

An assessment of the Impact of Howard Zehr's Visit to New Zealand, June 1994

Reproduced with the kind permission of the Mennonite Central Committee, USA, Prof Howard Zehr and Laidlaw College Henderson, which publishes *Stimulus*

I predict that in years to come New Zealand will look back to 1994 as one of the most significant years in the history of its criminal justice system. That system has continued in basically the same form since the time that British law was established here in the early 19th century. It is a system that places heavy emphasis on procedural justice and upon punishment. In fact New Zealand has a very punitive sentencing regime - it is second only to the USA in the rate of imprisonment of its population.

Over the last 12 months New Zealand has started to hear about restorative justice from a few people who have read Howard Zehr's book *Changing Lenses*. That book was music to my ears, for two reasons. First, I had already come to see our Youth Court system as a very different model of justice and in *Changing Lenses* I found the historical and theoretical underpinning that it needed, supplementing our indigenous Maori perspective on conflict resolution. Of the various accounts I have now read of restorative justice Howard Zehr's is by far the best. Secondly, his reasoned exposition of restorative justice threw into relief the essential features of the old retributive model, many of which were so deeply embedded as to be invisible to most eyes.

Howard Zehr, the quiet Mennonite from Akron Pennsylvania, therefore came to New Zealand in June 1994 as a prophet of justice, proclaiming that there is a better way of dealing with both offenders and victims, one which promotes healing in the community. I was not present in Wellington for the *Stimulus* Conference but I was present on four occasions when Howard spoke to other groups. One of these was an historic weekend seminar at Teschemakers, Oamaru when a mixture of social workers, prison visitors, lawyers, Maori kaumatua, youth justice personnel, probation officers, judges, nuns, law students and former prisoners were amongst those who saw and heard him speak. Ruth Morris, the Quaker from Canada, was also present. I can tell you, over that weekend healing justice really came alive! "Justice is about meaning ... Crime is really about disrespect ... We would like justice to be a teacher. If we want offenders to have respect for others, how can we do that if we don't treat them with respect? ... No-one takes brokenness seriously ... Healing justice is about respecting people." In such memorable phrases Howard Zehr brought to all of us new dimensions of justice.

Although New Zealand has already ventured a certain distance down the restorative justice track with its new Youth Justice model, there has been no successful equivalent here to the Victim-Offender Mediation Programs operating in North America. An additional factor in the importance of Howard's visit was therefore our exposure to this model as something that can operate quite independently from the disposition of court cases, and also to the valuable research that has built up around VORP in North America.

My belief is that with the right encouragement and assistance New Zealand will move to a restorative model of justice in its dealings with all offenders, not just young people. It is an idea whose time has come, and the prospects for its acceptance are looking increasingly good. Elsewhere I have advocated the establishment of Community Group Conferences for adult offenders and since then I have heard of at least two such conferences successfully arranged on a voluntary basis, in each case with very positive results for both victim and offender.

Many New Zealand judges are receptive to the idea, as I believe the public will be when properly informed. After all, a criminal justice system which promotes accountability, a much better deal for victims and a healing of damaged relationships in the community is no soft option.

I come last to the religious aspect, not because it was the least important part of Howard's time here but because I think restorative justice must be able to stand on its own feet in a predominantly secular society like New Zealand. The chapter in *Changing Lenses* about biblical justice has a special relevance to Christians, and my reference to Howard as a prophet is both metaphorically and literally apposite. The Church has a prophetic role to play in social justice. It must speak out against injustice and tell of God's will for his people. Their need and yearning for justice is very deep. Restorative justice offers to the world the healing power of repentance and forgiveness, of justice with mercy, of God's love for all people.