

The Sycamore Tree Programme

The Sycamore Tree Project® is an intensive 8 week in-prison programme that brings six crime victims into prison to meet with six unrelated offenders. They talk about the effects of crime, the harms it causes, and how to make things right.

Victims and offenders meet for eight 2-hour sessions, usually over a period of 4 weeks. Using a tested discussion guide, the facilitator leads the group through a series of topics leading naturally to a time in which both victims and offenders can share letters and covenants which express how they feel and how they wish to move forward. Offenders are invited to explore ways of making restitution for the harm caused by their criminal behaviour. Victims are given the opportunity to consider ways in which they can take control of their lives and begin their journey toward healing and restoration. At the final session, the group meets with members of the community, to share their experiences over a meal.

Between 1997 and June 2004, Prison Fellowship New Zealand (PFNZ) had implemented the Sycamore Tree programme three times at Arohata Prison, four times at Rimutaka Prison, and seven times at Hawkes Bay Regional Prison. Up until then, the programme was funded entirely by Prison Fellowship.

In 2004-2005, with contributory funding from the Department of Corrections, Prison Fellowship was contracted to deliver eight programs per annum. PFNZ delivered the Sycamore Tree on 11 occasions at 8 Prisons. It was funded on the same basis in 2005 – 2006, and delivered 19 programs at 11 prisons. In 2006 – 2007, 26 programs to 11 prisons, were delivered. The funding from the Department of Corrections will meet about half the cost running this program. In 2007 – 2008, it is planned to deliver 40 programs a year.

Sycamore Tree Program Evaluation

In 2001, PFNZ developed an evaluation framework, with input and support from the Crime Prevention Unit, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. It has since commissioned three program evaluations, at its own cost. Dr Leon Bakker, consultant clinical psychologist, in his analysis of the evaluation results found that:

- The number of survey forms for victims and offenders were sufficient to provide reasonably sound analysis. The case officer forms were too few to allow other than suggestive comments.
- Victims and offenders both considered that the encounters were worthwhile and resulted in shifts in attitudes.
- They were perceived as providing greater understanding and empathy both ways.

- Victims and offenders agreed overwhelmingly that they enjoyed the ST experience and that they would recommend it to others.
- Common themes of what was good were the changed attitudes and sense of healing that was achieved through the process.
- The tutor was rated as facilitating the process very well.
- Improvements to the programme were mostly about increasing the amount of time to allow more discussion and exploration of ideas.
- Inmates perceived the need to treat others with respect (wives, children and victims) as major changes that they wanted to make following the programme. Several identified the need to attend other programmes, change attitudes or become involved with pro-social influences as means by which change could occur.

An independent analysis of the results by Margaret Marshall ¹, found that:

The STP includes most of the core elements of a fully restorative justice process. Victims are provided with a safe and respectful place in which to tell offenders their stories. They also hear inmates accept the wrongness of their actions. Victims have a significant experience of vindication, while inmates are given a realistic context in which to consider their own offending. Elements of restitution are considered and given some symbolic form. The interests of the wider community in the process are recognised in the form of a celebratory meal. Some victims will find that the STP process is sufficient to meet their emotional needs arising from the harm suffered. For others it will be a further step in the healing process. For both victims and inmates, involvement in the STP is excellent preparation for having a restorative justice conference with their own specific victims/offenders.

¹ Margaret Marshall is a lawyer who works as a Disputes Tribunal Referee and is a member of the Legal Aid Review Panel. In 1992 she trained as a facilitator in the Victim Offender Reconciliation Programme (VORP) offered by the Centre for Community Justice in Elkhart, Indiana. She is an accredited restorative justice facilitator in the Court-referred Restorative Justice Pilot, and has worked as a facilitator with the Waitakere Restorative Justice Community Group for several years. She has also been involved at a regional level in clarifying and developing restorative justice practices for provider groups and facilitators.

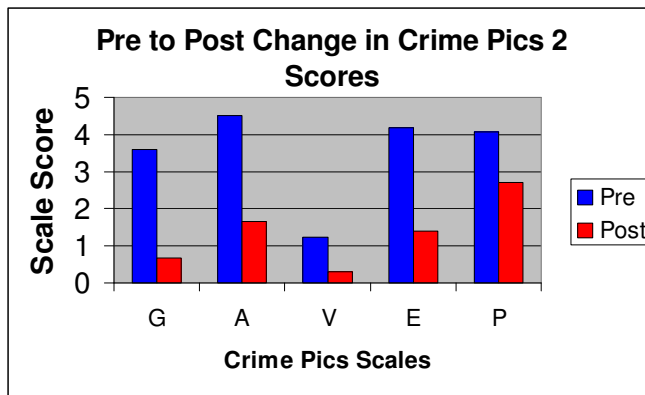
It is an approach which gets as close as it can to being fully restorative, without offenders meeting their actual victims. ²

The Crimepics II Evaluation

In 2004, PFNZ commissioned Dr Leon Bakker to develop an evaluation process that could determine what effect the Sycamore Tree process had upon offenders and victims. Its scope was constrained to ensure that it did not require excessive professional input but could provide sufficient rigour to enable findings to be defensible and robust.

The evaluation demonstrated that the program was successful, and achieved the outputs sought under Departmental Output 7.1. This output class provides for “Responsivity programmes to improve offenders’ motivation to address the causes of their criminal offending. These programmes are designed to increase an offender’s responsivity to undertake a specific programme that seeks to address an identified criminogenic need”

Pre and Post Scores



G General Attitude to Offending

A person with a low G score believes that offending is not an acceptable way of life. In essence, they are saying “Crime is not for me”.

A Anticipation of Re-offending

A direct assessment of the individual’s acceptance of the likelihood of re-offending. A low score indicates a resolve not to offend again.

² Marshall, Margaret, “A Consideration of the Sycamore Tree Programme and Survey Results from the Perspective of a Restorative Justice Practitioner” May 2005.

http://www.pfnz.org.nz/programs/syctree_what_works.htm

V Victim Hurt Denial

The degree to which the offender rejects or accepts that his or her crime had adverse effects on a victim. This will be of much clearer relevance to those convicted of certain offences. A low score indicates an acceptance that offending does have adverse effects for victims.

E Evaluation of Crime as Worthwhile

The degree to which the individual accepts or rejects the view that crime is a useful way of obtaining goods or of getting excitement or “kicks”. A low score indicates a rejection of the view that crime has benefits that outweigh the costs.

P Perception of Current Life Problems

The number of problem areas the person perceives in his or her life. The higher the score the more problem areas the individual has identified.”

The results show that all the scales have significant reductions in scores following the Sycamore Tree program – including the victim empathy scale. All scales showed significant reductions following the Sycamore Tree program, and shows that the program impacts positively on a range of criminogenic attitudes and this in turn leads to offenders who were unmotivated to change before the program, being more likely to take advantage of opportunities to rehabilitate and restore their lives. Prison Fellowship is currently working with the Department of Corrections to expand the program within the system. We want to implement a minimum of 26 programs nationally in 2005 – 2006.

The evaluation report is available at: <http://www.pficjr.org/programs/stp/report/>

In his concluding comments, Dr Bakker reports:

Forty nine offenders completed an attitude to offending measure (CRIME_PICS II) before and after the Sycamore Tree programme showed significant changes on all scales in the expected direction. While the reduction in victim empathy was not as great as might be expected the changes were nevertheless significant. The pre test scores showed that the offenders entering the Sycamore Tree programme are more empathic to victims than would be expected from the general offender population.

While reductions in recidivism have not been tested to date, it is clear that the Sycamore Tree programme has demonstrated meaningful changes in offenders’ attitudes towards crime. These would be considered necessary pre-cursors to changes in recidivism. The comparison with the United Kingdom study supports the view that the New Zealand programme has possibly been more effective in shifting these although a test of significance has not been possible with the data available.

Departmental Support

Support from the Department of Corrections has been high since the introduction of the program into prisons. The General Manager, Public Prisons wrote a letter of support on 17 November 1998, and has supported the project since. We have had excellent support from the chaplaincy, Program Managers, Unit Managers, and Site Managers.

Funding

That support has not translated into full financial support for the program, and Prison Fellowship is required to find \$60,000 a year to keep the program running.

Demand

There is a very high demand for this program. In 2005 – 2006 114 victims took part in the program, all of whom would recommend the program to other victims. Some of the victims go on to seek meetings with the people who have offended against them.

Conclusion

The developing statutory context recognises that it is important to have restorative justice processes available for victims, in those circumstances where the offenders are currently in prison. However, the legislative intent is not matched by the development of appropriate policies, practises, guidelines and resources to provide victims with the opportunity to participate in an in-prison restorative justice process, should they choose to do so.

Recommendation

Prison Fellowship New Zealand recommends that:

1. Section 9 of the Victims Rights Act is amended, to provide more explicit support for victims who seek to meet with offenders.
2. That the Ministry of Justice and Department of Corrections be required to develop specific, policies, procedures and guidelines for the implementation of victim offender conferences and victim offender panels within prisons, in order to satisfy the legislative intent of:
 - a) Section 9 of the Victims Rights Act 2002

b) Section 7, (2)(d) of the Parole Act 2002

c) Section 6(1)(d) of the Corrections Act 2004

That public funds are appropriated for the development and management of victim offender conferences and victim-offender panels within the prison system.