

Circles of Support and Accountability: The Need to Make Room for More Victim/Survivor Input

Brief Bio and Program Background:

The writer, David Dyck, served as the first Project Coordinator of Circles of Support and Accountability (CSA) in Winnipeg, Manitoba. CSA is a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) initiative designed to enhance the safety of the community and reduce the risk of re-offence by released sex offenders. CSA volunteers form "Circles" who aid in the reintegration process of "Core Members" by offering them social support and encouraging them to act responsibly in the community. David has since relocated to Halifax, Nova Scotia where he continues to act as a resource person in training and consultation for CSA and other restorative justice initiatives.

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1. Introduction:

Prior to joining Circles of Support and Accountability (CSA) as a staff person in January, 1999, I wrote a research paper as a part of my graduate studies to familiarize myself with this relatively new Canadian initiative. While my overall assessment of CSA's work was positive, I also made several broad suggestions regarding ways that the initiative might be improved. One of the specific issues I identified at that time was the need for CSA to seek out more concrete involvement of the victim/survivor community in the planning and carrying out of their work. Having not yet worked with the program, however, I took care to formulate these observations in tentative terms (Dyck, 1998).

Having now been associated with CSA for the better part of a year, I am in a somewhat better position to both further assess the validity of my initial findings and to offer more by way of tangible proposals. In this article, then, I will briefly review the factors that led me to my initial assessment of CSA with respect to victims. Second, I will describe my subsequent experience as a CSA "insider" and review the ways it has affected my original conclusions. Finally, I will close with a few specific

recommendations based on my current assessment. Originally written as a paper towards completion of my graduate studies, I was encouraged to draft this article as a case study for *VOMA Quarterly* because of the concern increasingly being expressed about victim/survivor input in the field of restorative justice as a whole (Doerksen et al, forthcoming; Zehr, forthcoming).

2. My Original Assessment of CSA With Respect to Victim/Survivor Input:

While carrying out my research, it quickly became clear to me that CSA placed a strong theoretical emphasis on respecting the needs of victims of sexual abuse. For example, after discussing the needs of the offender, the authors of the Mennonite Central Committee Ontario's (MCCO) main program manual go on to immediately add:

At the same time, the needs of each victim of abuse or violence must be similarly addressed. Men and women who have experienced sexual abuse have every reason to be skeptical about the sincerity of those who are involved in the offender program. It is so easy to become (so) focused on the pain of the offender that you can lose the perspective of those affected by the abuse (Heise et al., 1996, p.12).

Later, while exploring the philosophy of restorative justice, the authors again emphasize the importance of being “*equally* concerned to show respect to those who are harmed as to those who harm...” (Ibid., p.49 – emphasis mine). Moving from the overarching philosophical framework to their practical objectives, the writers state that CSA’s commitment is to “prevent further victimization” and “ensure that the victims are accessing the available resources in the community to meet their personal needs for healing” (Ibid., p.11, 16). Furthermore, they state that “direct input by the victim to the Circle provides valuable insights for monitoring relapse prevention strategies” and that “(a) victim or victim representative who has processed their experience well adds a valuable perspective to the Circle” (Ibid., p.16, 14). At both the outset and conclusions of their work, the writers openly invite the critical feedback of “*survivors/victims*, offenders, or other community members” on all aspects of CSA so as to “guide us (i.e. CSA) in responding to their needs” (Ibid., p.13, 50 – emphasis mine).

Under the basic description of the program, the Ontario brochure reads: “The Community Reintegration Project is a pilot project of MCCO that seeks to reduce the risk of re-offence by released sex offenders, to ease their transition into the community, *and to open an avenue for victims in their journey for restoration and healing*” (MCCO CSA brochure, 1996 – emphasis mine). On another panel describing the program’s goals in relation to the victim, the wording is even more bold: “Our concern is to *address the victim/s’ need for healing*, in their vulnerability, and the fear that the offender will violate someone close to them” (MCCO CSA brochure, 1996 – emphasis mine).

In short, the primary CSA documents seemed to demonstrate that the program’s founders understood the centrality of victims/survivors to a true practice of restorative justice. Indeed, their writing indicated a commitment to working inclusively with victim/survivors of sexual abuse in all phases of their work – from their vision to the actual functioning of the Circles themselves to ongoing program development. This was and is impressive. As Howard Zehr has noted, ideals are important. Even if we are not

always able to live up to them, they provide an overall direction and, without them, we have no way of knowing whether we are on or off our desired course (Zehr, 1990).

On closer inspection, however, there seemed to me to be a something of a “gap” between the CSA founders’ ideals of meaningful victim involvement and what was actually taking place “on the ground.” The only hard evidence I found of practical attention to victims/survivors was in relation to CSA’s training sessions. Here, the manual indicated that CSA trainers always invite an expert resource person to present on victim’s needs and perspectives (Dyck, 1998, Heise et al, 1996). While this is important, it seemed to fall well short of the level of commitment to victims implied in CSA materials. When asked about the practical ways in which victims were working with CSA, Hugh Kirkegaard, its current national spokesperson, acknowledged this to be an area of weakness. He also acknowledged that, at that time, victims/survivors and/or their advocates were not represented on the governing bodies or planning committee of the Ontario Project (Dyck, 1998).

3. Our Efforts to Close Victim/Survivor “Gap” in Winnipeg:

Since we did not anticipate offering the services to victims that the Ontario brochure seems to imply, the Winnipeg brochure reads more simply: “Our concern is to carry out our work with offenders in a way that is sensitive to the needs and perspectives of victims/survivors” (CSA Winnipeg brochure, 1999). We also believed that this wording would help us to avoid the trap of merely invoking the name of the victim to “sell” our program. Members of our key advisory body, which included both victims/survivors of sexual abuse and their advocates, understood this reasoning and supported the changes.

Shortly after taking my position, I also sought to expand the membership of the advisory body to include persons I thought might share my perspective about the importance of victim involvement. Interestingly, one of the persons who agreed to join us in this capacity divulged to the planning group that s/he was him/herself a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. S/he proved to be an especially important partner as we continued to deliberate about ways we should pursue victim/survivor involvement.

It was s/he, for example, who most enthusiastically endorsed the idea of approaching a local agency, devoted to counseling and advocating for women who were childhood survivors of sexual abuse, to see if they might be willing to appoint a staff person to sit on our committee. S/he also strongly affirmed my decision to invite various victim/survivor advocates to share their hopes *and* fears about CSA at each of the four initial public information/discussion events we held in Winnipeg about CSA. Even more importantly, perhaps, it was s/he who first suggested we develop a steering committee made up entirely of victims and/or their advocates to meet with us on an “ad hoc” basis. Her/his idea quickly evolved into the Victim/Survivor Advisory Team (V/SAT), a committee of seven persons.

4. Insights from Winnipeg’s Victim-Survivor Advisory Team:

Members of this group met with me on multiple occasions in the critical first six months of the project, providing CSA Winnipeg with invaluable insight on a wide range of topics. For example, among other things, they recommended that we needed to:

- a) find a concrete, intentional way of responding to, acknowledging, including, and/or respecting the primary victim(s) of the men (i.e. ex-offenders) we were working with (i.e. rather than ignoring them because we were unsure of how or whether we could or should contact them)
- b) make the consideration of some sort of restitution on the part of the ex-offender, either symbolic or concrete, towards his specific victim(s), the victim/survivor community, and/or society more broadly a standard part of the program
- c) develop partnerships with organizations such as Winnipeg's Mediation Services to facilitate the carrying out of various forms of victim-offender dialogue *where, and only where, the victim indicates an interest and both victim and offender demonstrate an assessed readiness to participate in such a process*
- d) develop partnerships with local sexual assault and education centers so as to enhance the initial orientation, screening, and training process for potential volunteers (i.e. along lines which reflect the concerns and insights of those who work with the aftermath of sexual offending)
- e) more specifically, develop a more intentional and structured process of training that would be carried out over a longer period of time and which would include topics such as the role of power, gender, and society in the creation and perpetuation of sexual abuse (i.e. a feminist analysis)
- f) develop a thorough and intentional process for screening Core Members
- g) enhance the ongoing support mechanisms for volunteers and Core Members of existing Circles
- h) remove wording in our literature that "claims too much" with respect to what we are doing for and with victims (e.g. one V/SAT member memorably told me that the wording of the Ontario brochure might well leave victims feeling "exploited" in light of our relative lack of concrete connections to victims)
- i) more broadly, "stop making excuses" about not including them or, as one person delicately put it, "either put up or shut up about victims" 😊

5. The Challenge of "Holding it Together:"

Staying connected with victim/survivor advocates was not without its challenges. V/SAT was a group of people with a sophisticated analysis of what makes for sexual offending and clear, strong beliefs about what should be done to prevent its reoccurrence. As such, they were not shy about asking tough questions about CSA protocol and theory, often raising dangers that generally did not surface when I confined my conversations to the realm of program "insiders." Indeed, as they brought up what seemed like countless issues of concern, I sometimes grew weary. At times, I felt tempted to see their attitude as "nitpicky" or paranoid.

And yet, in my better moments, I realized that their concerns stemmed from the hard-wrought pain of real experience and careful learning. As such, I came to believe that shunting them aside would be a grave error. Such a move could only have led to our being rudely surprised at a later date by "fallout" in the form of either dangerous programmatic problems or unsupportive, angry victims' groups (or, more likely, both).

And then there was the challenge of simultaneously trying to build connections with the Christian faith community. The victim/survivor and women's advocacy communities are, by virtue of past experience, wary of involvement with things

“Christian.” In my experience, there is good cause for this distrust. Church adherents are often suspicious of or overtly hostile towards things associated with the women’s or feminist movement. There is also a legacy of Christian leaders (the vast majority of whom are male) dismissing the concerns of groups like V/SAT and, even more damaging, perpetuating abuse through secrecy and the maintenance of elaborate webs of denial. And yet faith communities, when healthy, are among the most natural places to build Circles and can serve as an incredible resource for healing. Indeed, it was the church, in large part, which served as the mid-wife for the re-birthing of the contemporary interest in a justice that heals. I was reluctant, therefore, to abandon this source of energy and vision.

In these moments of struggle, then, I sometimes found myself recalling the words of Northern Irish mediator Joe Campbell. Speaking in Harrisonburg, Virginia in the fall of 1997, Joe emphasized the vital importance of “including the extremes” when engaging in peace and justice building. He stressed that while progress might seem quicker and easier when some “radical” elements are left out, the consensus that is achieved is ultimately weak and misleading.

I have concluded, therefore, that our struggle was but part of the community building process that is necessary when growing grass-roots restorative justice. In other words, it was exactly the fragility of the consensus we were building that suggested we were on the road towards creating something more dynamic, diversely rooted, and whole for the long-term. Far from trying to rid ourselves of the tension we experienced, then, we needed to pay attention to it, learn from it, and be ready to be transformed by it.

6. The Broader CSA Response:

I was curious, however, to see to what degree the larger CSA movement might be open to dialogue and struggle along the lines being suggested by our association with victims/survivors. Would CSA embrace the challenge of building relationships like those represented by V/SAT more broadly? How open would the CSA movement’s leaders be to considering altering aspects of our approach to programming and training along the lines suggested?

Initial reactions were mixed. Most of the CSA staff represented at the MCC Canada gathering in March, 1999 seemed quite enthusiastic about building stronger connections to victims and open to the changes that this might imply. It is important to note, however, that some of the key leaders were not able to be in attendance at this consultation. Furthermore, some of the staff who were there indicated that concerns about the lack of victim/survivor input and connection had been raised internally before. They suggested that program leaders had seemed somewhat reluctant to acknowledge or address the problem in the past.

On the other hand, more recently, CSA leaders in Ontario made the decision “to actively seek victim involvement in the Working Group (CSA Ontario’s key advisory and planning body), partly as we recognize it has been part of the DNA of our vision which has gone unaddressed and partly because of (the) work in Winnipeg...” (Kirkegaard, 1999). Furthermore, they expressed a refreshing openness to my publishing this case study with *VOMA Quarterly* in the interests of promoting dialogue and reflection on these issues in the field as a whole.

7. Conclusions and Final Recommendations:

All of this suggests that it remains to be seen what the long-term responsiveness of CSA will be to the need for greater victim/survivor involvement. In terms of my personal recommendations for how to move in the desired direction, I can do no better as a starting point than to direct the reader to return to those suggestions generated by Winnipeg's Victim/Survivor Advisory Team. With respect to the day-to-day operationalizing of Circles "on the ground," I find their ideas to be compelling, comprehensive, and reasonably practical. However, with respect to the broader questions of what needs to happen in terms of gaining victim/survivor representation on the governing bodies of CSA across Canada, I have three additional relatively straightforward suggestions to offer as starting points for further discussion.

First, we should begin to invite victim/survivors and their advocates (especially survivors of sexual abuse) to attend our national gatherings/consultations to tell us how they experience programs like ours and what we can do to improve.* Second, we should make a concentrated effort to develop bodies such as Winnipeg's Victim/Survivor Advisory Team in all other CSA programs across Canada. We must find concrete ways of including victim/survivor voices in the ongoing development of the CSA concept at all levels of planning and administration. Finally, once we have succeeded in securing that involvement, we should be sure to take their input seriously *even if this complicates matters for us considerably in the short-run and implies some significant changes on our part* (as I think it will and should).

If we do these things while also paying attention to the specific recommendations that have already emerged, I believe we will have taken our first significant steps towards closing the gap between our rhetoric and actions with respect to victims/survivors. More broadly, we will be moving in the direction of a fuller, truer expression of the restorative justice philosophy that animates our vision and should also guide our day-to-day practical activities.

*In Winnipeg, Wilma Doerksen (Director of MCCC's "Victim's Voice") and others, such as Heather Block (Director of Winnipeg's Laurel Centre - an organization dedicated to counseling and advocating on behalf of female survivors of childhood sexual abuse), have recently been initiating dialogue about restorative justice initiatives from the perspective of victims/survivors. They are both supportive of the CSA concept and, like many others across the country I am sure, would both make excellent people with whom to engage at our gatherings.

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Doerksen, Wilma et al. Wilma Doerksen is the Program Coordinator of a Mennonite Central Committee Canada initiative called *Victim's Voice*. She has recently been involved in initiating dialogue in Winnipeg, Manitoba regarding the degree to which current restorative justice initiatives reflect the concerns of the victim/survivor community. In a recent conversation, she told me that a smaller subcommittee which she chairs is now working on defining what justice would "look like" from the perspective of victims (i.e. she noted that they had decided that they had spent too much time "reacting" to the Criminal Justice System's definition or that of the restorative justice movement and that the time was ripe to articulate their own vision). Most exciting, however, are their plans to publish some highlights of their reflections and deliberations in the near future.

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_____ Dr. Zehr is currently in midst of completing a Listening Project with a focus on interviewing victims/survivors of crime about their experiences and needs.