

Out of the mouths of children, or Whanganui towards a restorative city?

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A few years ago I was sponsored to go to Hull in Britain. I chose Hull because the city had some of the worse social indicators in Britain: high crime, high unemployment, high numbers on low socio economic levels, poverty and many other problems.

On my first morning there I was taken to a primary school in an area of the highest deprivation. The school was surrounded with high barbed wired fences, but I was pleased to note that now the gates were wide open.

I was taken to a class of nine year olds who, without teacher assistance, were setting up a circle of all the students and teachers in the classroom. Then they proceeded to do a "round" where everyone said how they were feeling and what they needed for the day. For example, one nine year old said she was worried as her sister was going away for a while: it turned out she was going to prison for a few years. Another pupil offered to be beside her all day.

Also, if there was any conflict or behaviour issues in the school, they were sorted out at the meetings. It was understood that one person's behaviour affected all others, and became everyone's problem to solve – and they did.

After the round I had the opportunity to ask a small group of students from the class how what they were doing worked. I asked what happened if something arose between the students while in the playground and no teachers were around. A nine-year old girl looked at me as if I were an idiot, and said "we form a circle, Sir, and sort it out". Indeed that was Restorative Practices in action. Such practices turned that school and the Hull community around. The fences and relationships were opened up.

Imagine if we all operated like that?

I should explain that I am a foundation trustee of the Whanganui Restorative Justice Trust. It was established in 1999 and has continued to run a successful Restorative Justice programme through the Courts since then. We had seen the "magic" that happens when victim and offender and families get together and talk to one another. We thought the same idea could apply across the wider community. We found Hull and Nova Scotia were trying to do the same, and we linked with them to create Restorative Cities in common.

We began by working in partnership with the Ministry of Education to apply restorative practices in schools. Initially the focus was on conferences to get perpetrators and victims together, but then we worked on the whole culture of the school, to achieve Restorative schools and work in preventative ways. Now all the secondary and some of the primary schools in the district are operating restoratively.

Then we spread to other sectors, e.g. to the District Council, the Whanganui Hospital and health services, the prison, community Probation, Child Youth and Family, pre schools, community social services and the business community as well as focussing on a neighbourhood. Soon we established an advisory board to represent the different sectors in consultation with our iwi, and chaired by our local member of parliament. Finally the District Councillors voted to support the proposal of Whanganui being a restorative city as part of the annual plan, and had notices to that effect placed prominently around the city. The Trust also convened two international conferences in Whanganui to spread the word.

What has been achieved so far? The Council and other sectors agreed to work together on the goal. We have had lots of requests to provide restorative conferences and processes for issues such as employment disputes from businesses and dealing with customer service complaints, disputes between tenants in housing complexes, dog and other issues, to name some examples.

History tells us that citizens “resolved” conflict centuries ago between themselves by direct engagement, even if it involved retaliation through violence. Monarchs took over and then came laws and courts and officials to deal with offending, and councils took over disputes between neighbours and so on.

As a result people stopped talking to each other and expected a third party to resolve the issues. However, at the same time they felt dissatisfied by no longer directly participating in the process. Research on restorative justice not only shows much improved victim outcome satisfaction, but also a reduction in crime compared with traditional approaches.

Restorative justice uses different language and approaches than traditional methods of conflict resolution it relies on getting the parties talking directly to one another to involve the parties in obtaining a more meaningful and involved resolution. Rather than tenants calling the council to complain, the tenants come to talk to each other. Likewise, in employment or customer service issues the parties talk to each other directly rather than through lawyers. *If everyone talked to each other with respect and restoration in mind, we would have a Restorative City.*

Restorative justice is a slow and steady process as also is the conventional

procedure for resolving disputes of any kind. It challenges the way people think, and initially is hard to grasp. Language is an issue. The roles of Victim and offender in Restorative Justice are understood but the concept of them talking to each other as equal participants talking to each other is harder to comprehend. The word “Restorative” is both a help and a hindrance. *It derives from restoring relationships between people. It is more than just dealing with problems or conflicts but a way of relating that enhances the community.*

There are challenges. The Whanganui Restorative Practices Trust brought in trainers who previously had focussed more on problem areas and facilitating conferences. But our aim was to convert them into “site champions” in their respective sectors who would in turn train others. That is still work in progress. Currently the Trust is developing a lower level training to meet other needs. Energy and sustainability are issues. Building on the community as a whole is much harder to get sustainable funding compared with the more tangible, structured and measurable Restorative Justice through the Courts.

My fellow trustees and I frequently think we have achieved very little on this journey, but others constantly remind us that we have made progress. Recently Victoria University in Wellington began a project to evaluate our work.

Our aim simply is to make restorative practices the default position in all interactions in the Whanganui community: in other words, to make restorative justice a way of life. As a Quaker, I consider this accords with Quakerism.