

I Don't Mean To Cause Offence...

Scandal as Mission

GEOFF RYAN, JULY/AUGUST 2002

“Be it true or false, what is said about men often has as much influence upon their lives, and especially upon their destinies, as what they do.” (Victor Hugo, Les Miserables)

“You see, we have no reputation to lose.” (William Booth)

A friend of mine who is well known in evangelical circles, once told me of an incident from his younger days when he was in training down in Chicago. It was late at night and he was in a bar talking with some prostitutes and pimps. The police busted the place and my friend was rounded up along with the other patrons, handcuffed and led away to the paddy wagon. At the police station he protested: “But, I’m a pastor!”

Looking at his long-hair and beard, jeans and single earring, the booking officer retorted: “Oh yeah? Well, what’s a pastor doing in a place like that?”

“Can you think of a better place for a pastor to be?” my friend replied. They let him go.

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On Friday nights a small group of people head out from the 614 offices to prayerwalk in our community. Sometimes this means just walking the neighbourhood praying, sometimes just talking to people as they sit outside and taking prayer requests or praying on the spot and sometimes going into local bars and restaurants to pray and talk with folks. A few weeks ago on two of our soldiers were in a restaurant in the heart of Regent Park late at night when the place was raided by the police who were looking for weapons.

Suddenly eight policemen with riot guns crowded into the small restaurant. A female officer approached Rob (the ministry coordinator at our corps) first. She asked if he had a gun to which he replied “no”. His innocent,

babyface apparently failed to convince her. Grabbing the front of his shirt she hauled him to his feet rather roughly and proceeded to frisk him. The 614 jacket he had on with the small red shield embroidered on the front and the large, eight-inch high red Salvation Army shield emblazoned across his back made no difference.

No weapons were found and the police eventually left. Rob was immediately congratulated, his back was slapped, he was “in”. The other patrons of the restaurant thought it hugely amusing that the Salvation Army had been nailed by the police. We had been treated in the same way they felt they were usually treated at the hands of the authorities.

Rob better understands now what it feels like to be stereotyped and powerless and at the mercy of a system that can act on assumptions and often denies justice to those at the margins. He’s the better for what happened and so is his ministry. He has “friends” at that restaurant.

Then there was the time when my wife was mistaken for a prostitute. She was standing in front of the fortified Hells Angel Clubhouse east of our neighbourhood and even though she was in full Salvation Army uniform including her 614 jacket with the large red shield on her back, she was “cruised”.

“Want a ride?” the prospective “date” asked as he drew his car up to curbside.

“No”, Sandra replied

“C’mon – it’ll be fun!”

“I have enough fun in my life”, accompanied by that withering glare that I as her husband know only too well. He got the message and slithered off doubtless to continue his hunt elsewhere (at the very least this is an interesting commentary on the theory that our uniform “turns people off” - in this case, it seems that the opposite happened).

Then there was the time I was driving in my car and had just pulled away from our offices when I spied one of the local working girls waving me down. She wanted

to ask a few questions about her boyfriend. He was due to get out of prison soon and wanted to get into a drug program. I pulled the car over and rolled down the window. The girl bent down and put her head through the passenger window and we talked. Just then a police car pulled around the corner coming to an abrupt stop, in the middle of the street.

Had I been in my uniform all would have been fine. My protestations that I was a Salvation Army officer - a minister - that I knew this girl, that I worked in that building, that this was “business”, were all met with gruff skepticism. I’m a good talker though and eventually he let me drive off without any charges or without recording my license number. I’m not sure why he let me go. From his perspective it must have looked all bad. Maybe it was the originality of my explanation that got me off the hook, maybe it had been a long day and he couldn’t be bothered, maybe ...who knows? What I do remember is the contempt in his voice and the disgust in his eyes as he watched me drive off.

Then there was the lady who attends our corps who came to me one Sunday with a message from her son. He told her to tell me to be careful at night. I had been walking through The Park a couple of Friday nights ago (actually it turns out that it wasn’t me but some of our soldiers from the corps) on one of our prayer walks.

The group of three soldiers walked near to where some drug dealers were doing some business. They were all carrying guns. One of them noticed our guys first and reaching for his gun murmured to the others: “Who are those white boys?” Another dealer who I know, squinted through the night, saw our 614 jackets, thought he recognized me and said: “Its OK – its the Salvation Army. That’s “my boy” Geoff – he’s cool”. The prayerwalkers passed quite oblivious to the situation they had almost stumbled into.

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I don’t really remember when I was first informed that henceforth in life I was to be judged by the company I kept, by my friends. I think it was by my mother and likely during one of the much dreaded Mom-Dad-Son talks that inevitably occurred immediately following parent-teacher interviews at whatever school I was attending at that time in whatever city the Army had appointed us to. These talks punctuated my formative years with a dreary and dreaded regularity.

Why do you hang around with those people? You have nothing in common with them. They’re dragging you down. They are a bad influence. Endlessly it went on – or so it seemed at the time.

My only defence (when I offered one) was a cheap shot at comparing myself to Jesus who was also, I earnestly pointed out, a “friend of sinners”. Nobody bought it though. The difference of course – as my parents invariably countered – was that the people Jesus hung out with changed for the better because of HIS influence on THEM.

All my youthful spin-doctoring aside, there *is* something to this whole thing. Can you tell a person by the company they keep? What *does* it say about that person? And if so, what *do* people say of us in The Salvation Army?

I know of one United Church minister, fresh back from the barricades in Quebec City last year where he fought – actually fought – against what he perceived as injustice, oppression and other things contrary to his faith and understanding of God. Now this guy is likely involved in all sorts of scandalous causes, making a nuisance of himself all over the place, using his denomination and his calling as a man of God in order to annoy, confuse and anger the powers that be. A prophet or just a pain?

In speaking to an officer friend of mine he let it slip that as far as he and his friends were concerned (more clergy, all equally “into” the whole social action kick) the Salvation Army was little better than a lap dog of the establishment. Our hobnobbing with politicians and corporate leaders, our advisory boards and Red Shield dinners, the “grip and grin” photo ops with presidents, Prime Ministers and Prices of Industry, our cosying up to what he sees as inherently Godless structures and systems and people and our hungering after safe respectability is all evidence of our apostasy. “Radical nonsense!”, I mutter as I write this. “Liberal, social gospel heresy!” Then I spy the cover of the April issue of the War Cry sitting on my desk and wonder...

We forget that Christianity was birthed in scandal and that Christ was born at the centre of a scandal, to a young, unwed mother in a patriarchal society that valued women little enough. We forget that this scandal dogged him his whole life (Matthew 13:55). We overlook that in his three years of active ministry Jesus scandalized and shocked, through word and deed, on virtually a daily basis. We forget that Christianity continued to be a scandal until Constantine co-opted us into his empire.

The word *scandal* comes from the Greek word *skandalon*. *Skandalon* occurs 15 times in the New Testament. Depending on the context it means either a “stumbling-block” (3 times), an “occasion of stumbling” (once), an “occasion to fall” (once), an “offence” (nine times) or “things that offend” (once). Twice it is used in direct reference to Christ, in Romans 9:32 and 1 Peter 2:8. Christ the Scandal – an offence to some, a saviour to others.

The Army was nothing if not a scandal back in our youth. Did you know that in order to fight the “white slave trade” (an industry whereby thousands of underage girls from Britain were sold into brothels throughout Europe), Bramwell Booth and W.T. Stead, (editor of the Pall Mall Gazette) actually had a young salvationist work her way undercover into a brothel posing as a prostitute in order to get information and then they actually bought a young, underage girl, in order to make their case? Things got violent and ugly. It went to trial with Bramwell, then Chief of the Staff, in the dock after being transported to court in a police wagon and sitting locked in a cell until the trial each day. There were mob scenes. “Can the Salvation Army’s status survive a scandal which was now headline news across the globe?”, wondered one observer. The papers had a field day. Try to imagine something like this happening today, if you can.

“Everybody has settled it that we are fools, if not a great deal worse; therefore we can go into a town and do exactly what we think best, without taking the least notice of what anybody may say or wish. We have only to please God and get the people saved, and that is easily done.” Booth was said by way of explaining his success.

Well, this certainly was the case during my years in Russia. Fools? Quite possibly. A great deal worse? Definitely. Looking back now I realize that throughout my nine years I there I was constantly in trouble with local authorities and the official church structure. Considered disreputable, fanatical and dangerous, I have been publicly denounced by a vice-mayor as “an especially dangerous agent of the CIA”; Shouted at by a Russian Orthodox priest for my apparent complicity in the sack of Constantinople in 1453 and then dismissed with the admonition that due to my status as a leader the only Biblical directive relevant to me was Matthew 18:6,7. I have been denounced countless times in newspapers – both local and national - wherein I have been accused of everything from stealing children, drugging them and shipping them off into slavery in the

West, to practicing the black mass as a Satanist, to being (my personal favourite) a “spiritual bandit”. I have been threatened by police, kicked out of buildings and out of cities, investigated by federal prosecutors, mocked and ridiculed, ripped off, lied to, screamed at, received death threats, had property and vehicles stolen and vandalized, mail opened, phone conversations tapped, I’ve been shot at and eventually barred from re-entering the country as persona non grata. I guess you could say I was a bit of a scandal myself.

And yet, we always got along really well with regular folks in Russia, the people in the market place, the petty criminals. Once after our offices in Rostov had been robbed the local mafia put word out that resulted in a complete return of every last thing that was stolen. A drunk who vandalized our van one night in St. Petersburg was brought, a little worse for wear, to our door late one night at gunpoint by a couple of the local hoods who wanted to know what we wanted done with him (our merciful approach appeared to confuse them somewhat - different expectations I suppose). I have watched grown men – tough, hard Muslims - staying up all night outside the room where I was sleeping, playing poker to stay awake, in order to guard me from any harm.

But what a relief to come home to Canada where everyone loves us. My uniform gets me into places I never dreamed of being. I’ve even joined a service club. I am courted by people because of my Salvationism. People keep telling me how wonderful the Army is and what wonderful work we do and when they find out about 614 and Regent Park, well, the admiration and affirmation knows no bounds (but from a distance, of course, always from a distance).

But you know what? I’m not really all that sure I want their friendship. Don’t get me wrong, a return to those “Russian battles” is not something I long for. And I do not wish to court conflict or even to deliberately offend. It’s just that I fear I might compromise my mission, if not my faith, by who I’m seen with.

You see, the lines have to be drawn somewhere. And in a neighbourhood like mine, the lines are drawn fairly clearly. Were I to become, say, a police chaplain like a number of my fellow officers have and don a police uniform from time to time, carry a badge and spend a lot of time with the local police and even the local police station – it would impact my ministry negatively. I would not be trusted in my community, among my people and I would lose the relationships I have formed with

those who most need what I think I have to offer them. Sure, it would mean I would no longer be suspected of frequenting prostitutes and my staff would likely not get roughed up in bars. But it also might mean that a Friday night encounter with the dealers could turn out much different. One of definitely judged by one's friends.

I hope we are doing what Jesus would do - ministering "outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore." (Hebrews 13:13). I hope the attitude we get at times is in the same vein as what Jesus had to put up. "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" I think I am justified in spinning it thus this time around, more

justified than I was as a 13-year old academic misfit trying to rationalize my misbehaviour.

"Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighbourhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons... This is hazardous work I'm assigning you. You're going to be like sheep running through a wolf pack... Some people will impugn your motives, others will smear your reputation - just because you believe in me. Don't be upset when they haul you before the civil authorities." (Matthew 10, *The Message*)