

Tough on Crime

By

Dave Feick, Executive Director of Micah Saskatoon

Tough on Crime! We hear that phrase so often but what does it really mean? Some think that in order to be tough on crime we must be tough on criminals. Let's lock them away, give them harsher, longer sentences, longer minimum sentences and on and on.



But who really wins in that situation? Are there any winners? Does the victim win? Does the person who has committed the crime win? Does the government win?

In some cases, people who have been harmed by crime get some closure to their situation when they see that the person who offended against them is punished. More often, the people who have been hurt are completely ignored and they are not involved at all in the justice process.

On the inside of our prisons the offender does his/her time, in the presence of many other offenders where they share their stories and even learn to be better offenders - learning to commit crimes without getting caught. Some may search for ways to change their lives but as the prison is overcrowded, there are not enough chaplains, educators, program coordinators to meet all the needs and many slip through the cracks. They do not get the help they need and they simply do their time only to return to the former life of crime and find themselves back inside again and again and again.

In all of this, the government may say "the streets are safer" but the truth is incarceration is a very ineffective way of addressing crime.

So what is the solution? In contrast to the current system of retributive justice, where some sort of retribution - usually incarceration - is the expectation there is the restorative justice view.

Restorative justice is about community - seeking to restore communities to wholeness. When a crime is committed in our community trust is broken, relationships are broken. Many people do not know how to relate to those who are harmed by crime or those who cause the harm. We may sympathize with people who have been hurt but we are often encouraged to translate our concern into calls for vengeance, a response that hardens and alienates people who commit crime. Restorative justice searches for a better answer, one that heals brokenness of the whole community.

We see many examples of this. Healing lodges such as the one on Beardy's reserve offer a place for inmates to heal through spiritual and cultural practices in an atmosphere of very low security and greater trust. As well, victim/offender mediation offers the opportunity for the victim and the offender to sit down face to face and to talk about the incident and how they might find healing in their situation.

In the past 30 years and more, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan have been working in restorative justice ministries. Person to Person (P2P) has offered members of the community the opportunity to take seriously the words of Jesus when he says, "*I was in prison and you visited me,*" (Matthew 25:36) and, "*when you did it for the least of these, you did it to me.*" (Mt. 25:40) Beginning first in Prince Albert at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary and then branching out to include the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon, volunteers have been visiting, getting to know, and befriending inmates who find themselves incarcerated for any number of crimes. As they journey together the crime act is transformed and growing into new persons

becomes central. Both people are changed by the relationship. In some cases, those relationships have carried on into the community as the offender has served his time and is released.

In the case of those who have offended sexually, the organizations which coordinate the P2P visits have also coordinated Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA). Again, volunteers have the opportunity to meet, befriend, support and hold accountable people who no longer want to hurt anyone and no longer want to go back to prison. CoSAs believe that there should be no more victims and that no one is disposable. There is hope for every person.

Statistics prove that inmates who are visited in prison are less likely to reoffend and likewise, CoSAs have proven to reduce reoffending by at least 75%. Thus, it can be argued that Restorative Justice is more successful than the tough on crime approach.

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