

## There goes the neighbourhood!

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*Its not just about how we plant churches – but where*

*“The Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.” (John 1:14, The Message)*

**M**uch has been spoken and millions of words written on **how** we should plant our corps. Manuals have been produced and are being produced, seminars attended videos watched and cassettes listened to; the gurus and planters push their models and tell their success stories for us to consider. Resources galore to help us do what we need to do. Curiously though, little is ever said about the **where** of planting. This is because all of the above is predicated from an assumption that all players are working from the same page, that there is consensus and agreement and that it can be taken for granted that we all understand that we plant in those areas that we ourselves feel at home in.

We plant in those areas where we feel most comfortable – among people that look, think, act and talk like ourselves. Staying in one’s comfort zone where it is easier to navigate is seen as common sense and even good mission practice. It is effective and after all “one can’t argue with success” (another assumption here, by the way, that we all accept the same definitions of success). Thus expediency becomes the bottom line. In a results-oriented, corporate culture driven by consumerism and materialism we define effectiveness by prevailing cultural norms. And in so doing, we have taken a sociological reality and made it a mission strategy. How else to explain the homogeneous principle of church growth, for example? Biblical values are about changing the habits of people and the rules of society and calling us to a better – although more difficult - standard and value system. Just because something works, does not make it right.

Given the fairly consistent and rather unequivocal

words of the prophets with regard to social and economic justice (Isaiah 58 for example, “The Charter of The Salvation Army”, in Booth’s own words). Given the life of Jesus who kicks off his whole active ministry by getting up in a synagogue and reading Isaiah 61:1,2 and then sitting down (thereby basically saying “I’ve just told you the important stuff about who I am”). Who then goes on for three years to hang out with the working poor, prostitutes, national traitors, unsavoury racial types, religious heretics and terrorists. Given the record of the early church, mainly composed of “the slaves and politically powerless peoples of the first- and second-century Roman Empire, among whom Christianity had its most extensive appeal” (Needham, “Community in Mission”, footnote No. 38). Given the history of our movement, the Salvation Army, a working class movement raised up by God as a prophetic voice for the oppressed and excluded. Given all this, it really should be easy to find us as Salvationists, to know which neighbourhoods we live in and where we do church.

And yet the Salvation Army in Canada & Bermuda territory over the past 10-15 years has strategically targeted middle- to upper-middle class neighbourhoods. Systematically we have withdrawn our worshipping communities from inner-city, multi-ethnic core areas and poorer neighbourhoods and shifted to outlying suburbs (note: this is not a strictly Canadian thing – a friend of mine who is well-known in urban ministry circles throughout the continent lamented the fact that one can drive through downtown Chicago and point to half a dozen sites where “the Salvation Army used to be”). We have left our social service providers in these areas in order to maintain a presence even as the officers in these institutions live in better neighbourhoods, leaving the downtown areas without any incarnational presence.

I reckon that John White said it best almost twenty years ago, in his book, *Flirting with the World*. “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, and to the pariahs of society – drunks, whores, homosexuals, the poor, the insane, 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.”

One of Jesus’ best praxis on mission was slipped in at the beginning of the sermon on the mount. Matthew 5:13-16 introduces the subsequently overused metaphors of salt and light. The Church popularized these images as evangelism taglines to tell us **what** we should be. But the metaphor has as much to say about **where** we should be, as it does about **who** we should be as the people of God.

Where? As “light”, in the darkest places (not much point in lighting a candle either in a well-lit room or in a room where there are other candles already burning) and as “salt”, in those places most in danger of spoiling and going rotten. The kicker at the end about “good deeds”, I understand as a validation of our redemptive theology of salvation and as a confirmation that social action **is** evangelism.

As we strategized and pioneered in Russia, the implications of this led us into some very dark and rotten places, from the drug-infested streets of the southern village of Kuleshovka to the war-torn region of Chechnya. Its not that we had no other choices and not that there were no relatively nice places wanting the Army in Russia. Rather it was that as Salvationist Christians we formulated our mission in the context of who we were called to be in the body of Christ and through our relatively straightforward reading of the Bible. It seemed like a no-brainer at the time. It still does.

So, why the erroneous assumption about the role of place in our planting strategy?

At the end of the day I think there are two reasons, one personal and the other corporate. Personally, I have come to understand that we are unwilling to submit ourselves, our lives, our possessions, our children, our time, to the greater need of a mission imperative. We understand our faith and service as an aspect of our lives and not a whole-life passion; we have decided that accomodation to the prevailing culture is more desirable than counter-cultural, incarnational ministry. Consider

it the sacramentalization of our faith (read as reducing a worldview to a ritual).

Put more simply – we do not want to live in those houses in those places, we don’t want those people to be our neighbours, we don’t our children to go to those schools. We don’t want to lose our lives, so we save them and being saved ourselves, think that this allows us to in turn save others (like us) as we act out mission from our security and strength and talents, instead of out of our weakness and brokenness and powerlessness. And the dominant church culture tells us in no uncertain terms that we can, and even should, do this. That, in fact, it would be counter-productive and ineffective to do otherwise. It would not produce the desired results if we did. We would not be successful and failure is our culture’s one unforgiveable sin.

The second reason is corporate and it has to do with money. All roads lead to the money men in today’s Army. No argument here, it does take money (and a lot of it) to engage in mission. Saving the world is an expensive proposition. However, once any organization – particularly if that organization is the church – allows their accountants to shape mission policy and control mission strategy, there will be problems. Financial people, by the very nature of their skill-set, are generally conservatives and true mission is a risky business. Any faith institution lives with an inherent tension between the money people who will work to enforce risk-management and the missionaries, usually the risk-takers. This can be a creative tension to ensure wise stewardship of Gd’s resources – creative and healthy. But it is the kiss of death when these parts of our structure are allowed in the driver’s seat.

It is not financially good sense to open corps in impoverished areas among people with few financial resources. Ghetto churches don’t pay for themselves, is what everybody understands – so why go there? It will cost too much, use up too much of our present resources. The returns will be minimal and the success, if it comes at all, too hard won. It is bad business.

I guess the question we have to ask ourselves is if these reasons of ours are good theology or just good sociology. What is a successful church and what price is too high to achieve that success? Where *would* Jesus live in Canada, who would he hang out with, where would he go to church?