

Ron Claassen
Carl and Esther Robinson Award
Dinner: Hope Lutheran Church
June 3, 2007

**Statement by Dalton Reimer, Senior Associate and International Programs
Coordinator of the Fresno Pacific University Center for Peacemaking and Conflict
Studies, which Ron Claassen serves as Director.**

I and my colleagues at the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University join in congratulating Ron Claassen on receiving the 2007 Carl and Esther Robinson Award for the Outstanding Advocate for the Common Good.

I must confess, though, that when I read the Fresno Bee headline: “Rev. Claassen is selected for advocate award,” over an article written by another Ron at the Fresno Bee, I was a bit amused by the title of Reverend. I suppose we could even improve on that and call him the Right Reverend Dr. Ron Claassen. But if you know Mennonite culture, that would be a bit ostentatious, though you should know that even Mennonites secretly rather enjoy such attention.

But Reverend does fit Ron. He does have a pastoral heart. But Rev. alone is not an adequate description of Ron. He also has a prophetic mind and spirit – and prophets stir things up, they challenge the conventions of the time and culture, and if they are really good, they not only critique the past and present, but they also point the way into the future. And that is what Ron has done for us here in Fresno, and beyond.

You should know, in historical perspective, that Fresno has been in the forefront of the restorative justice movement because of Ron. Victim-Offender Reconciliation Programs began in Canada and the U.S. only in the mid-1970s. And so when Ron became the founding director of California’s first Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program here in Fresno in 1982, that was very early in the movement. There is a sense in which we in Fresno have grown up with the movement.

But growing an idea from birth to full maturity is a challenge. As a conversational partner with Ron in the 1980s, and then co-director with Ron of the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific from 1990 until my retirement from fulltime teaching in 2002, and now a continuing colleague as a volunteer, I am well aware of the challenges. And one thing I have learned about Ron over these years is that he embodies a prophet’s single-mindedness and passion about restorative justice. Though we yet have a ways to go here in Fresno to reach full maturity in our exercise of restorative justice, we would not be where we are today if Ron had not pursued this agenda with the single-mindedness and passion that he has.

We rightfully honor Ron today, yet I know that a still greater honor for him would be if all of our criminal and civil justice systems, our schools, our business and community

organizations, and faith communities would embrace the principles and practice the disciplines of restorative justice for the greater common good of all of us.

Drawing on his previous incarnation as a mathematician, Ron has a fascination with models. And he has drawn on this fascination with good effect by developing models of restorative justice to point the way. And so I suppose our collective challenge as Fresnoans is whether we will have the political and social and organizational courage to do the transformational work that is required to walk the way.

In conversations with Ron, I have sometimes noted that a first step toward social change is sometimes the development of systems that are parallel to mainstream systems, but initially not integrated. Unless first tested elsewhere, those in mainstream systems resist making radical changes. It is hard to change a system from within.

But we now have 25 years of experience in Fresno with the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program and similar experiences in many other settings. The challenge that remains is to mainstream what has been learned. That is slowly beginning to happen, but much remains to be done.

So for now, thanks, Ron, for leading us to where we now are, and blessings as you continue to prod us to complete the journey.