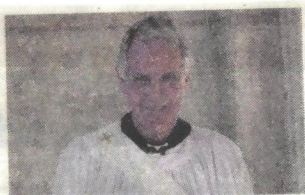


Restorative Justice allows offenders and victims to discuss what happened and move forward. Although widely praised, it is rarely used. This year has seen the axing of the Sycamore Tree course in English and Welsh prisons, and claims that the Ministry of Justice is blocking charities from doing their work. Inside Time explores the issue

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"The point is that Sycamore Tree works"

The Rev Jonathan Aitken calls for a rethink

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Sycamore Tree deserves a reprieve



Jonathan Aitken

Oh dear! Oh dear! The mad axemen of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) are on the rampage again, slashing and burning in the only parts of their prison territory that are too weak to fight back – rehabilitation courses largely provided by volunteers.

The latest victim of the mad axemen's folly is the Sycamore Tree programme. It is better known as the Restorative Justice (RJ) programme and has been a shining star in the firmament of changing bad prisoners' lives into better lives for nearly three decades.

RJ is an acclaimed method, proven by academic research and practical experience in many prisons, for persuading offenders to recognise the impact of their crimes on their victims.

Burglars, who often operate under the delusion that they are merely committing offences against property, can be startled to the point of breaking down in tears when they hear at Sycamore meetings how their victims can be traumatised by break-ins. As a Sycamore Tree attender since 2002, I well know how effective these IJ courses can be.

The MoJ's explanation for cancelling the Sycamore Tree programme is that "it doesn't meet international standards". This deserves the famous retort: "However thin ya slice it, it's still baloney."

There are no such "international standards" because RJ works differently in different countries. In the UK, particularly in Northern Ireland and Thames Valley, the standards and the results are good.

Sycamore Tree is a low-cost and, in some prisons, a no-cost item. In HMP Pentonville and some other jails, the course is paid for by charities. But still the mad axemen insist on cutting it. Why? Some informed observers fear that Sycamore Tree has been felled because its origins come from the Christian Gospel story of a fraudster called Zacchaeus who publicly restored his ill-gotten gains to his victims. But who cares where the earliest RJ stories came from? The point is that Sycamore Tree works, while far too many and much more expensive MoJ courses, such as anger management, fail.

Is it too much to hope for a rethink, or better still a reprieve, for Sycamore Tree?

The Rev Jonathan Aitken is a chaplain at HMP Pentonville and a Patron of Prison Fellowship, the charity which runs the Sycamore Tree programme