

Where Do I Sign Up?

GEOFF RYAN, AUGUST 2003

I sent the club a wire stating. PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT ME AS A MEMBER.

(Groucho Marx)

There were probably close to thirty of us, all under the age of ten, not counting the three adult leaders. We were dressed in rather quaint quasi-militaristic uniforms resplendant in symbolism grafted from the animal kingdom. The adults leading the ceremony looked somewhat more incongruous than us dressed as they were in shorts and knee socks with grave expressions on their middle-aged faces. Squatting on our haunches, we balanced ourselves on two fingers of each hand that rested on the floor. In the centre of our circle was a life-like replica of a severed wolf's head, replete with blood painted in the corners of its mouth.

We all chanted together, our fervent enthusiasm echoing around the small basement hall where we met, promising to do our best for our leader, who we knew only by his 'nom de guerre' (also taken from the animal world). Our shouted fealty ended with the following recitation: "This is the law of the wolf pack / its as old and true as the sky / the wolf cub who keeps it shall prosper / the wolf cub who breaks it will die!

How weird is that?

Then there was my sister, who along with her friends, had to dance around a replica toadstool while singing an affirmation that commenced with the words: "We're the fairies bright and gay..."

The things we did to belong.

The question of membership in these post-modern times is a thorny issue, membership in anything whether

it be a service club, a reading circle or a church... especially a church, actually. The rites and conditions and requirements of membership in past times can, looking from these perspective of the 21st century, seem odd and arcane, if not mildly damaging at times. Certainly of late they have scrutinized, questioned and more often than not, rejected (and there you have it – my three-step description of post-moderism).

Service clubs such as Rotary and Kiwanis are experiencing difficulty recruiting new blood into their aging membership. The service club that I am a member of is one of the oldest and prestigious of its kind in the country, but the average age is 65 and the recent efforts we have made to attract new, younger members have not met with any great success. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides have been in decline numerically for years (ten years ago in the Greater Toronto Area there were 20,000 cub scouts, as of last year there are less than 4,000) and have recently undertaken a massive restructuring in order to now offer various "membership options". Rumour has it that even the Freemasons are starting to sweat. People just don't seem to want to "join things" anymore. Is it just one more example of our commitment-shy culture and rampant individualism or are there other forces at work here as well?

The issue of membership is a huge challenge for The Salvation Army. What constitutes membership and how should this be celebrated and confirmed? How should it be controlled and monitored... or should it be at all? At what point do the requirements of building and maintaining an Army conflict with the requirements and needs of the Kingdom of God and/or the Church of Jesus Christ? How do we maintain 'esprit de corps' and common mission focus and strategy, while respecting an increasingly important (culturally) individual expression?

Much of the challenge is rooted in the organizational structure of the Salvation Army. With our hierarchal

and centralized management structure we find ourselves an anachronism in a decentralized, linear, relational, post 9/11 world. We resist admitting this fact and resist changing this reality because we have so much invested in the status quo. But the manner in which we are presently structured becomes increasingly untenable year by year and further disconnected from the mission as it is fought daily in the field.

As strange as this may sound, as a mission structure Al-Qaeda provides the perfect model for The Salvation Army. As odd as it may be, a group of people with a medieval, yet profoundly religious worldview, have come up with the perfect post-modern organizational structure that embodies the latest in management theory and employs the best in technological gadgetry. Al Qaeda has been described as a “hybrid peer-to-peer network in which a central source triggers the actions that are carried out by individual nodes”. Their “headquarters”, as such, was embodied as it was in Osama Bin Ladin, who primarily fulfilled the functions of resourcing and inspiring the network nodes. Bin Ladin set the mission and embodied the fundamental vision - he was the ideological icon for the organization. He also provided the financial resources for the international network of nodes at carry out their missions. The discipline of a deep commitment to the vision/mission is what held the network together. They operated largely undetectable, yet with huge impact, in an environment that is hostile toward them. They were “a network of local missions with an intense global focus.” The applications to The Salvation Army in an aggressively secular, post-Christian culture are self-evident I think.

We, however, continue to operate within a corporate culture model from the mid-20th century that is often inflexible and operates largely on assumptions and constructs that are a bad fit in 2001. I refer, for example, to such operating norms as rigidly vertical lines of top-down authority, an organizational pyramid structure, a leadership culture that is largely disempowering. This increasingly wide disconnect between the demands of an organizational structure that is perceived to exist mainly to sustain and feed its bureaucratic hunger and the exigencies of mission at the sharp end has produced a complex confusion that has transmitted itself down through the ranks of adherents, soldiers and officers.

Membership in a local corps is not as cut and dried as it used to be, partly due to societal and generational shifts as they influence long-term commitment, denominational loyalty and individualistic drive and partly as fallout

resulting from the lack of clarity transmitted from upper leadership.

While serving in Russia I encountered the phenomena of people who were deeply committed to the local expression of the Salvation Army as expressed through our corps. They had little understanding of the wider Salvation Army though and absolutely no interest in connecting with this. One such couple came to us in Rostov-on-Don. They had become Christians through a para-church ministry in the city. He was a university professor with a doctorate in quantum physics and she was a high school teacher. Following conversion they had shopped around the rather sparse selection of Protestant churches in the city and decided that they liked ours best and so joined up. They were virtually the only non-dysfunctional family in our church, were educated and well saved so they naturally became leaders playing a very active role in the life of our church. In that environment, with few mature Christians, they were indispensable. The husband, however, couldn't handle the whole uniform/military thing and was deeply committed to the sacraments, so the furthest they would go with regard to membership was adherency. When eventually they immigrated to Canada, this couple found another church to attend and eventually became members there.

I thought that this was unique to Russia, until returning to Canada where I found the last three years that this is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon here as well. I presently have people fulfilling leadership roles at 614 Toronto who have come to us from other church backgrounds and who are mature, committed, gifted Christians, desperately needed by us, but who, for various reasons, are not interested in the whole soldiership thing or in forming any lasting ties to the denomination as such. Intensely committed on the micro-level of our corps, they have no desire to commit on the macro-level to the organization. As the church is, at the end of the day, a voluntary organization - what can be done?

In this regard, adherency is a Godsend because it is such a flexible and loose designation, that it can be shaped to fit the needs of most contexts. In Russia we redefined it in order to offer an initial step of inclusion for the literally hundreds of people in St. Petersburg in the early 1990's who wanted to join the us but did not really know or understand what we were about and needed more time to come to this understanding. At 614 Toronto adherency has been reshaped to offer inclusion to a range of people from mature, experienced Christians who are committed

solely to our highly-localised faith community to street people who have made a profession of faith and, though still with huge lifestyle issues to work out, are regular attenders and valued participants in the life of our church community. Full membership, presently defined solely as soldiership, is not an option for either of these people.

A number of “corps” that I know of in the UK have drafted up membership covenants that include the doctrines of the Salvation Army (often in alternate language) and various other affirmations of intent usually related to the localized body, but often with some reference to the wider denominational community of The Salvation Army. At 614 Toronto we continue to wrestle with this and have instituted a separate covenant, signed annually, that asks the signee to make a commitment to our local corps. As well, we have ministry covenants for those active in any ministry (ideally all would be adherents and soldiers).

There are a number of extra-biblical clauses in The Salvation Army membership document that are not weathering the strain of the changing times overly well. Some are issues that have never been adequately resolved. For example, there is the requirement that all soldiers abstain from drinking. While overall this is a good and prudent thing and often very necessary for our mission, it is extra-biblical and can we really, at the end of the day, make abstinence from alcohol a requirement for membership in the church, the Body of Christ? The truth is we cannot – but we have historically.

I remember as a teenager soldiering at a now closed downtown corps in Toronto. One of our soldiers was a troubled soul who some officer in bygone years had placed on the rolls. She would often act out inappropriately, occasionally violently and was generally a disturbing presence most of the time (I was afraid of her). Needless to say, she loved her uniform and proudly wore it absolutely everywhere...I don't think I ever saw her in any other clothing. Often other folks in the corps would look at her and shaking their heads, mutter: “Who in the world put _____ in uniform? What were they thinking?” The fact is, she *was* often a bad representative of The Salvation Army and probably hurt our corporate reputation a fair bit. But even back then, at a time in my life when I gave such matters little thought, the confusing dilemma represented by _____ niggled at me. Agreed, _____ should not have been in uniform as the public face of the Army. However, as soldiership was (is?) our primary form of discipleship and full church

membership (and uniform wearing can be a part of this) could we, as a part of the Church, deny someone membership in the Body based on mental capacity? So it was wrong to allow _____ to represent the Army in so public a manner but it also would have been wrong to exclude her from membership in the Church because of this. Not the last time that membership in the Salvation Army and membership in the Body of Christ have become confused, I reckon.

And what about officership? If anything, the confusion is even greater here, at least from my perspective as an officer who finds himself increasingly bewildered by the nature of the covenant I signed over a decade ago and with the behaviour of the organization / denomination I committed to.

When General Gowans, in response ostensibly to the cry of the grass roots and through the International Commission on Officership created new policies governing officership, in one sense he further muddied the waters. By giving freedom for local definition while retaining centralized control to a large degree, the General created a “push-me-pull-you” hybrid compromise. Individual territories have been allowed to progress with the redefinition of officership as they see fit and so the traditionally international homogeneity of officership has given way to a patchwork of localized definitions. It is somewhat akin to the effect that pluralism has had on religion – fifty years ago in Canada if you referred to “God” everyone more or less knew who you were talking about. That is not the case now. An officer in Canadian means something different to an officer in the U.K., for starters. Not necessarily a bad thing, but not necessarily a good thing either.

In the UK recently I bumped into a young woman who had worked with Sandra and myself for a couple of years in Russia. _____ had returned to the UK following her service in Russia, gotten married, served with her husband as corps assistants in the US and now were back in the UK where they had become lieutenants. As they were involved in the conference in a leadership capacity, they were listed in the event guide as associate officers at their corps. Apparently they enjoyed the benefits of any officer in their Territory (such as an Army vehicle, quarters etc) and yet retained their autonomy to a larger degree than is permitted myself. They essentially chose where they wanted to serve and with whom.

At the same conference I also bumped into _____, one of our former soldiers from Rostov-on-Don who

had become an officer a couple of years back. Surprised to see her in the UK, she explained that she was now serving in a social services appointment in the UK territory. She introduced me to her fiancé, an Englishman. They are getting married in July, after which he will enter some form of flexible training. _____ will remain an officer throughout this period and will not be required to step down from officership. A far cry from the officer couple who were family friends of ours, who some years ago ran into some difficulties. The husband was dismissed from the ranks and so was his wife. After over 40 years of faithful - if not exemplary - service, she was also stripped of her rank and years of service and...well - why *do* some officers get nailed on the joint covenant clause when their spouse messes up, while others can be married to non-officer, non-Army in some cases, non-Christian spouses and continue in ministry? The essential question is the nature and conditions of officership

Here in Canada I have a friend who planted a corps not too long ago. He is a college drop out (like myself, I hasten to add), who has had a bit of experience youth pastoring in a couple of locales around the country. However, due to natural talent and ability, a certain nurtured reputation and some fortuitous circumstances, he has been given the opportunity to plant a corps. He is not an officer and has not undergone training, is not an envoy (remember them?) nor a lieutenant, although I believe he is a soldier. At any rate, he is now on par with the other corps officers in his division – he is a church

leader. What does this say about my officership and the covenant I have undertaken, what does it say about the screening process and training process presently in place for candidates? What do I say to the 20-somethings who attend my corps and ask me why on earth they would ever become an officer, what is the difference between myself and my church planting friend? I have no answers.

Each of these people I count as friends, I have no personal issue with any of them, and am glad that they stand in the ranks alongside me. But each of them, in their own way, has added to my confusion of the nature of my calling and of what exactly is an officer in these days. What does it require to become an officer as regards training and development? What does it require to stay as an officer with regard to commitment, covenant and self-determination?

To sum up – it seems like signing on the dotted line is not as straightforward as it once was. I would like a bit more clarity from those who make these sort of decisions if I am to continue to offer people membership in The Salvation Army. If ultimately it is to be totally devolved to the local level and I am to be given full freedom to define these stages of membership as I see fit – then so be it! Let me know for sure. If not, then I need clear direction as to what I am calling people to belong to and what they are required to undertake in order to achieve and maintain this membership. As for personal concerns...how do I become a lieutenant again?