

Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Creating Peaceful Pathways

Linley Gregory & Saskia Schuitemaker

AVP began in 1975 in Greenhaven Prison, New York, USA when a group of prisoners asked local Quakers to help them devise ways of communicating non-violently, in an attempt to stop the rising spiral of violence they were noticing amongst the younger inmates.

While at first the focus was on prisons, it became clear that violence in prisons is merely a version of the violence in the whole of society. People unconnected with prisons began to ask for AVP workshops, and in 1976 the first community training workshops were held.

Why do we train people in Alternatives to Violence? Because we believe that a life lived with dignity and self-respect, and the opportunity for self-realisation, is the birthright of every person. The era we live in is characterised by violence. In part it is a response to the violence embedded in our institutions, values and entertainments.

Some people are more affected by violence than others, but there is no one that does not share a capacity for violence, and none that is not hurt by violence in one way or another. Quakers believe that :

- people do not have to live this way
- there is a power that can transform hostility and destructiveness into co-operation and community
- this power is everywhere – in us, in our opponents, and in the world around us
- ‘tuning into’ this power enables us and our opponents to regain our birthright of peace and dignity, and
- the dynamics of tuning into this power can be learned.

Thus AVP is a way of sharing these beliefs and dynamics to build more constructive lives and healthier societies.

AVP workshops are a process. The facilitators do not bring direct answers. The answers lie within the same place as the questions and problems that people

bring. AVP provides a seeker-friendly environment and ideas, techniques, which encourage people to search within themselves for solutions.

It has been said, “Peace is a process”. The essential thing about AVP workshops is that they, too, are a process that allows people to experience being in a community based on peaceful relationships. Every workshop is a journey, and no two journeys are alike. For the traveller, every journey is a life experience. No two travellers are alike, nor will they experience the same journey in the same way.

A workshop group is like a group of travellers and each workshop is as unique as the individual travellers who compose it.

All facilitators are volunteers, as are all participants. What happens in AVP workshops is considered confidential. AVP workshops are experiential, and can be challenging. They are not lectures, training or therapy, and they are often fun. Each workshop aims to develop a sense of community in the group, based on respect for all the people in it. This is an important basis for developing our own power to deal with non-violent ways of dealing with conflict.

We start by **affirmation** of each other, and go on to work on **communication** skills, **co-operation** and **handling conflict**, all of which are essential for a non-violent lifestyle. We try together for solutions, which come from the whole group. **The facilitators don't bring answers** and they are not therapists. We expect the participants to find creative alternatives; i.e. choices of good ways to act to deal with disagreements, problems, and conflicts.

The concept of **Transforming Power** lies at the heart of all in AVP, and the workshops are experiential. The cumulative experience demonstrates their Transforming Power. Participants speak of the beginnings of change in their attitudes to themselves and others. When nurtured the process brings about transformation. Everyone has the potential for change. Nobody is completely powerless. Transforming power is independent of us and is something we can tap into.

There are three levels of AVP workshops. The basic introduces the AVP concepts, the advanced deals in some detail with a topic chosen by the group, and finally comes the training to be an AVP facilitator.

In 1991 an AVP facilitator from USA brought AVP to New Zealand. Two people, here with facilitator skills were quickly introduced to the AVP techniques to enable basic workshops to be run in a few prisons on that visit. The next year the same facilitator returned with one other to run more

workshops in the prisons and in the community. Then AVP Aotearoa was established, and it continued working in some of the prisons in New Zealand till 2005. At that time the Department of Corrections was running its own anger management courses and groups, and it did not see the need to continue to support AVP in prisons. Yet the work continued to some extent within the community.

To contact AVPA

avpane@gmail.com

Phone: 022320290