

Restorative Justice - Prison Ministry Rebuilding the Community

"Restorative Justice focuses first on the victim and the community harmed by the crime, rather than on the state-against-the-offender model." (Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops, November 2000).

DEFINING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: Restorative justice is an alternative way of thinking about criminal justice. It emphasizes the ways in which crime harms relationships in the context of the community. As a result, the offender becomes accountable to the victim and the community, not just the state. Accountability for offenders means taking responsibility for actions, and taking action to repair the harm caused to the victim and the community. Restorative justice provides active participation by the victim, the offender and the community in the process of repairing the fabric of community peace. Victims services, restitution, community service, face-to-face meetings between victims and offenders, victim impact panels, and skill-building classes for offenders are elements of restorative justice.

A COMMUNITY EFFORT: A Restorative Justice approach, in order to be effective, requires a collaborative effort by all community members: judges, attorneys, law enforcement, social agencies, community organizations as well as the individuals involved.

HOW IS RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICED?

- Victim/offender mediation is available for victims who wish to participate. Faith communities, professional agencies, and community volunteers also provide support and assistance to the families of offenders.
- Businesses and community organizations work with offenders to reintegrate them into the community while offenders fulfill their obligations of restitution to the victim and the community.
- Faith communities sponsor support groups for offenders trying to change negative life patterns. Offenders leave prison with better life skills due to programs which engage them in victim/offender mediation, family group conferences, victim panels and community panels.
- Offenders engage in community service projects which benefit the community. The community provides work opportunities so that offenders are able to make restitution to the victims of their crimes.

CORRECTIONAL STAFF OUTREACH: Above all else guard your heart (Proverbs 4:23). Dismas Ministry also remembers the correctional officers and staff across the country who perform a service that is, often, unseen and

unappreciated by society. One day, as a prison ministry volunteer was being accompanied by a correctional officer, the officer said: "You know, I've been in here longer than many inmates." This officer pointed out what many people do not realize. Correctional staff spend a great part of their lives behind bars. They perform a service that society requires as it incarcerates greater numbers of people than ever before.

Currently, there are over 2 million men and women incarcerated in the United States and it is the job of correctional staff to oversee this vast number of people. The emotional, physical and spiritual impact of this service on the staff themselves is great. The daily stress, that becomes pent up, takes a toll on these dedicated public servants. There is trauma associated with this line of work, even if it goes undetected by themselves, their loved ones or society. Despite the firm outward demeanor that correctional staff maintain, they have a basic need for understanding and respect as human beings.

Correctional staff carry a great responsibility. They are crucial to a positive environment behind bars. They can provide a role model for inmates since they are in contact with inmates daily. They can have a tremendous influence on the inmates' rehabilitation. Because of the nature of their job, the service of correctional staff can be taken for granted. They deserve emotional and spiritual support for the work they do for society.

WORDS OF STRENGTH & ENCOURAGEMENT:

- Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).
- The Lord is faithful. He will strengthen and guard you (2 Thessalonians 3:3).
- The God of Israel will be your rear guard (Isaiah 52:12).
- on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong. Your every act should be done with love (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).