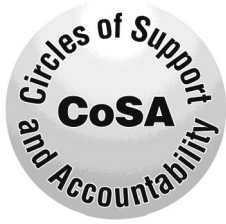


My Experience in CoSA*

By John Yoder



I have been volunteering in CoSAs for a little over two years now and have been involved with three core members over that time period. Some may be wondering what the CoSA experience involves and if the program is effective. I would like

to share a few observations from my involvement with CoSA in the hope that perhaps something of my experience may resonate with others who are considering involvement with this worthy program.

Comradery

I must admit that I was a bit skeptical when I first joined a CoSA wondering what good this would actually do in the life of someone who has just been released from prison. Especially since it appeared that we were merely to meet and chat. I found myself asking, "How will a weekly coffee and group chat help an individual get back on their feet and prevent further offenses?"

What I found is that in comradery, we began to find or build commonality. Oh sure, the first couple of meetings were a bit stiff and less than relaxing, but that changed soon enough. There are things that happen in the meetings every week that produce some intangible yet very real relational effects. It is in the weekly comradery of conversation and accountability that seeds of trust and compassion are planted.

Compassion

I sensed that we began to develop a sense of compassion for each other within the group and not all of it was directed toward the core member. In the Circle, we began to sense community and loyalty developed out of that. I noticed that all of us took an interest in each other's lives and although we were focused on assisting the Core Member to reintegrate with the local community, we were all moving toward friendship.

Friendship

Through the shared experience of our weekly meetings and working through the difficulties facing the core member, we actually developed friendships. As we encouraged through the low times by being a listening ear or offering practical

knowledge and resources, we also experienced the joy of the same things being reciprocated, by the core member.

I remember the joy and the surprise when a core member took it upon himself to personally take an interest in a problem that I had shared with the group. This told me that he was beginning to see me as a friend and not merely a fixture in a program he was taking. It was another step in his healing and rebuilding process to be able to reach out and touch another person's life for the good.

Broader Experience

I have experienced much by way of working inside the Correctional System both in Canada in the United States, but CoSA has been my first real experience working closely with someone who is rebuilding their life from the ground up on the outside. It has been really eye-opening to see the incredible odds that face our friends as they are released and attempt to begin a new life.

I have been challenged and inspired to see the incredible courage with which many of the core members meet the difficulties of starting over. These are things few of us need to face, and so it is not surprising if we are ignorant of them in the life of another person. However, they are mountains and seeing this helped me to begin understanding how, in general, our current release policies set individuals up for failure. In many ways it is like telling an individual to scale a mountain but forcing them to start below sea level.

Some may say it is not the fault of the system that an individual is starting his climb from the bottom of a hole. It would be a waste of my time to argue that. It may also be argued that many of our core members have dug the holes out of which they need to climb. However, this is not a justification to leave them there. For me, as a follower of Jesus Christ, this behooves me to climb into the pit and assist these individuals in the climb regardless of whose fault this is or who dug the pit. CoSA became a ladder which enabled me to reach into another's situation and

allowed both of us to climb out and to keep climbing.

So then the challenges include finding safe and adequate housing in an area that will not suck the individual back into an old lifestyle. The first several weeks after release are pretty intense as the homeless shelters and transitional housing are populated by many of the temptations and negative influences a released offender must avoid to maintain the conditions of parole. Yet these housing conditions are the first (and sometimes only) available options until the individual is able to get a job and collect an income.

Then there is the branding that follows a released offender. It is hard to overcome the “prison” on their employment and social record. CoSA provides a group of friends who stand with an individual in spite of the brand. It is a group that can encourage and support through the many painful rejections that come. Some of the most painful results of the “branding” are the lack of trust and suspicion. It is amazing how demoralizing this can be.

Getting a job is always considered a first priority but it is here that the core member faces the “Catch 22’s” of limited finances, available work, and radius of travel allowed by conditions of parole. Working through these frustrating issues opens opportunities to show love and support for the core member.

In one case, the situation was literally impossible for the individual to work around. He had work in construction and the job was outside of the city. The starter went out on his car. He didn’t have money to buy a starter and without it he couldn’t get to work. Without work, he was unable to make the money to buy the starter and fix his car. The more days he didn’t work, the further he went into a hole financially. Such a small thing for many of us, but it held the potential for becoming the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. It was at this point that we stepped in and provided a starter and the situation was resolved. However, without a CoSA, this individual could have been moved to do something desperate or perhaps just give up.

This broader experience is still a work in progress for me. I am still learning and growing. I entered the CoSA with the idea of making a difference in another’s life, but I am finding that it has challenged and stretched me to grow. In all, I would recommend the CoSA experience. It may not be for everyone, but I do believe that it has been a great benefit in my life. It is a worthwhile investment of your time and energy. You may think you are investing in another, but you will find that the investment brings returns to your life as well.

In Christ,

John

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*CoSA = Circle of Support and Accountability

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