

Building Bridges in an International Context

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Presented at

Building Bridges Conference: Supporting the Victims of Crime through Restorative Dialogue
Rome – 20 November 2015

Let me begin by congratulating the hosts of this conference, Marcella Reni and her colleagues from Prison Fellowship Italy, for a successful and stimulating event. Congratulations as well to the presenters who have made this a fruitful and productive conference. Most of all, a big congratulations and “well done” to Joost De Jager, Building Bridges Project Coordinator and to the nine Building Bridges Partners who have worked so hard for three years on this research project. The word I noticed repeated in your materials was “challenges”, and I can imagine that this was indeed a difficult venture as you come from very different organizational and cultural contexts. But this conference shows that this was effort well spent.

I would like to help draw this event to a close by adding information about the use of Sycamore Tree Project® outside of Europe, saying a few things about the restorative justice character of programs like Building Bridges, and concluding with a video presentation developed by Prison Fellowship Australia Queensland that reminds us why we do this.

Sycamore Tree Project® around the world

Sycamore Tree Project® is was developed in 1996. It was first used in the United States, England and Wales, and New Zealand. We now of 40 national affiliates that have used STP, and it is used regularly in 30-34 countries with over 3,500 victims and prisoners participating yearly. Over the years, modified program models have emerged in response to the legal, political, and cultural contexts of national affiliates. A 2014 analysis of use of *Sycamore Tree Project®* noted

differences in the number and frequency of victims participating, the number of prisoners participating, and the number of sessions:

1. The majority of affiliates have victim participants present for all sessions. However, the number of victims varies from course to course and is rarely equal to the number of prisoner participants. Victim participants appear to participate in multiple courses.
2. The majority of national affiliates run the program in six to eight sessions. A minority use five sessions and a very few have expanded it to nine to twelve sessions.
3. A slight majority of affiliates invite fewer than 10 prisoner participants. The balance involve between 10 and 20.¹

PFI currently offers very limited assistance to national affiliates wanting to run STP. We provide program materials, consisting of a session guide, an operational manual, and a participant workbook for victims and offenders to use. These are available online in four languages. We also provide long-distance assistance through email and telephone on an as-requested basis. So it is significant that there are over 30 affiliates using STP with such minimal support from PFI.

It appears that those affiliates make limited use of STP. The overwhelming majority, according to the 2014 research, use it in a single prison.

Affiliates have identified four main obstacles they face in continuing to run the program: victim recruitment, facilitator recruitment, difficulty getting permission from prison officials, and limited resources to pay for transportation for volunteers and staff coordination. They persist in

¹ Parker, Lynette (2014) *Sycamore Tree Project Report*, unpublished manuscript available at Prison Fellowship International.

running the program in spite of these obstacles because of the transformative impact it has on victims, offenders and facilitators.

In addition to those affiliates that use the program at least annually, we are aware of another 40 or so that have expressed interest by requesting program materials. The reasons they have not started using the program vary, but often they come down to lack of a skilled volunteer to lead the project and recruit the participants.

Our study found that what would be useful would be modest funding to cover transportation and other costs, provide a small stipend to a project coordinator, training of the national affiliate in fundraising, development of an organizational structure to enable recruitment, training and volunteer development, and additional tools for promoting and implementing the program.

Prison Fellowship Australia is an affiliate that uses STP with reasonable frequency, in five prisons and over a number of years. Late last year, they engaged consultants to undertake a strategic review of Sycamore Tree Project in Western Australia. The findings were released earlier this year and included a number of interesting and helpful findings.

Sycamore Tree Project started in Perth in 2005 and the Prison Fellowship office in Western Australia has conducted 73 courses in the decade since, involving 782 prisoners and 411 victim participants. The researchers interviewed 46 individuals including prisoners, prison officials, chaplains, facilitators, victims and assistants from five prisons.

The review was very favorable in terms of the effectiveness of Sycamore Tree Project. Prisoners rated STP as the best program offered in prison and many suggested that it be the first program offered in prison because it would enhance the effectiveness of other prison programs.

It identified nine key benefits to STP:

1. Prisoners overwhelmingly realise the impact of their crime on victims, often for the first time in their lives...
2. Prisoners described how the STP course has helped them better understand their thoughts and emotions that led them to commit the crime, and to have better self-control.
3. The program and its themes of remorse, forgiveness, responsibility and restitution helps prisoners make a meaningful internal commitment to get off the cycle of offending. Prison officials spoke about prisoners gaining understanding of forgiveness and taking responsibility for their actions.
4. Supported by other programs, counselling services, and chaplains, this internal commitment can be harnessed to break the cycle of offending.
5. Rehabilitation of prisoners was a huge benefit expressed by all stakeholder groups and most strongly reflected in the interviews with prison officials..., many noting a lessening of anger and more signs of positive behavior among prisoners after attending the STP course.
6. Prison officials spoke about STP as making a difference in the lives of prisoners when they leave prison....

7. Victims often feel stronger and aided in their healing from their participation in STP. For many it has helped them work through fears and anxieties. Healing has helped victims to become survivors.
8. Many stakeholders (prisoners, victims and facilitators) described their participation in STP as life changing....
9. STP benefits families and the wider community. Prisoners talked about how STP helped them reconnect with their families, resolve to not reoffend, and realizing the need and their chance to give back to the community and society....²

Why is the program effective? What is its “secret sauce”? Based on our experience of nearly 20 years, and drawing on research into other restorative justice processes, we have concluded that there are three components of restorative conversations among victims and offenders that give them their healing impact:

1. A safe, respectful meeting environment, created by a trained facilitator who prepares both parties and guides their conversation.
2. An emphasis on storytelling to the “other”, with the goal of fostering understanding.
3. A commitment to action as a way of responding to the conversation.

Prison Fellowship International’s plans for STP

The Western Australia review noted that there was a waiting list for the program every prison, and that all the prison officials interviewed wanted the program run more often. It identified two key drivers of STP that need strengthening. These are:

² Shaw Boyle (2015) Final Report: Review of the Sycamore Tree Program Western Australia,

1. The recruitment, participation and support of victims
2. Support for facilitators to deliver programs and provide quality assurance.³

Perhaps you could add to this list based on your experience. We believe that it is possible and important to identify the obstacles to expansion and find solutions. Early next year we will begin a review and revision exercise of the Sycamore Tree Project. This will build on research done in the Building Bridges Project, additional research from New Zealand and Australia and the experience of our affiliates in other countries. The purpose of the revision will be to overcome obstacles to substantial program expansion. Our objective will be to create a streamlined version of STP that can be used in countries around the world to generate high volume participation by victims and offenders without sacrificing effectiveness.

We are giving ourselves a goal of facilitating 100,000 restorative conversations between victims and offenders through Sycamore Tree Project by 2020.

Is it really restorative justice?

I call these restorative conversations, but some question whether Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges is in fact a restorative justice project. This is the result of a very narrow definition of restorative justice that limits it to situations where victims and their offenders meet together with trained facilitator. These are certainly the gold standard for restorative practices.

But restorative justice need not be limited to these programs. Gerry Johnstone and I have suggested that restorative justice is a deeply contested concept.⁴ It is a complex idea, the

³ Ibid., 5.

meaning of which continues to evolve with new discoveries. It's also a positive term, meaning that it's considered a good thing to have the name applied to a program or idea. We identified three overlapping but distinct conceptions that compete for the definition of restorative justice.

The first is the encounter conception. This focuses on the stakeholders meeting together. This is a familiar concept all of us.

The second is the reparative conception. The idea here is that crime causes harm that must be repaired by the offender and perhaps by society through victim support.

The third is the transformation conception. This is the most expansive of the two because it has to do with broken relationships at multiple levels of society. These include the relationships between the parties but also within the structures of society itself.

Programs like Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges fall within all three of these conceptions. However, they are not at the center of any conception. There is an encounter but it is between unrelated victims and offenders. There is repair but it is symbolic. There is transformation but it is transformation of individual victims and offenders.

The definition of restorative justice that I use is the following: Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. It is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all stakeholders. When this happens transformation may occur.

This definition recognizes all three conceptions and places them in an order of priority. The first priority is to repair the harm that is done by crime. Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges

⁴ Gerry Johnstone and Daniel W. Van Ness, "The Meaning of Restorative Justice," in Gerry Johnstone and Daniel W. Van Ness, eds., *Handbook of Restorative Justice* (Cullompton, UK: Willan, 2006).

does this by allowing offenders to share their experiences and answer questions posed by victims of other crimes. They are repairing harm done by another offender, rather than harm that they themselves caused. The victims who were harmed benefit nonetheless.

The second priority in our definition is the encounter conception. We note that repair is best accomplished by the stakeholders themselves, and that may be through a face-to-face meeting. Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges creates a structure for an encounter between people who represent “the other” to each of them. Victims have an opportunity to speak with, dialogue with and tell stories to people who have committed crimes but who are not their own offenders. The same is true for the offenders. There is a kind of encounter but not with one’s own victim or offender.

The third priority in our definition is given to the transformation conception. We present it as a potential outcome of repair and encounter, one which may or may not occur. But as we know, it often does. One of the notable outcomes of Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges are the stories of transformation that take place in the lives of offenders and victims. We will see further examples of this in a few moments.

I think the appropriate question to ask of any intervention that claims to be restorative is this: Is the intervention as restorative as it might be? This can lead to fruitful introspection. It is a question worth asking the context of the Building Bridges project. Are we offering meetings between unrelated victims and offenders who would be ready, willing, and able to meet with their own victims and offenders? If so, we should take steps to allow them to have that experience.

But relatively few victims and offenders are able to meet with their own counterparts. Most crimes are not solved. There the victims have no restorative recourse if the only acceptable form is a meeting with their actual offender. Even when an offender is apprehended, the interest and ability of the parties, and status of the legal process, must all align in order for the victim and offender to be able to meet.

Sycamore Tree Project/Building Bridges offers an alternative to those who cannot meet their own victim or offender and yet would like restorative relief.

That relief can be powerful. I would like to close by showing you a six minute video with six victims from Australia describing their experience with Sycamore Tree Project there.

[video]

Thank you very much.