

Pierre Allard Honoured by Volunteers of America

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Within the select club of people of whom it could be said: “If everyone were like them, the world would be a better place,” Reverend Dr. Pierre Allard could easily be a charter member. As a Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) chaplain, co-founder of Community Chaplaincy and currently Assistant Commissioner, Community Engagement Sector, he has worked tirelessly for a more compassionate approach to corrections and for more community involvement.

Reverend Dr. Allard’s deep faith and his belief in the human potential of each offender led him early on in his chaplaincy to become an advocate for restorative justice, a form of conflict resolution that aims to heal the wounds caused by crime and encourages offenders to take responsibility for the harm they have caused.

His leadership in this field was recently recognized by Volunteers of America, a non-profit spiritually-based organization with more than 14,000 employees and nearly 70,000 volunteers providing a variety of social services, including correctional programs, to 1.8 million Americans.

On August 2 in Chicago, Reverend Dr. Allard was presented with the 2004 Maud Booth Correctional Services Award, which cited his “international leadership in teaching and engaging individuals and communities in faith-based and restorative justice practices.” Maud Booth was the co-founder of Volunteers of America and a pioneer in prison reform.

Though Reverend Dr. Allard has received numerous awards throughout his distinguished career, his reaction to the honour was typically modest. “It was a surprise,” he says. “I didn’t even know that I had been nominated. But it’s also very humbling. Whenever I am given an award, I feel that I have received it on behalf of my wife, Judy, my colleagues, our volunteers and offenders with whom I have journeyed.”

“One of my greatest joys over the last 30 years has been the opportunity to build a community with so many volunteers across Canada,” he adds. “I have been privileged.”

Building community support for the safe reintegration of offenders has been a big part of his life’s work.

“We know that most offenders will return to the community, so we have to ask: how will they return? Will they be better people?”

Will there be someone to welcome them and offer them hope?"

One of the things that attracts Reverend Dr. Allard to the restorative justice movement is that it regards crime as the breaking down of human relationships, a definition that goes far beyond the breaking of a law. "But it is also about restoring those relationships," he says, "so when a crime occurs, it can actually be viewed as an opportunity for the community to become a better place."

He also believes that offenders need to be challenged to do something "great and beautiful" for the community. "We need to call out the best in them. On the subject of offenders, the Bible says 'let the thief no longer steal', but it also adds a worthy challenge 'let him work, that he may have something to share with those in need.'"

He has seen, many times over, the power of believing in people whom society would rather forget about. Some have even gone on to become ordained ministers, helping other offenders rebuild their lives.

Reverend Dr. Allard stresses that restorative justice is not just about the offender. "Helping the victims to heal and regain a sense of control over their life is an important part of creating healthy communities that can accept offenders back into their midst.

"But it's a long process," he emphasizes. "Most people cannot be healed overnight."

He adds that implanting restorative justice is also a long process. "We are far from dealing with all the correctional issues in a restorative way. We have to continue to flesh out the concept, but we've come a long way since 1974." That year marked the first time restorative justice techniques were officially used in Canada, in the pioneering Victim Offender Reconciliation Program.

Through its Restorative Justice and Dispute Resolution Branch, CSC has sponsored restorative justice pilot projects across the country. The Branch works closely with the National Parole Board and the Department of Justice, as well as with numerous community agencies, to deliver collaborative programs, and has become a pioneer in promoting restorative approaches to serious crime.

Restorative principles are also being applied within the department, in pilot projects like the Restorative Justice Living Unit at Grande Cache Institution, and in the development of internal conflict management processes. The Service has led the way in promoting awareness of restorative justice through its coordination of Restorative Justice Week, the Ron Wiebe Restorative Justice Award and a wide range of training and education efforts.

Reverend Dr. Allard comments that "It's nice to look back and see some of the things you strongly believe in take root," adding modestly "If I can help on my journey, then I am thankful."

The journey that began in Archambault Penitentiary many years

ago continues and has taken on an international dimension that he ardently pursues as president of the International Prison Chaplains' Association (IPCA), recently visiting prisons in Eastern Europe and embarking on the organization of a Worldwide Prison Chaplains' Conference for August 2005.

But no matter where his work has taken him, at the core of Reverend Dr. Allard's beliefs has always been the conviction that "despite their crime, offenders remain people." ■