a difference. Restorative justice is a gift to us, as it is a gift to others, and it gives churches a viable counter to the perennial charge of hypocrisy – all words, no actions.

Moreover, the church is uniquely situated in our society to do the work of reconciliation. We've been primed and readied. We understand the mission – it is our calling, and we embrace the inclusivity inherent in our faith that inspires us to work with all kinds of people, as Jesus did.

In addition, we people of faith know only too well our own human frailty, the pain of broken relationships, the challenge of living together in community, and, most importantly, we also know the possibilities, the capacity for change. People of faith bring hope and find their own spirits enlivened as they do the loving work of restorative justice.

Where do we begin?

Step One: Educate

Learn about Restorative Justice

See the resource list at the end of this article. Search out local resources, attend conferences, and check with denominational offices.

Explore the Challenge of Shifting to a Restorative Paradigm

Though buttressed with ancient and modern wisdom, restorative justice meets with opposition because it challenges the prevailing system, especially beliefs about the efficacy of punishment.

It is a common notion that punishment deters crime, that if we inflict pain on offenders, surely they will not offend again. Yet the evidence suggests this is not the case. Recidivism rates are high for those punished through incarceration.

We must also consider how we are all affected by a punishment mentality. It's been said that "an eye for an eye" ultimately makes everyone blind. When we surrender to the spirit of retribution and revenge, it

fuels the flames of violence. If we feed our bitterness and rage, over time it poisons our souls and the fabric of community remains shredded.

A restorative response to crime says this: we take crime seriously by helping offenders learn the impact of their actions, giving a voice to victims, as well as offenders, and engaging all parties in making a plan for repairing the harm.

Incarcerated offenders were asked, "If you were given a choice between imprisonment and meeting the victim of your crime, which would you choose?" An overwhelming majority said they'd choose prison. Restorative processes are sobering, an effective and humane way of "getting tough on crime." And, we must remember that our goal is public safety, the safer we will all be.

Demystify Crime and Use It as a Catalyst

Learn about the effects of crime on individuals and communities, the fear and distrust, anger and bitterness that arise. In the wake of crime, people become self-protective, often isolating themselves. Crime breeds separation; it tears the fabric of community.

Learn about the causes of crime, about disconnection and despair, humiliation and disrespect, poverty and racism. Read James Gilligan's *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic And Its Causes* (see Resources).

Let crime be a catalyst, for crime means that something in this community and in this individual has gone awry, and needs to be addressed. Crime is a cry for help, an opportunity for a community to respond to the needs of its people.

Step Two: Make a Commitment

There are many ways to express a commitment to restorative justice. Some congregations and denominations have written documents outlining their beliefs and intentions. Here are excerpts from two such documents:

Resolution on Declaring Ourselves a Restorative Justice Congregation, Adopted May 31, 1998.

As members of Washington Park United Church of Christ (Denver, CO), we believe in a God who calls us to participate in caring and supportive relationships. We

believe in the inherent good – though sometimes deeply hidden – in every human being. We believe in the healing powers of reconciliation and restitution...

Therefore, we hereby declare ourselves to be a restorative justice congregation...

We believe that:

- ◆ Our faith calls us to find effective, long-term solutions to the problems of crime.
- ◆ Such solutions are necessary for the health of our society.
- ◆ The principles of restorative justice are a creative step toward reaching that goal.
- ◆ If it can be done, the place to begin is here where we are.

PLEDGES TO ACTION

- ◆ Encourage ongoing education of our whole church family on the important issues of criminal and Restorative Justice.
- ◆ Include criminal justice concerns in our personal and corporate worship.
- ◆ Demonstrate our commitment to a just society through political, economic, and social justice activities aimed at alleviating the root causes of violence.

Can restorative justice enliven our congregation and invigorate our faith experience?

- ◆ Develop an action plan for responding to the victims of violence and crime in our own congregation, community, and the world.
- ◆ Continue to expand our commitment to restorative justice activism through our outreach activities.

Statement on Restorative Justice: August 7, 1996, New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

We, Members of the Religious Society of Friends, believe that God is leading us to adopt and live in accordance with a testimony of restorative justice, which calls for justice without retribution and without vengeance. It also calls for healing of all parties in any conflict, whether familial, civil, criminal, racial, or international. It is based on unconditional love and forgiveness, love of victims and offenders equally.

In our peace testimony we affirm that Jesus taught us to love our enemies. As Friends we believe that there is that of God in every person and that the power of God

can transform the evil of violence to peaceful goodwill...

Restorative justice recognizes that we must all be held accountable for our actions and the consequences of our actions. Society has a legitimate right to public safety and protection from violence. Restraint and other disciplinary measures must be applied humanely and only to the extent necessary. Where offenders are restrained in institutions, the restorative and healing process should be extended into the institutions.

Restorative justice is not the justice system that prevails today. The present system relies far too heavily on the concepts of punishment and retribution and not enough on restitution and healing relationships. We, Friends in New England, believe that God is calling us to renew our traditional concern for those in prison and to challenge our justice systems to act in radically different ways, and to implement restorative justice systems in our communities.

We ask God's spirit to lead us in our efforts.

Step Three: Prepare for Action

Beginning with a broad perspective, we note three understandings to guide our movement toward specific action.

1) Understand the Power of the Story
It is empowering to tell one's story, to be heard, to have one's reality acknowledged, honored, and validated, and it is healing.

According to Marlene Young, executive director of the National Organization for Victim Assistance, when someone is traumatized, thoughts, feelings, and memories are scattered throughout the brain in a disorganized fashion. One may feel appropriately "scatterbrained," and fear losing one's mind. Life seems out of control, and one feels a loss of competence and confidence. Young indicates that in telling the story, again and again, the memories are literally reconstructed and reorganized. One begins to make sense out of the trauma and regain confidence.

Whenever and wherever we listen to the stories of those who have been violated or have caused harm, we assist them in rebuilding their lives and their sense of connection. We also expand our own experience and deepen our understanding, thus exercising our own hearts and building our capacity to love.

2) Grow in Our Ability to Embrace Pain

Ours is a culture uncomfortable with pain, particularly emotional pain. We avoid, hide, and medicate, urging those who suffer to move on, to get over it. When we ourselves do not know how to grieve, we are ill at ease with those who do grieve.

If we learn to be with ourselves in pain, we can be with others. There we discover holy ground, for pain is often a common denominator, a place of authenticity, and a source of connection that evokes compassionate understanding.

3) Build Community Wherever You Go

It is safe to assume that most people are hungry for human connection. Healthy communities, with a sense of belonging, are a deterrent to crime, and when crime does occur, it can be addressed restoratively.

Step Four: Act

The possibilities for engaging in restorative justice are endless. This is a place for creativity and discernment. What are the needs of the community? What are the resources and needs of the congregation? Where do the needs and resources intersect? As people of faith discover their compatibility with a restorative vision, their inventiveness and resourcefulness can be boundless.

Faith communities respond to restorative justice in a multitude of ways, by initiating programs and by supporting those already in place. Here is a sampling of the possibilities:

- ◆ Serve as volunteer mediators for a victim offender mediation program;
- ◆ Initiate a crisis response team to address immediate needs when a crime occurs;
- ◆ Create a mentoring program for at-risk neighborhood youth;
- ◆ Provide space in the church for mediations or a program office;
- ◆ Become a site for community service, developing relationships with offenders;
- ◆ Participate in mediations, circles, conferences as community members’
- ◆ Support victims and offenders in the congregation and community;
- ◆ Facilitate healing/storytelling circles for offenders, victims and their families;
- ◆ Assist programs with administrative

- work, fund-raising, marketing;
- ◆ Sponsor an incarcerated offender who is reintegrating into the community;
- ◆ Assist offenders in the job search process, as they seek to meet their restitution obligations, or provide short-term employment at the church;
- ◆ Plan a series on restorative justice for adult education and youth programs;
- ◆ Serve on the board for a local program, or the design team for a new initiative,
- ◆ Build ecumenical support for restorative justice programming;
- ◆ Provide recreational opportunities for juvenile offenders;
- ◆ Practice restorative methods for dealing with conflict in the congrega-

Restorative justice moves us to enact the truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness embedded in love.

- tion;
- ◆ Celebrate, give visibility to restorative work in congregation and community;
- ◆ Initiate community dialogue on issues of public safety, crime, values;
- ◆ Contribute financially;
- ◆ If your church is victimized, for example, by vandalism or theft, respond restoratively.

At the outset, provide the congregation with small, practical ways to participate in restorative justice work. As much as possible, engage them directly in victim offender dialogue, for that is the heart of it. Build ownership in the work.

In some settings there is an organized system for faith community involvement. The Fresno (CA) VORP (Victim Offender Reconciliation Program) invites local congregations to participate in their work as “Sustaining Friends,” and the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice has established a Faith Community Network.

Out of my vision of building peace from the inside out, I have developed a

training and mobilization model for congregations: “I Am the One Who Will Make the Peace.” Restorative justice forms the framework for an interactive, experiential process engaging participants in biblical, theological, and spiritual reflection; skill-building, storytelling, and community-building; and discernment of one’s gifts, one’s energy and passion, and one’s calling as a peacemaker. The focus is this: “Given who I am in this moment in history, how can I contribute to restoration and peace in the world and my own inner peace?”

Hopefully you sense the power and energy in restorative work and feel inspired to explore the possibilities. May it be a generative, transformative experience for you and your congregation. Restorative justice moves us to enact the truth, reconciliation, and forgiveness embedded in love. There is no substitute for living and radiating the power of reconciling love.

Truly, restorative justice is a gift to communities of faith. It renews our sense of calling and mission and enhances our vision and vitality – as we discover ways to build peace within our communities and within their lives. Restorative justice is a way of life and a vehicle of hope that transforms us as it invites others to experience the gift of restoration.

Resources on Restorative Justice

Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice by Howard Zehr, Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990.

Presbyterian Distribution Service [1-800-524-26120]:

Restorative Justice: Toward Nonviolence by Virginia Mackey [free – PDS #72-630-96-705]

Restoring Justice video, 51-minute documentary [\$5 plus shipping and handling – PDS #72-630-96-720]

“Justice or Just Desserts.” Four-session adult curriculum developed at Washington Park UCC, Denver, CO. Contact Virginia Mackey: Email Vdmackey@aol.com; 303-216-1766.