

**Who will help crime victims heal in faith communities?
By Rev. Dr. Bruce Cook**

Much of my life has been devoted to exploring ways to respond to crime. At the age of twelve, I was robbed at knifepoint and the robbers got \$.25. I got into several fights at school when bullies pushed me around. Violence touched my family as well. My grandmother was mugged, dragged, and injured in 1975. My stepbrother was murdered in 1977. My home was burglarized in 1986. I have always had an aversion to “thugs.” I don’t back down to any of them, whether in prison or out. I believe in holding convicted criminals accountable for their actions. Restitution and community service should be part of any sentence in which a convicted criminal can one day be released on supervision. Every prosecutor should offer a crime victim the opportunity to issue a victim impact statement. That statement can be a meaningful part of a victim’s healing. Every victim of crime should have the right to information, notification, and participation in the criminal justice system. They deserve the right to be treated with dignity, compassion, respect and spiritual care. Crime victims should receive justice that is equal and parallel to what offenders are granted as basic constitutional rights.

My personal experiences with crime have had a lot to do with my personal philosophy and chosen vocation. As a crime survivor myself, I wanted to help other crime victims get justice and to recover from their experiences. From 1970 to 1999, I worked in a number of local, state, and correctional facilities. While as a chaplain at the Morris County Jail and the Atlanta Penitentiary, I wanted inmates to have a genuine religious conversion – a change of heart – and to change from their criminal and sinful behavior, but it very rarely happened. When I conducted about 10,000 parole hearings in federal prison, I wanted to represent crime victims and make sure the parole decisions were fair for them. When I directed two therapeutic communities for the Georgia Department of Corrections, I wanted to change inmate behavior from criminal to law-abiding. Unfortunately, the therapy made no significant difference in recidivism for the treated career criminals (Part 1 Felons) compared to the non-treated career criminals over a three-year period.

After 29 years, I have concluded that criminal behavior is amenable to change with only a few inmates and that change is incremental at best. The goal of correctional systems is to punish and control inmates rather than to change or correct their behavior. The system focuses primarily on retribution with very little attention devoted to issues of reconciliation and healing. Because correctional systems are considered a lower priority relative to the economy and homeland security, correctional policy initiatives and resources are limited, resulting in security staff cuts and sparse offerings of inmate rehabilitative services. At this stage of my life, I care more about victims receiving fair justice, restitution, compensation, and compassionate care than I do about “fixing” the correctional system. I care about educating crime victims, especially children and the elderly, about ways to prevent re-victimization. It costs more to fix the correctional system than public policy makers will ever be willing to pay. I do care that the prison staff are well-funded in order to keep them safe. We owe that to the brave correctional staff that is willing to risk their lives to protect us from violent offenders. I also care that we maximize sentencing alternatives in order to get the minor offenders into diversion, day centers, probation, and electronic monitoring and other forms of intermediate sanctions. We need to make room in prison for violent, predatory offenders to serve their full time. I like truth-in-sentencing laws and

support the current federal sentencing guidelines in which offenders serve 85% of their time (no parole). Since the passage of the federal sentencing guidelines, the Supreme Court has ruled that the guidelines are not mandatory. My hope is that Georgia will one day adopt voluntary sentencing guidelines for all the judges to use.

After a serious DUI crash in 1989 that left a child comatose, my church – the Vinings United Methodist Church in Atlanta – decided to start a ministry to help crime victims recover. As one of the founders, I called the organization Crime Victims Advocacy Council, or CVAC. CVAC is a faith-based organization in Atlanta that offers free assistance to crime victims who are traumatized by serious violent crime. Our mission is simple – to help crime victims heal – but difficult to implement. We have struggled to find funds, volunteers, and staff to accomplish this mission. Many local church mission budgets, local and corporate donors, and state and federal grants have supported our work to help crime victims in need. Since 1989, CVAC has served over 15,000 crime victims in annual memorial services, crisis hotline, individual, family and support group sessions that provide spiritual care.

CVAC works closely with other advocacy groups and district attorneys' offices to improve crime victim services and support victim's rights legislation. The organization has been involved in the passage of six laws in Georgia that promoted victims' rights and compensation. CVAC also spoke out about the need for a national constitutional amendment for a crime victim's Bill of Rights. CVAC collaborated with Gordon and Elaine Rondeau on this amendment and joined their organization, the National Coalition for Crime Victims in Action. The CVAC staff works closely with the District Attorney Victim Witness Directors of Metro Atlanta and the City of Atlanta Victim Witness Program. We are part of the team that I call the "victims justice system." We try to empower crime victims to know and exercise their basic rights – the right to participate and be heard by the criminal justice system, the right to protection from the accused, the right to be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect, and the right to notification, information about the case, and victims compensation, including restitution.

Since its beginning, I have volunteered as a Board member and President until 1999 when I accepted the position as chaplain and director of pastoral care for CVAC. The position has a lot of challenges that I love to tackle. I like to think I am on a team to help the victim I am talking to: the team of the victim, the criminal justice system, the social services and legal system, the faith-based organizational system, and myself. Ultimately, I hope and pray that we are all on God's team to promote His healing for crime victims and survivors in our own unique way. When a crime victim receives genuine help and healing from the services offered and says "thank you," that makes it all worthwhile. The Good Samaritan Parable speaks volumes about Jesus' concern for the wounded crime victims left bleeding on the side of the road. He exhorted us all to take our victims to inns of healing and pay whatever it costs for them to heal.

The victims' justice system in America has improved dramatically in recent years. There are approximately 10,000 victim service providers located at the local, state and federal levels across the country. Every state has a bill of rights for crime victims. Notification programs have been established in corrections. Recently, federal legislation for crime victims was passed that promotes a system of rights for crime victims in federal courts. Our most pressing victim service need is in our faith-based community's organizational response to crime victimization. Today,

clergy are not educated about crime and crime victimization in seminary (see the President's Task Force Report in 1982 that recommended clergy training). I hear repeatedly from victims that the church cares initially about the crime, but rarely provides intermediate and long-term care and spiritual counseling for the victims. I go to court with crime victims and only see clergy representing the defendant as a character witness. In all my years of service to victims, I have never seen clergy at the trial for the victim's family. Out of about 1,100 attendees at the most recent event sponsored by the National Organization for Victims Assistance in Atlanta, I could only find eight clergy present and most were involved in providing invocation prayers. Recently, I asked a group of 150 clergy how many had a program to help crime victims and three raised their hands. A highly trained pastoral counselor told me that he could counsel crime victims even though he had no training or experience in crime victimization or criminal justice matters. Indeed, he would be very helpful as a spiritual care provider, but where he would falter is helping them to navigate the criminal justice system and how to obtain compensation. Further, he was not familiar with the basic rights of victims nor did he understand how important it is to be a ministry of presence with the victim when the victim goes to trial.

With additional training, many clergy can be very helpful in the healing process with crime victims. They already have the spiritual care skills, just not the knowledge skills about the criminal justice system. ETP did a study in 1998 and found only 53 faith-based organizations that helped crime victims and about half of these were Mennonite Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs. Given the fact that almost all of our prisons have a chaplain (Protestant and Catholic, Imam and Rabbi), it is time for a field and profession of victims' chaplains to emerge. I think Victims of Crime Act funds should be used to support the training of victims' chaplains. A very meaningful relationship can be fostered with District Attorney Victim Witness Assistance Program Directors (VWAP) and victims' chaplains. VWAPs often look for volunteers to assist them in meeting such needs as driving victims to court and helping victims fill out victim compensation applications. What a better resource for the DA VWAP Director than to use a victims' chaplain to coordinate the recruitment of volunteers from faith-based organizations. Victims' chaplains can help the DA offices to operate crisis hotlines and help families with funeral and memorial arrangements. The chaplains could provide free spiritual care sessions with family members who have experienced a violent crime. They can be trained as emergency first responders or intermediate/long term care responders to a mass disaster or terrorism event. As chaplains, they can organize the faith community's response to the event. I am indebted to Rev. Dave Delaplane of Denver and Rev. Cary Johnson of Denver Seminary for their pioneer work in clergy training in the field of crime victims spiritual care.

As a facilitating chaplain of the weekly support group for homicide co-victims, I encourage participants to get better, rather than remain bitter. I listen to their stories and validate where they are so they know they have been heard and affirmed and loved and cared for. We all pray for each other and prayer is voluntary. I use relaxation exercises and a "talking stick go-around" method that are very healing (for more information on these methods, see Justice that Reconciles and Heals on our website at <http://www.gbgm-umc.org/cvac>). I also use the coping skills inventory test (located at <http://www.psychtests.com/>) as a tool to measure how stressed clients of murdered victims are before and after participating in the support group. The group sessions cover many different criminal justice issues, including how to file for victims compensation or restitution, how to write a victims impact statement, and how to request information via FOIA or

the Open Records Act. The support group provides support for grieving families and the members let each other know that they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation and that they are not alone or going crazy. Over time this care and compassion helps them to heal.

Difficult topics also are dealt with in the group – forgiveness, the problem of evil, judgment, the death penalty, heaven, and hell. The group struggles with its own answers to these very complicated theological issues. Outside reading is recommended, but ultimately each person has to decide what he or she believes theologically about these matters. There is no one doctrine or authority person in the group, as it is a mutual self-help group in which each person is an equal co-learner. One of the group's favorite definitions of forgiveness is Howard Zehr's words in *Changing Lenses*, "Forgiveness is letting go of the power that the offense and the offender has over you in your life." This suggests that forgiveness is a process that takes time to heal. By releasing the power the event and the person who caused the event has over you, the individual heals. The group does not rush anyone into forgiveness or force them to come to it. Each member of the group is allowed to come to it or not come to it on their own and in their own time. The group is about healing, not forced doctrine or cheap grace. That is what we are about – helping crime victims heal.

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