

Restorative Discipline

A Tool for Community



By Kimberly Medendorp

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:15–22, NRSV).

These verses are often the guidelines used to solve conflicts in a Christian school setting. The verses give encouragement to restore a holy relationship within our communities, both between individuals and among the entire body. But how does the school's current discipline procedure either mirror or undermine these verses?

When the topic of restorative justice or restorative discipline comes up, there are often questions and confusion around both what it is and how it could be implemented in a larger environment, like a school. According to Howard Zehr, in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, "Restorative Justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offence and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and

obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (2002, 37). Within a school context, it is often referred to as restorative discipline.

Consider these two scenarios in a school context:

- Rosa has taken an item from Anna without her permission.
- Javier has gotten in a fight with another boy, James, in his class.

While there is a need for accountability and correction in the situations above, there are different lenses of accountability that can be applied. Many times, the questions asked (either consciously or unconsciously) are as follows:

- What school rules have been broken?
- Who did it?
- What do they deserve?

These questions often become a checklist for punishment with the idea that the punishment is the end in and of itself.

The restorative discipline model, starts with a different set of questions:

- Who has been hurt?
- What are their needs?
- How do we make it as right as possible?

Remember, the goal of restorative justice is "to heal and put things as right as possible." Looking at each of these questions for each scenario at the school gives the possibility for right relationship to be restored. Using the questions in the restorative discipline model and the examples above, dig deeper into each example.

Who Has Been Hurt?

It seems easy at first to identify who was hurt. Both Anna and James would be identified as the victims of the offense. But what about Rosa and Javier? When someone commits a wrong against another, there is hurt there also. Either beginning a mediated conversation between the victim and the offender or meeting individually with each of the students is a place to start. Had Anna started ignoring Rosa and Rosa was trying to get her to pay attention to her again? Was Javier being made fun of by James and had he become frustrated with it and acted impulsively?

Many times actions are not just isolated, but part of a larger story that should be told. This is not an excuse for the behavior of Rosa or Javier. When looking at Matthew 18, the goals are accountability and restoration. However, if the underlying account isn't taken into consideration, both the victim and the offender are left with unmet needs that will cause further problems. The specific issue will be over, but the relationship will not be restored. It is also impossible to identify the needs of the students if they haven't had a chance to identify them, articulate them, and tell their own stories.

What Are Their Needs?

The answer to this question often can be answered with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. When students aren't having their needs met at any level, they are unable to attend to their higher needs, which include following God's call in their lives. Most of students in school have their physiological needs (food, shelter, sleep, and so on) met either at home or through the system at school. But what about their next levels of need, safety and security and belonging and friendship? Was Javier feeling unsafe when he hit James? Was Rosa feeling like she no longer belonged in her friendships with her peer group?

The needs of the students must be part of the conversation in discipline for real reconciliation to occur. Christian schools need to model the welcoming love of Jesus who meets the deepest needs. In the story of Jesus

and the woman at the well, Jesus met her basic needs first (water, safety, belonging) before He called her into accountability in the community. As schools meet the needs of their students, the students are more open to accountability and reconciliation.

How Do We Make It as Right as Possible?

Looking at our last question, the focus has now shifted and expanded. The way to make it as right as possible is through the relationship between these students. Once Rosa and Anna have talked, Rosa will need to restore

the item taken, but even more than that, the girls now understand what happened and Anna may also apologize for ignoring Rosa. Javier will need to make the situation right with James, but James will also need to be held accountable for the mean things he said. Working together to restore their relationship, there is the opportunity to make the whole community stronger.

The accountability and restoration of relationship is a way to restore the connection so that a small conflict in one grade doesn't continue breaking down the community for years to come. Christian schools should be

continually building and modeling the communion of the saints. How schools model accountability in a Christian context is as important as the academic content taught in the classrooms. Try it with the next conflict encountered.

Resource

Amstutz, Lorraine Stutzman, and Judy H. Mullet. 2005. *The little book of restorative discipline in schools: Teaching responsibility, creating caring climates*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Reference

Zehr, Howard. 2002. *The little book of restorative justice*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

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