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NP Befriend the sinner, banish the sin (National Post, June 22, 2005)

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MONTREAL - Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick,

Yet with my nobler reason, 'gainst my fury

Do I take part: the rarer action is

In virtue than in vengeance..." (The Tempest, Prospero to Ariel)

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Visiting friends in Kingston some years ago, I felt uncomfortable knowing Karla Homolka was less than a mile from me -- even behind prison walls.

Well, Homolka may soon be living about a mile away from me in Montreal, without prison walls. Many people want to kill her; some apparently want to sleep with her. But who in Montreal would befriend her?

The answer is: members of COSA - Circles of Support and Accountability. COSA adherents not only accept sexual offenders into their communities, but also work with them as "friends" for an open-ended time, to prevent them from reoffending.

COSA members are not social workers, psychologists or vocational counsellors. They are ordinary people who volunteer to sup with a pedophile, shop with a rapist, visit the dentist with a murderer and, in their words, "walk with" society's outcasts. Probably you couldn't do it. I certainly couldn't. But we're both safer because COSA does.

That's not wishful thinking; it's fact. A recently concluded research study commissioned by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) proves that such an approach, a "relationship scheme based on friendship and accountability for behaviour" works, and even "works dramatically," to forestall recidivism by high-risk offenders.

COSA was conceived to fill a gap in service for the most despised members of society -- sexual offenders -- without family, friends, money or coping mechanisms, who have served their full term, but have no after-care program. Volunteers, both men and women from 25 to 78 years old, meet with offenders on a daily basis, singly or in pairs depending on comfort level. An outer circle of professionals -- law enforcement personnel, psychologists and social workers -- help with recruitment, training and behavioural guidelines. People with "agendas" -- revenge, proselytizing, prurience -- are weeded out in a careful screening process. There are now about 80 circles, working in all the provinces but primarily Ontario, with about 300 active volunteers.

COSA began in 1994, when a confirmed pedophile Charlie Taylor was dumped with no resources into a community (Hamilton, Ont.) as averse to his arrival as Montreal is to Homolka's. A prison psychologist asked Harry Nigh, a Mennonite minister, if he could help. Nigh organized the first "circle," with Taylor as the first "core member." Six months later, a second circle was formed for Wray Budreo, a pedophile with 36 convictions.

Actuarial tables for risk of re-offence placed both these men in the 100% bracket. Eleven years later, both still being monitored by their circles; neither has reoffended.

Without COSA, they almost certainly would have. According to Dr. Robin Wilson, a senior psychologist for CSC in the Ontario region and the principal author of the research study proving COSA's success, the 60 offenders studied in the COSA project show a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism, and a 57% reduction in violence, measured against a control group of 60 slightly less high-risk offenders (i.e., the bar was set higher for the COSA subjects). Moreover, sexual reoffences in the COSA group were decidedly less severe than prior offences (for example, an obscene phone call rather than an assault), but not in the matched comparison group.

One key to COSA's success is the condition of "no secrets" between core member and volunteers. Often, COSA members are the first people ever to care about an offender, a powerful message that encourages compliance with the terms of the contract the offenders must sign. As one core member said, "[COSA volunteers] are my best friends ... If they weren't there, I'd be back inside by now."

How do volunteers come to "care" about such human wreckage? It helps to be a Christian, as 75% of the volunteers are. One says of her role that it "is not of my own choosing or making, but from God ... This is God saying, 'You have to do something about this.'" Remarkably, the volunteers make no attempt to convert their charges. Their involvement is purely dutiful, pragmatic and unselfish.

Today COSA, a Canadian invention operating on a shoestring budget, has inspired interest and imitation in the U.S. and overseas. Law enforcement professionals endorse it enthusiastically. Continued funding is a concern, although clearly the fiscal benefits of lower rates of recidivism should speak for itself to legislators.

With expansion, recruitment of volunteers becomes harder. I suspect Christians will continue to be the majority among them. The Christian faith, uniquely among the world's religions, has inspired an awesome tradition of ministering to the lepers most of us cannot bear to look at.

Will Karla Homolka take advantage of COSA? Only about 10% of released offenders do, that is to say, those who truly want help in containing their perverse impulses. "Her need is great," says Dr Wilson. An understatement, to be sure.

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