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FaithCARE: Creating Restorative Congregations

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

Restorative practices, well known in schools and the criminal justice field, is gaining ground in fields involving the family, higher education and the workplace. Shalem Mental Health Network, which provides counseling services and a variety of community service programs across Ontario, Canada, has launched a program that focuses on transforming conflict and building healthy community in religious congregations.

FaithCARE—Faith Communities Affirming Restorative Experiences — (see www.shalemnetwork.org/?page_id=567) — grew from a two-day retreat in 2007 that explored the possibilities for employing restorative practices in a faith-community context. Following the retreat, the group, including restorative justice pioneers Mark Yantzi and the late Rev. Stu Schroeder, as well as others still involved in the project, formed a steering committee to develop operational concepts for resolving conflict in churches and find ways to use restorative processes for decision making and relationship building in faith communities.

During a pilot, FaithCARE worked with a dozen churches in four denominations, including Lutheran, Christian Reformed, United Church of Canada and Presbyterian, as well as nondenominational community churches. (The organization's work to date has been with Christian denominations, but they intend to expand to Muslim, Jewish and other faith communities.) The goal was to implement circle processes for decision making and discover what it would look like to apply to congregations the full continuum of restorative practices, from formal restorative

conferences to more impromptu and less formal restorative interactions.

Sometimes a church comes to FaithCARE when they have no specific conflict but want to improve relationships in general within the church. For instance, one church, which previously used Robert's Rules of Order for business meetings, instead adopted a circle process. Now all the congregation's business meetings are held using a circle format, providing a way for everyone's voices to be heard on issues being discussed and to work toward decisions acceptable to the whole group.

Bruce Schenk, director of IIRP Canada, helped develop FaithCARE and also introduced restorative practices to his own congregation, even before the 2007 retreat. During post-Sunday-service lunches, the congregation periodically holds a restorative circle meeting. With six or seven people at a table and one congregant trained to facilitate the discussion, each group talks through a series of questions on a topic that needs to be addressed.

One Sunday, the group decided what to do with the church parsonage, which had suffered water damage and had not served as a pastor's residence for some time. People in small groups presented their ideas, which were then shared with the whole group. Eventually they decided to fix the parsonage with insurance money that covered some of the damage and rent it out, rather than try to sell it "as is." Said Schenk, "By the end they came pretty close to consensus. Not everyone was in agreement, but probably 90 percent. And no one was disgruntled, because they felt the process had been fair."

Karen Jenkins, who recently became pastor of a new congregation, was pastor of the church described above for seven years and saw how restorative practices changed that congregation. During the last church circle in which she participated, about 50 people met to grieve and say goodbye but also to look to the future. Questions addressed included, "How do you feel about this church?" "What brought you here?" and "What do you see as the future of the church?" People talked a lot about one another and discussed how important restorative processes were for building relationships. Circle participants commented, "I know things about you now that I never learned in 25 years."

In her new congregation, Jenkins has observed a lot of gossip, compared with what she saw at her former church, where restorative practices had engendered a positive tone. She's undeterred, however: "I know what to do about the gossip. A lot of pastors back away from conflict. My job is to help [the congregation] move forward." She believes the biggest step in creating successful restorative circles is to simply get people to sit down across from one another. "It's scary at first, but it builds open, honest communication in a gentle way."

Mark Vander Vennen, director of Shalem, said, "We learned a number of crucial things from our pilot." FaithCARE practitioners always work in pairs, one male and one female, for gender balance. One practitioner is typically a member of the church's denomination, and the other is not, so the person belonging to the denomination knows

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the unspoken rules and the way things work, while the other provides an outside perspective.

The third crucial thing, which Vander Vennen said David Brubaker, of Eastern Mennonite University, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, taught them at the initial retreat, is that each church forms a reference committee or reference group of four to six people with whom FaithCARE can consult. Ideally, these people represent different sides of a dispute or different points of view within the congregation, but they are also chosen for their ability to see beyond their own points of view to the larger good and for their credibility within the congregation. During consultation, the reference committee, using circle processes, decides how to proceed and chooses which circles and practices would make the most sense, given the situation. The congregation empowers the reference committee to walk them through the restorative processes with the assistance of FaithCARE practitioners, who do all the initial facilitation. Along the way, the committee members build their capacity to become facilitators themselves, to guide the church in becoming what Vander Vennen calls a "restorative culture community." FaithCARE then steps back, providing further training and mentoring when needed.

Some churches have sought assistance from FaithCARE to deal with specific serious conflicts that have caused a rift in a congregation and polarized people around a "presenting issue," often involving the pastor. FaithCARE representatives hope that while addressing the current problem, the congregation will also delve into unexamined issues that undergird the conflict. Many churches then consider instituting restorative practices as an ongoing approach for confronting conflict, making decisions and building a caring community.

In one church, a young pastor was charged by police with embezzling church funds. The church council was shocked but also divided because some people still loved the pastor, and questions arose about how the crime had been reported to the police. When framing whom to include in the restorative circles, one of the important questions to ask is, "Who has been affected and in what way?" The idea is to include everyone who has been affected by what has happened. The first talking circle was held among the church council, which, as is often the case, also served as the reference committee. They aired their feelings, which eased conflicts within their ranks, by answering questions among themselves like, "What did you think when you realized what had happened?" and "Where do you think you would like to go from here?" A follow-up circle was held to produce a victim-impact statement, which had been requested by the prosecution.

The council also planned a series of open circles for the broader congregation. People signed up to share their feelings about what had happened and what might be done to repair the harm. Schenk and his co-facilitator took notes and fed people's reactions back to the council. "It was almost like a grieving process that helped them move through this," he said. Subsequently, they facilitated a one-day retreat for the church council, where they discussed the importance for the church to follow a restorative practices framework, what it would mean to be a restorative community and how restorative practices connects with the core principles of their spiritual faith and practice. Schenk noted, "If you just use restorative practices as a way to address issues, that has an impact. But it's not going to be anywhere near as big an impact as if you use these practices on a regular basis."

FaithCARE has been called to churches to help congregations deal with issues related to sexual abuse and misconduct, to help victims of those incidents deal with their feelings and obtain support from the congregation to avoid re-victimization, and in some cases, for the church to reach out and allay concerns with the wider community. One church, whose congregation fired a beloved pastor after an extramarital affair with a congregant came to light, used circles to deal with the emotional hurt and shock they felt.

Restorative practices are being employed in congregations outside Canada, as well. In the U.S., in a case unrelated to FaithCARE, a pastor who is also a teacher using restorative practices in his school setting, moved his family into a tough part of his city to be closer to his church community. When violence erupted in the line of people waiting at the church's free soup kitchen, the pastor held a circle to address the impact of the violence, give everyone a chance to express their feelings about what had happened and develop a plan to prevent a recurrence. A circle of about 40 people, including police responders, agreed to an idea, initiated by the pastor, that people would no longer come early to line up and would be given a pre-packed bag rather than choosing what food they were given. There has been no more violence in the church food line.

Schenk believes that when it comes to building a strong faith community, "Of course there's a spiritual component, but there's also a relational component. Peacemaking, relationship building, forgiveness and love—these are at the core of what the community is supposed to be about." Added Pastor Jenkins, "[Restorative practices] is a process. I know it works. I know I can take these people [in my new congregation] to a different level. It involves a lot of a hard work and laying a solid foundation." ☉