

Every Soldier A Missionary

GEOFF RYAN, MARCH/APRIL 2001

I am convinced that few people read manuals regardless of whether they are explaining how to put a crib together, program a computer or plant a church. I know I never do. Now granted, putting a crib together is one thing, planting a church quite another and I am also fairly sure that there are certain types of people who do one better than the other. For many of the same reasons, this column will likely appeal to certain readers while confounding some and maybe even annoying others.

Being instinctively suspicious of formulaic approaches, my hope is that *'Dispatches'* will not end up reading like a manual or a policy book for the continuing maintenance of the franchise. The intent is that it be a distillation of the ideas that have been hammered out over almost a decade of pioneering work in Russia. Every concept offered has been tested under fire and hence the name: *'Dispatches from the Front'*. Our soldiers lived and fought by these maxims - they shaped our vision, guided our mission and conjured an Army out of thin air. *'Imagination rules the world'*, said Napoleon and we were ruled by these ideas as we imagined a new world amid the ruin of former things.

As the *zeitgeist* of our times is one of challenged assumptions and sacred cows who often need to go the way of the fatted calf – this needs to be kept in mind as you read.

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"The Founder marched us out of the Church and into the World – and I'm not going to march us back in." (General Eva Burrows)

Major religious revivals and cutting edge churches usually exhibit certain commonalities, regardless of the era or context. One of these is a renewed commitment to the 'priesthood of all believers', a New Testament imperative that seems constantly in tension with established church

structure. From the early house churches of Acts, to the emergence of the Franciscan order, the Waldenses, Quakers, Puritans, Moravians, Primitive Methodists, the Salvationists up to present-gurus such as Peter Wagner and Rick Warren and others (for a quick survey of reform movements throughout church history, I would suggest *'First Called Christians: A Study in Names'*, by Gustave Isely, SP&S 1952). The idea is the common dignity, calling and privilege of all Christians before God. *"Every shoemaker can be a priest of God, and stick to his own last while he does it"*, said Luther. Yet, 'no single Church has been able to express in its worship, work and witness, the full richness of this doctrine.' (C. Eastwood).

"In the early Church, decision making was neither highly structured nor done in isolation. It involved the community. As time went on and the priesthood developed, however, diversity of gifts was depreciated. The clergy were seen to be concerned with the spiritual, the laity with the secular. Hence clerical power and privilege expanded. The result was a considerable diminution of lay participation in the life and decision making of the church. From time to time in the history of the church, movements such as lay monasticism and the Protestant reformation have made attempts to restore the laity to their rightful place, but the dilemma is still with us." (Community in Mission, Phil Needham, P. 16)

The Salvation Army developed a priesthood, in any case, through default more than anything else I believe, although concrete steps were eventually taken to formalize popular perception and practice. In truth, an officer is a Christian who has entered a covenant relationship with God in submission to the spiritual authority of The Salvation Army and its structural constraints as a means to release him or her from the distractions of daily life in order to invest completely in mission. It is a 'role' and not

a 'status' thing, more pragmatic in nature than anything else.

The impulse to spiritualize things is strong, however, and often the beginning of many of our problems. In spiritualizing – or overspiritualizing – things it becomes much easier to remove them from the realm of reality and thus, trivialize them into impotence. Call it the 'Monty Python syndrome'.

As the role and importance of the officer increased, conversely the involvement and commitment of soldiers - the laity - decreased. This cuts both ways, though some fault may lie with the organization that exalted the 'office' of the officer disproportionate to its function thereby gradually disempowering the soldiery, the other side is that this agreement actually suited many, and maybe eventually the majority, of the soldiery (ever heard of the 80/20 principle?). The urge to compartmentalize religion along with other facets of our lives is almost irresistible, and besides, if there is someone standing up front getting paid to do it all, why not let them? In today's Army, soldiery is by and large church membership rather than a commitment to being a missionary, with the corps functioning as a mission centre.

Yet the profound beauty of early-day Army operations was that anyone and everyone could and did do everything that eventually came to be regarded as the exclusive domain – if not sacred obligation - of the officer. That's why we had 'soldiers' as opposed to 'members' – we were enshrining within our membership structure an expectation of mission involvement.

'...the description of membership as soldiery means that there is no room for passive membership. In this sense, 'soldier' is a better word than 'member'. Members can be passive or active; they may do no more than belong on the rolls. Soldiers cannot only belong; they are either fighting or maintaining readiness for battle – otherwise, they are not really soldiers. To put it differently, the objectives of a society or club are usually primarily internal; the objectives of an army are primarily external. Hence, the Church's use of the military metaphor is symbolic of its external purpose: mission in the world.' (Community in Mission, Phil Needham, P. 55)

Most early-day corps were opened by soldiers with the officer being sent in later. This is still often the case in the areas of most intense Salvationist warfare (Africa

and Asia). It was my experience in the Russia. Of the corps opened in the Southern Region (Division) during my time as Regional Officer, all five were pioneered by soldiers and four of these are still run by soldiers.

As the 'Christian Mission' mindset waned and we grew up and became a church, we took on characteristics of the churches around us. As generational Salvationists were born and grew up in the ranks, as persecution turned into acceptance, respectability and even emulation we adjusted accordingly. The models we had around us were churches and we gradually minimized the distinctives that distanced us from our cousins. As a prophetic movement, we slowly took on board priestly trappings, hiked in from the hills to the sanctuary of the Temple and found that we rather liked it there. The Army's hierarchal structure is actually closer to the Roman Catholic church than to most of the Protestant congregational models, but we were already tinkering with various aspects of our missional structure, bit by bit ending up with a our present day incarnation – a hybrid that is neither fish nor fowl, neither Army nor church, order nor denomination. No less confusing for our cousins than for us.

The mission emphasis shifted from 'sending them out' to 'bringing them in' – we built Temples, we invested in equipment, we created static congregations and installed our 'priests' and our soldiers increasingly assumed the role of spectators who came to church, even as our corps increasingly ceased operating as mission centres and became churches.

A significant step toward this was made during Arnold Brown's Generalship in the early 1980s when the decision was made to commence 'ordaining' officers in addition to the Army's traditional practice of 'commissioning'. I, for example, was 'ordained' and 'commissioned' – to cover all the bases, I suppose. This rather signal event passed, it seems in hindsight, with relatively little notice. In reality, I think it carried some vast implications in the way we view ourselves and our focus as a 'missionary church'. I would go as far as to say that this was a defining moment in The Salvation Army's journey from mission movement to church. 'Commission' is a military term and carries with it the implication of 'sending' and of being equipped for a concrete task. As such it reflected not only the military metaphor of early Salvationist mindset, but also the emphasis we had on mission. 'Ordination' is a church term, it is static and has to do with the offices of a priest and, if truth be told, historically implies access to sacramental authority (its origin is from the Latin

ordinaire, which means 'to put in order' – does this imply a commitment to the ascendancy of the structure of the organization, rather than the mission?). It owes more to church tradition than Scriptural injunction.

Why it was really instituted is hard to say. I suspect that it had more to do with the Army seeking the validation of the status of our clergy class in the eyes of our fellow churches than anything else. My point though, is the shift in mindset from mission, to maintenance, from the war to the Army that fights the war, from sending to staying put, risk to risk management. In the end this change was official confirmation of the reality that was played out weekly in Salvation Army corps around the world.

All this is by way of background, however. That point is that were every soldier to understand their soldiery as a call to mission and that being a 'soldier' is synonymous with being a 'missionary', and were every corps to understand that their reason for being is to engage in mission in the world and that 'corps' is synonymous with 'mission centre' then maybe our renamed 'community churches' would actually live up to their names and our soldiery would too.

One other thing, I think a reemphasis on the 'priesthood of all believers' would go a long way toward correcting misconceptions of officership from both sides.