

GROWING *Together*

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FROM FIGHTING TO FRIENDSHIP

Ryan, 17, is in police custody for auto theft and assault. This isn't the first time that he's been caught committing a crime in his neighbourhood. In fact it is only the latest in a long string of violent acts Ryan has committed in his young life. Ryan's story makes us uneasy.

Crime reporting is front and centre in the news; the more we hear, the more our fears increase. The media keeps us up to date on the latest acts of violence at home and around the world. Remember the genocide in Rwanda, Kosovo and East Timor.

We have become preoccupied with conflict. Creeping into our souls is the numbing possibility that daily life consists of little more than fear and unrest.

Committed people who care both about individual offenders like Ryan and about community safety are working to transform our fear into positive action. By means of what is called a restorative approach wrongs can be put right. "Restorative justice" involves both offender and victim with the intent of restoring property and relationships damaged by a hurtful or violent act. Justice of this nature seeks to repair and redeem rather than punish for the sake of punishing.

The initiatives of several Tribal Councils in Saskatchewan are a dynamic example of restorative justice in action. It is a sobering fact that for First Nations teenagers, jail time is a more likely future than a high school education. Community Justice Workers among First Nations youth are committed to changing this stark statistic. Front line workers have created alternatives to the court system and the sentencing process.

mediation take place quickly after an offence has been committed. A family group conference is organized **before** the offender is brought through the court system. Present at this meeting with a facilitator are the offender and the victim (both accompanied by family members), an Elder, the police and other resource people.

"This project encourages offenders to take more responsibility for their criminal behavior and instills in them a greater degree of accountability for their conduct by being actively involved in undoing the wrong that they have done."¹ An elder addresses spiritual healing along with the mental, emotional and physical aspects of making things right.

Restorative justice is to a large extent a spiritual process. Justice focused on the spiritual vision of restoring property and relationships has deep roots in the practice and teachings of all faiths. First Nations Community Justice Workers in Saskatoon have participated in victim/offender reconciliation training alongside Mennonite workers. An Inter-Faith Social Justice Committee hosted Restorative Justice conferences in Saskatoon and Regina in November 1999. Corrections Canada workers in Prince Albert met with an interchurch organization to share perspectives on justice. Safer and healthier living in our towns and cities will be possible through partnerships like this.

The challenge is clear for people of faith who care about the lives of offenders. You can make a difference! Encourage education and volunteering among the adults in your congregation. Participate in prison visitation programs. Schools are launching mediation programs that teach children to deal appropriately with conflict on the playground. Help out!

Step out of your comfort zone and get to know someone who has been through the justice system. Educate yourself and dare to take a risk! The promise of another chance is always at hand and you can be a part of making it happen!

¹"Youth Circles: Alternative Measures Program using Family Group Conferencing," Saskatoon Tribal Council Urban First Nations Services, Inc., Saskatoon, Sask., 1999

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Through a process known as the Youth Circle, intervention and