Relationships, reconnection foster restoration

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Relationship is at the heart of the restorative justice philosophy—restoring an offender's relationship with self, family and community.

The reconnection often begins in prison, through state-provided programs and/or jail and prison ministries. Then individuals need assistance to reinforce new behaviors and return to their communities as productive citizens worthy of being trusted again.

Members of the Restorative Justice Ministry Family Service Center board of directors gather in front of the Community Mediation Center of Tyler County. They are (front row, left to right) Steve Secaur, Earl Williams, Ed Davis, Amy and Ben Bythewood, (second row) Delois Kirkland and Flo Edwards, (third row) John Morrison, Bill Gray and James Edwards. (PHOTOS/Courtesy of John Morrison)

According to the Restorative Justice Ministry Network of North America, a ministry can be classified as restorative if it leads offenders to recognize who they are and helps them realize they will be held accountable for their actions. Restorative justice also includes ways to help offenders make restitution to the victim and to the community.

A nonprofit ministry

Recently, the Missouri system allowed Wheels for the World, a ministry of Joni Eareckson Tada's organization, to approach its institutions for inmate help to restore wheelchairs, canes and walkers to be donated to the disabled in other countries.

Inmates at the Ozark Correctional Center in Fordland disassemble wheelchairs that cannot be restored and sort parts that can be used. Offenders at the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center at Vandalia clean canes, crutches and walkers. Inmate volunteers at the Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City sew new seat covers and cushions for wheelchairs.

A community

John Morrison of Woodville believed God intended for the community to minister to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Gib Lewis Unit.

"When God placed the prison in our town, the question was: Are we going to be able to embrace it? The answer was 'yes,' because we are our brother's keeper," Morrison said.

The TDCJ honored Morrison in 2008 with the Governor's Criminal Justice Volunteer Service Award for the 15 years he volunteered in the local facility.

He has served as a mentor to inmates, and for 10 years, has led the Voyager program that uses spiritual discipline to help improve social skills.

As his involvement in the prison grew, he began to share prisoner stories. That, he believes, is what continues to attract volunteers and has made new ministries possible.

When the prison was built, "volunteers were raised up," he said. "What they see in our prison is a valid church, and the world doesn't see that.

“When they come out (from ministering), they tell about it, and that’s what attracts others to the ministry.”

The Gib Lewis Unit Peacemaking Team—the Brothers in White—completed the Peacemaker Ministries small-group study to instill in them peacemaking principles to help stop violence in the prison yard. Brothers in White include (seated, left to right) Jess, Eric and Jason; (standing, left to right) Floyd, “Alabama,” Charles and Francisco. Not pictured are Thomas and Olguin.

Enough stories were told to attract city and county attention—and donors—to open the community-based Restorative Justice Ministries Family Services Center in Woodville four years ago.

Morrison and his team recruit and train prison mentors and jail ministry volunteers. They help ex-offenders find jobs and have a team that connects with local churches.

They also minister to prison staff, law enforcement and judicial professionals. His team finds ways to minister to prisoner families, as well.

Morrison also has trained several inmates in mediation skills using

Peacemakers Ministries material. The offenders—known as Brothers in White—help defuse possible tense situations between inmates.

One team under the service center's umbrella reaches out into the local schools as mentors to at-risk students.

"Many are connected by blood to those who are incarcerated," Morrison said.

While school districts usually aren't allowed to document those students, "teachers know who those are," he noted.

The example of one young man—Justin—and his family helped Mor-rison put into perspective the need for early intervention. Every member of Justin's family currently is serving time—each in a different Texas prison.

"His story made me understand how endemic this is," Morrison said.

A university

Restorative justice can make a difference in cases outside the legal system and, in some situations, can keep a young person from heading there.

Howard Payne University in Brownwood has implemented a restorative justice approach to discipline. The administration faced its first case with a student in mid-November.

"It turned out very well," explained Lynn Humeniuk, director of HPU's criminal justice program. "Had we not gone this route, this young man would have left school and probably spiraled downhill."

The student has signed an agreement to complete a list of obligations within a certain time limit. If he fails to do so, the university can force him to withdraw.

The Brownwood Independent School District is watching how the process works at Howard Payne and is considering implementing it at district level, Humeniuk said.

A district judge also is aware of the process Howard Payne is piloting and may consider using it to mediate cases in the future.