

### **'Restorative Justice' - what's it about?**

Our present justice system responds to criminal activity with the question "how do we punish?" A Restorative Justice system asks the question: "how do we restore the well-being of the victim, the offender and the community?"

It recognises the needs of the victims, who are at present so often left out altogether, and creates an opportunity for them to confront the offender with the hurt they have caused, in a face to face meeting in a controlled and supportive environment. It puts a human face on the victim for the offender, which can be the first step to understanding, remorse and apology. Their oddly worded aim is to try "to get victims to move towards healing, repentance, forgiveness and restoration".

Restorative Justice explores a cutting edge concept in criminal justice. At the heart of this new approach is reconciling right relationships between the victim, the offender and the community. Restorative justice is a holistic solution that allows the victim to find peace and security and at the same time create a way for the offender to earn his or her way back into the community. The goal, as it was designed and as it has borne out, is to make the community a safer, more whole place through a commonly experienced healing process.

When a crime is committed, the entire community suffers. We see that all the time in our nightly news. No matter where they live, people are at least momentarily devastated and probably forever changed by violent crime in their midst. That's why it is so important for the whole community to be involved in the healing process...to be restored as an entity. It goes right to the heart of what we are about - community and justice.

What we've got isn't working. Often, the first reaction is to call for tougher sentences, and depending on the circumstances, there can even be calls for re-instating the death penalty. Despite these understandable reactions, there is no evidence that these measures reduce levels of offending, and they do little if anything for the victims of crime.

A foreign Prime Minister recently admitted in a statement that despite recent policies of more police, longer sentences, longer non-parole periods, and "tougher" policies, crimes of violence are increasing. More of the same - longer still prison sentences, longer still non-parole periods, seven more prisons built to accommodate the load. Flogging offenders doesn't work either. South Africa introduced corporal punishment to try to change children's behaviour. It became a much more violent society. Sixty percent of men and 80% of women in jail have been the victims of violence themselves. Violence makes people angry and resentful and ready to hit someone else. Violence breeds violence. We cannot also continue building countless prisons for offenders. Of course we need prisons for those who will not or cannot change their behaviour but prisons are universities of crime that help create more offending by throwing similarly-minded rejects from society together to reinforce criminal attitudes and behaviours. Nearly 80 percent of inmates re-offend within a short time. Prisons breed crime.

**Restorative Justice: An Approach that Works**

Restorative Justice is tougher, and more demanding. It offers a chance for the offender to make reparation of some sort, and to be supported and mentored by others in the family or community who will hold them accountable for taking the steps they have promised. It can rebuild the family relationships which have gone wrong in the first place. Offenders many a times say it is the hardest thing they have ever had to do.

Restorative Justice has been enthusiastically embraced by many “Crime Stopping” bodies worldwide. In fact, so ardent is their belief that restorative justice is practical justice that they have invested lots of money for its implementation in their respective countries. But, even more important, the commitment to the process has produced the very results that are intended. Not only is the victim restored - the central issue in restorative justice - but, in many cases, the offender is reconciled back into the community. Restorative justice is a viable alternative to crime. It changes the emphasis in the justice system from the offender to the victim, from punishment to healing and proves itself not as a retrograde step but a progressive one.