



Called to new hearts and minds about victims of crime

How can faith communities be “neighbours” to victims of crime? (Luke 10:29-38)

It is estimated that at least 110 million crimes are committed in Canada each year. Behind every crime there is the face of a victim, often several faces and deeply personal stories. Some of us would count ourselves, a family member or a friend, among this group. Tragically, most of their stories are never told, or if told, they are soon forgotten. Only a small percentage of the victims of crime ever receive any recognition or response from the justice system. And when they do, many victims still feel dissatisfied, hurt and angry. The simple fact is that our present criminal justice system is organized with the understanding that crime is against the State. The pain and loss of victims is of little relevance since the justice system is not organized to respond to the needs of individual victims. The court system can sometimes leave victims feeling that they have been on trial too. A courtroom is not a safe place to fully tell their stories.

Many of us may not realize that victims of crime are not getting what they need from the criminal justice system. We may also feel uncomfortable treading into unknown waters. How can we in faith communities learn better ways to care for those victims who need support working things through as they seek justice, understanding and healing?

Who are the victims of crime?

Many victims of crime in our midst are not recognized because they do not fit the typical stereotypes of those in need, or they may be too ashamed to ever talk about what happened to them. Whether crime happens to seniors, the poor, the disabled, children, youth, or middle-class families: each crime victim and situation is unique. Impacts may vary with a whole host of differences related to gender, race, ethnicity, social belonging.¹

Even when the crime may be regarded as relatively minor by the criminal justice system, victims can suffer from physical and financial hardship, and be devastated by psychological and social losses leaving a lasting sense of violation and fear. Victims of serious personal crime can go through a trauma reaction that is debilitating and long-lasting. Victims of crime need to tell their story, sometimes over and over again, and to have their journey through raw emotions respected with care. They want the wrong they have suffered to be acknowledged and their dignity to be affirmed. Despite all that has happened, they have capacities for resilience and openness to new growth. They continue to be held by Jesus, the healer of all wounds, nourished by His radical love that unites us all no matter the circumstances.

¹ Crime Prevention Ottawa, "It's a Crime" Victimization Fact Sheets: Property Crime; Family Violence; Youth; Violence. <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/publications.cfm>.



How can faith communities be neighbours to victims of crime?

The story of Jesus's life as related in the Gospels is a message of mercy, understanding and love. Jesus was a healer of relationships. No one was beyond his loving concern. He reached out to wrongdoers and the injured alike. In the Story of the Good Samaritan he used the example of taking care of a victim of crime to show us how to love our neighbour as ourselves: The Samaritan...bound up his (the victim's) wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him....And Jesus said..."Go and do likewise."

In each of our faith communities we have such victims in our midst who may be suffering from pain and isolation that the rest of us hardly understand. How can we bind up their wounds and let them know that they are not alone? How can we be that neighbour for them?

There are many ways in which faith communities can become healing communities for victims of crime. Here are a few suggestions:

- Create a safe place where victims of crime can tell their stories, express their anger and fear without judgement or blame
- Create an environment where speaking about hurts, limitations and the need for healing is acceptable and encouraged.
- Stand up for victims of crime. Victims of crime need to hear a clear message that the harm they experienced is not acceptable in our community. We must stand up for the safety of crime victims and support them in taking steps to reclaim a sense of empowerment for their own lives.
- Help with practical daily tasks of living. Victims of crime may go through periods of emotional turmoil and chaos. We can help with childcare, comfort food, clean laundry, a tidy house, grocery shopping, and meals.
- Identify resources in the community and how victims of crime can access them. Victims of crime are often haunted by unanswered questions: What kind of a person could do such a thing? Why to me? What did my loved one go through? Is the person sorry? Was I to blame? Resources such as counselling, mediation and facilitated victim-offender encounters are often available in local communities.
- Provide the unique strengths and comforts of faith and of a believing community. Prayer, the reading of scripture and ritual celebrations can become occasions for crime victims to release their anger and pain in the presence of an understanding and loving God. Faith experienced in a believing community can bring hope in the face of terrible grief, and meaning in times of despair. Finally, a faith community journeying with victims of crime can support them along the path that leads to forgiveness – forgiveness experienced, not as an obligation, but as a conscious decision to let go of the burden of pain afflicting them and their families so that they can move on to recovery and peace. A decision made in



union with Jesus, who as an innocent victim himself, asked the Father to forgive his enemies “because they know not what they do” (Luke. 23:34).

Jesus taught us to forgive those who harm us and to bind up the wounds of those who have been harmed. He calls us now. Go and do likewise to the victims of crime in your midst.

Resources

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