

## The Mission of The Salvation Army

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*“Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died and that is what He died about that is where churchmen should be and what churchmanship should be about.” (George MacLeod)*

*“Meanwhile our churches, like secular associations, are concerned with fund-raising, beautiful buildings, large numbers, comforting sermons from highly qualified preachers, while they display indifference to the poor, the insane, and the lonely. Jesus himself would find no place in our all-too-respectable churches, for he did not come to help the righteous but to bring sinners to repentance. Our churches are not equipped to do that sort of thing.” (John White)*

*A corps officer should understand that he is sent by God and the Army to all the unconverted, non-church-going people in his district, especially to the most needy and depraved among them. (Orders and Regulations for Corps Officers)*

### The Only Two Questions

**W**hat is the mission of The Salvation Army? *Who* were we created to be and *what* is it we were created to do? Identity and function, the only two questions that truly need answering and they are being asked all over the place, all the time, by all sorts of people.

The Russians summed it up nicely for me as I walked around St. Petersburg in the early 1990's, not speaking a word of Russian and with “The Salvation Army” in large,

silver Cyrillic script nailed to my forehead (like the Old Testament priests with their “Holiness to the Lord” head plates). The difference was that the Israelites respected their priests while the Russians viewed me a little more skeptically and with a lot more hostility. Upon seeing my unusual uniform and reading the boast emblazoned across the front of my cap, they would invariably ask or shout or laugh one of two questions. Either: “*What is The Salvation Army?*”, or: “*Who do you save?*” Sometimes both in tandem.

It took me some time to realize that these questions were not only valid, but that they were well asked and that in truth, the answer to much lay between those two questions. Much with regard to The Salvation Army. Those questions required examination of our identity and our mission: *who* are we and *what* do we do? In trying to answer them for the sake of the Russians, I gradually found that I asking them to myself. I spent nine years trying to answer those questions and at times I wonder how good a job I really did. In some ways I'm still asking.

The asking is taking place on this side of the Atlantic as well, as I soon found out upon return from Russia. In fact they are being asked in most countries that the Army functions in. At the International Youth Forum in Capetown, South Africa in 1997 – all the discussions and recommendations and presentations came down to those two questions. Who are we? What should we be doing?

I wonder, however, whether the asking is fully honest. If you ask an honest question then you should be able to expect an honest answer. One at least deserves the other. But honest answers to these questions carry with them a host of implications and a horde of consequences. The Pandora's box for The Salvation Army is the one that contains the true and direct answers to these questions and we are wise in approaching it with more than a little fear and trepidation.

We lament our confusion and hesitancy in The

Salvation Army. But our instinct is to avoid the bright sun of clarity for the netherworld of uncertainty and questioning and tentative assertion. Muddy the waters, set off a smoke bomb, turn the lights off and you can avoid the obvious, the hard facts that bruise your shins and skin your ankles and generally just make life more of a hassle. "The truth will set us free", Jesus promised and warned us. But freedom is often frightening, it has implications and carries consequences. It demands an investment and responsibility that our commitment-phobic culture instinctively shies away, rather like a priest on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

With less and less to lose with each passing year, let us open the box, clear the water, turn the lights on and answer the questions. Personally I think the truth inside is relatively simple. Sure its a hard truth, but nothing too complicated. As a Russian philosopher once said: "Life is simple. People complicate it". So it is with our life as an Army. The difficulty lies not in the obvious answers to the questions asked but in the fact that we lack the honesty to listen steadily to these answers and live our lives, individually and corporately, in that truth. The answers are not what we want to hear so we root around in the box hoping to turn up some other answers, some different ones, some that better fit with what we had in our minds and how we have constructed our lives and corps and ministries. A liar is not only someone who speaks a falsehood but includes also those who intentionally only listen to falsehoods amid the spoken truth.

Enough obfustacion. It needs a look back, of course, a long, gaze at the "rock from whence we were hewn". Not as an exercise in nostalgia which is nothing more than a cul-de-sac (Webster's dictionary defines nostalgia as "a wistful...sometimes abnormal yearning for return to or return of some real or romanticized period or irrevocable condition or setting in the past"). As one writer noted, "rampant nostalgia plunders the past and bankrupts the present." Indulging in nostalgia about our imaginary past (the way we weren't) will prove unhelpful, a red herring in the search for clarity and truth.

We need to have a sense of history and continuity, a deep understanding of what God was up to in 1865 when he gave Booth the vision that became The Salvation Army. Jacques Ellul, the French Christian philosopher, opined that "modern man was a man without memory" and that this was a dangerous thing. To be disconnected from the past and bereft of any tradition or sense of self leaves one a prisoner of the present, bound by the laws

and temporal and fleeting values of the transitory. We all need giants on whose shoulders we stand.

I believe there were three seminal moments in William Booth's life that defined and directed the vision given him by God and that consequently became all that The Salvation Army is. I believe that vision was crystal clear, specific and focused and that it guided Booth throughout his life, from beginning to end. It was a while coming, but when it hit, it came with a certainty and clarity that never left him. It grew and developed, evolved even, but in its essence remained as intact as the night God passed it on to Booth.

You see, vision is specific. Anything you read about vision and visioning will tell you the same thing - a vision has hard edges and sharp edges. A vision is specific and unyielding in its focus, more laser beam than lamp. If it is fuzzy around the edges, if it is too wide and large and spacious and all-encompassing, then whatever else it might be, it is not a vision. It might be a plan or an idea or a strategy even, but not a vision. Visions are specific callings given by God to his visionaries - his prophets. The men and women that he raises up as vessels to carry that vision, embody it, give birth to it and nurture it to full flowering. This is what happened with William Booth.

### **A Vision Birthed**

It was summer 1865. Booth had been asked to lead a mission in London's East End, filling in for a leader who had fallen sick. Specifically, it was a tent campaign in an abandoned graveyard in Whitechapel (then, as now, one of London's rougher neighbourhoods). After one evening's toil, around midnight, Booth returned home to his wife Catherine who was customarily waiting up for him. He was tired, but "strangely excited" as he later remembered it (possibly in an unconscious nod to Wesley's famous heart experience of being "strangely warmed"). Walking in, William declared excitedly to Catherine, "*I have found my destiny!*"

Booth was 36 years old. He had been working as a full-time minister of the gospel, and more specifically a preacher and evangelist, for about 13 years at this point. He had preached to hundreds of people and seen score of souls won to the kingdom. Yet only *now* he finds his destiny? What did he mean by this? This is a vitally important question because it is from this point, this juncture, that the Christian Mission and subsequently The Salvation Army developed. So important is this event

that we commemorate it officially in The Salvation Army as Founders Day, July 2. The day on which the evangelistic campaign on the Whitechapel graveyard commenced is rightly seen as the birth moment of our movement (and not William Booth's birthday, as is more widely assumed as the reason for Founders Day).

So what did Booth mean by exclaiming this to Catherine that summer's night? He meant that saving *these particular type* of souls in *this particular place* was what God wanted him to do with his life and so he set about creating an organization in order to do it as effectively as possible. His destiny was to the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, the submerged tenth, the last, the lost and the least, as he realized it that night. It wasn't just about preaching in an evangelistic campaign, or pastoring a congregation or being a revivalist. He had been doing this for over a decade already with a fair measure of success. It was the specifics of locale and constituency that gripped his heart and mind and clarified the plan that God had devised for William Booth.

### **A Vision Passed On**

The second event came a bit later that same year when his son Bramwell was 12 years old and the Christian Mission was just getting started (The Salvation Army yet to be birthed). It was again late on a Sunday night following a hard day of preaching. Cyril Barnes writes of this moment in his book: "Words of William Booth".

"They had left Mile End Waste and gone but a few yards along Cambridge Heath Road when William pushed open the door of a drinking saloon. What Bramwell saw he never forgot. As a grown man he recalled seeing a 'brilliantly lighted place, noxious with the fumes of drink and tobacco, and reeking of filth....The place was crowded with men, many of them bearing on their faces the marks of brutishness and vice, and women also, dishevelled and drunken.'

*As the lad looked wondering what was the cause of all this sorrow, his father said: 'Willie, these are our people; these are the people I want you to live for and bring to Christ.'"*

This scene seems flavoured with the Old Testament imagery of the Father and Patriarch, giving his blessing to his first-born son, passing on his legacy, ensuring that what he has started will continue and flourish. This

exercise that Booth undertook with his eldest son is about sustaining vision. William was taking the vision that God had given him and cloaking Bramwell with its mantle - a prophetic act foreshadowing Bramwell's term as the second General of The Salvation Army.

How many of us would take our twelve-year old son or daughter and expose them to such a scene? But Booth, gripped by a vision that would consume the rest of his life and one to which he would sacrifice everything he had (children included as it turned out) needed to ensure that his heir would know his heart and understand the charge God had given him. And that in turn Bramwell would become invested in developing and sustaining this vision.

Catherine Bramwell-Booth, writing of this incident in her biography of Bramwell Booth elaborates on this theme:

"Prophetic, almost symbolic! For these two, Father and son, were destined to travel strange roads together; metaphorically speaking, one sees them hurrying through all, or nearly all, the Whitechapels of the world, always searching out the sinful, repulsive and outcast of the children of men, and always saying to each other, "These are our people."

*"That first vivid impression of mankind's misery and degradation, of its immeasurable spiritual need, which he received in Whitechapel, never left Bramwell Booth. More than sixty years later he lay dying in circumstances of peculiar personal sorrow and loss, but his thoughts and prayers were with "our people"..."*

### **Summing Up**

The third seminal incident occurs in May 1912, three months before Booth is promoted to glory. It is his last public address, delivered at the Royal Albert Hall in London before 10,000 people and a month after his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

Last words are always very telling. We study the last words of the great and famous looking for hints, do we not? Books are published containing nothing more than the last words of famous people. We somehow feel that a clue to the life and purpose of such extraordinary people will be contained in their parting words or that what have they have experienced and learned will be summed up and explained. If there is a legacy it will surely be passed on by a dying breath.

So, what did Booth say? What charge did he give to the more than 10,000 Salvationists gathered to catch his closing statements?

Well Booth *does* do a summing up. He spoke of housing for the poor, of unemployment, and addictions, health issues, criminal and prison reform, noting that while not one of these was intentionally the object of life's efforts (ergo his vision), or even specifically the stated mission of The Salvation Army, nevertheless the Army had ended up addressing each of these concerns. He declared that his object was to do God's will in his life and that sixty-five years previously he had consecrated his life to this end, to this "object", as he termed it. And what was God's will for William Booth?

With reference to the litany of social ills afflicting the poor that the Salvation Army had addressed, Booth continued:

*"And the object I chose all those years ago embraced every effort, contained in its heart the remedy for every form of misery and sin and wrong to be found upon the earth, and every method of reclamation needed by human nature."*

Then he concludes with his now famous "I'll Fight" declaration:

"And now, comrades and friends, I must say goodbye. I am going into dry-dock for repairs, but the Army will not be allowed to suffer, either financially or spiritually, or in any other way by my absence; and in the long future I think it will be seen – I shall not be here to see, but you will – that the Army will answer every doubt and banish every fear and strangle every slander, and by its marvellous success show to the world that it is the work of God and that the General has been His servant... While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight; while there is a drunkard left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight – I'll fight to the very end!"

Booth's "I'll Fight speech" is likely the closest to a mission or vision statement that our Founder ever made. It echoes Jesus mission statement given at the commencement of his public ministry as recorded in Luke 4: 18, 19 (a quotation from Isaiah 61). It is the cry of a prophet "nailing his colours to the mast", albeit more after the fact than before. They are words to inspire the troops by pointing to personal example and history and personal vision and achievement.

These verses were penned by the prophet Isaiah, employed by Jesus as a personal declaration of purpose and as the standard by which believers will apparently be judged by his Father (Matthew 25: 31 – 46) and by William Booth as a summation of his life's work. They also came to be enshrined in The Salvation Army's officers pledge. It is one of two affirmations that officers worldwide assent to publicly on their day of commissioning:

*Do you regard it as your duty to bear witness to the world, to strive to*

*lead mankind to its only Saviour, and, for Christ's sake, to care for the*

*poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love the unloveable, and befriend*

*those who have no friends?*

In essence what Booth was saying was that *this* is what he had been about for the past 68 years: the drunkards and criminals, the prostitutes, the starving, those lost for time and eternity. This is the call - the vision - that God placed on his life and out of which came The Salvation Army. This is what we (read Salvationists) are about. "This is why you are here today", Booth was saying in effect. "Learn from me, follow my example, catch the torch as I throw it to you and move forward".

With that he left the platform and three short months later left for heaven.

Therefore...

If there is any value is looking at one's roots, in returning to the fundament and source of the vision, it is for times and questions such as these. The way forward must needs be linked to a comprehensive understanding of the road already travelled. We need to attempt to understand God's purposes and plans with regard to our movement and the answer to this lies in that vision that was birthed well over a hundred years ago.

We speak here of ecclesiology, not methodology. Most of the disputes and identity issues that crop up in The Salvation Army today regarding *who* we are and *what* we should be doing (and *where* and among *whom* we should be doing it) pick methodological battlegrounds on which to battle out issues. Yet method itself defines little if anything. This is defined by context and guided by philosophy, or in this case theology and ecclesiology. It is pointless to argue about things such as uniform styles, musical tastes, sacramental options, the role of officers vs soldiers to name a few, matters which are inherently

methodological and structural issues, if the vision remains questioned, ill-defined, confused or even lost.

To say that William Booth was simply about reaching the lost and leave it at that is to misunderstand the nature of vision and to misread the particulars of Booth's calling and vision. Yes, Booth was at the end of the day, an evangelist. A pragmatic evangelist whose passion and inclination was to preach and evangelize and he would naturally engage anyone within arms reach because of who he was and the gifts God had imbued him with. To move from this, however, to the assertion that this, in and of itself, constitutes his vision and that this was no more focused or particular than a "reaching of the lost", irrespective of *which* "lost" he was attempting to reach, is to wilfully ignore the evidence of our history as a movement and Booth's own recorded thoughts on the matter:

"To help the poor, to minister to them in their slums, to sympathize with them in their poverty, afflictions, and irreligion, was the natural outcome that came to my soul through believing in Jesus Christ."

The imperative to reach the lost does not constitute a vision. It is larger than that, far wider than any vision. In fact, it is a commission. In Christian circles generally termed the "Great Commission". It comes from Christ's words to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, taken as

binding on all subsequent disciples. It is a non-negotiable for anyone who becomes a Christian. To say it is a vision per se, is a misnomer. To say that this general instruction to all believers constituted Booth's particular calling is to misunderstand the nature of vision and calling and to fail to grasp God's wider plan for the salvation of the world.

Booth had a passionate understanding of his message as a gospel for the whosoever. The vision God gave him was for those of the whosoever that were neglected by the churches and rejected by mainstream society. His vision, and by extension the vision for The Salvation Army, was a mission *of* the poor, *to* the poor and *with* the poor.

Certainly this vision is lived out within the context of the Great Commission. Picture if you can an actor, playing a particular role on stage, with a scenic backdrop that establishes the context and sets the tone and informs the theatregoers of the period and setting for the play. This is how I believe God envisions us as The Salvation Army. One actor amid his troupe, playing a specific role with specific intent – our vision – as one part of his grand play of Redemption.

*"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love...Repent and do the things you did at first."  
(Revelation 2:4,5)*