

## Are We the Church of the Poor?

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*The body of Christ is more than the sum of its parts. All Christians are called to embrace the marginalized*

*William Booth took Bramwell on a field trip to a local pub and told his son, "These are our people"*

Recently I had coffee with a local pastor and the topic turned to Salvation Army ministry. According to him, we are the church that takes care of the poor. I wasn't sure if I should warn him about my strong convictions on this topic.

"Rick," he said, "last week a man came into our church. I could tell he was poor because of the way he dressed. I watched as he stood alone drinking his coffee. A guy like him isn't going to fit in my church because, when it comes down to it, what does he have in common with a business executive who owns his own company?"

"Oh, I don't know," I thought sarcastically, "how about the fact that the business executive can offer him employment and, by the sounds of it, the newcomer needs a job." Instead, I showed restraint. "My friend, that man is going to the exact same Hell as your business owner was before God reached down and saved his miserable life from destruction."

Conversations like this disturb me. They highlight a bad theology that is pervasive in church culture and in The Salvation Army.

### SUM OF ITS PARTS?

The church is the body of Christ, a living organic community of pilgrims on a journey of faith. The Apostle Paul writes that the body is comprised of different parts, each with a different function (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Bad theology misreads Paul's intent and suggests the "church" is comprised of all the local expressions, and that each church or centre fulfills a particular function or ministry. For example, The Salvation Army is the church that takes care of the poor, the Vineyard is the church that brings us prophecy and apostles, and so on. If this is true, then the church is merely the sum of its parts, and any part that is missing or not functioning weakens the

overall strength of the body.

Some in The Salvation Army might suggest our corps or social centres comprise different functions of the "church." Some corps minister to the poor, some provide social services, some function as prophetic or apostolic and others meet the needs of families in a suburban context.

But the idea of different churches performing different functions is more about meeting the needs of the constituency than fulfilling the mission of the church. Paul was writing to the Corinthians about individual gifts the Holy Spirit gives to believers. It's true that each local expression of the church comes together with all of the gifts to form the one body. But the body metaphor highlights the interconnectedness of the believers, not the institution. The Salvation Army is not simply the sum of its parts—corps, social services and administration.

In the same way, the Army is not the hand of the church that takes care of the poor, nor are our social services the part of the Army called to fulfil this role. This flawed theology flows from an observation of our function. It's what people see or perceive us doing. But caring for the downtrodden is something all Christians in all churches are called to do. The church, as a whole, including The Salvation Army, needs to listen again to Jesus' call to meet him at the margins of society.

### MISSION AT THE MARGINS

My former college professor, Rev Sikakani, believes the church has become centripetal (inwardly focused) in its mission, and it must go back to its calling to be a centrifugal force in the world. We have become focused on ministering to the needs and marketing to the whims of people versus taking up the mission of the church to our world, especially in the margins of society to which Jesus calls us. His call to minister to the poor and oppressed is a call to the whole church, not to a specific congregation or denomination. There are over 2,000 references to the poor, oppressed and marginalized in Scripture. If we

choose to ignore these verses, then Scripture becomes little more than a book of pithy sayings.

My wife, Deana, and I celebrate our 18th anniversary this month. If Deana went around the house dropping hints about diamonds (cutting sandwiches into diamond shapes, serving carrots at every meal, leaving jewelry ads in the bathroom for me to read, whistling the tune to *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend*) I'd have to be pretty thick not to pick up on the fact that she wants me to buy tickets to a baseball game! All kidding aside, we need to be tuned into what God is repeatedly communicating to us through Scripture.

Major Bruce Power's book, *Conversations with God*, reminded me afresh that the Bible is literally God's Word. It is God himself speaking to us. God invites us into dialogue through his Word, which calls for a response from the reader. What is God saying to us as a denomination, as individual corps and as the universal church? He has a word for us about the poor. In Jesus' life and ministry he subverted the power structures of society and invited his disciples to join him in this new place, the Kingdom at the margins.

The Gospel of Mark opens with: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" " Commentaries on this verse note that Mark wrongly attributes a quote from Malachi 3:1 to Isaiah. Is the gospel writer mistaken or is he making a point?

Theologian Ched Myers explains that the writer's deliberate misquote suggests another layer of interpretation. While we may have missed it, the original audience wouldn't have. The original verse in Malachi is part of the prophet's judgment on a corrupt temple where religious leaders had ignored the plight of the poor, oppressed and marginalized. In Mark 1:12 we find Jesus in the wilderness before beginning his ministry. The gospel writer is signalling a theme by identifying Jesus with those who have been pushed out to the margins of society.

## REDRAWING THE BOUNDARIES

Later in Mark we encounter the oppressed and downtrodden. They include a leper unable to enter the temple because of his illness (Mark 1:40-45) and a nameless woman whose issue of blood made her unclean (5:25-34). In the wilderness the crowds who were hungry received enough to eat in the economy of God's grace (6:30-44) and crowds of heathens were invited to the same table as the children of God (8:1-10). A nameless woman dares to stand up to a Jewish man, challenging the status quo by asking him for a favour (7:24). These people had no privilege in society. They stood outside of religious, political and familial rule. But as he identified with them, Jesus redrew what it meant to be the church—a community and family that seeks justice for those in the margins of society.

Jesus' call to his disciples, and his call to us, takes us out of the centre of our corps, families and society to the margins where we find our new centre in Jesus. Not only did Jesus identify those in the margins as his family (see Mark 3:31-35), but in a spiritual mystery of faith he also tells us that he is the people at the margins the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these ... you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

I'm ashamed of those times when I referred Jesus to another agency or person because their needs didn't fit my timetable. In the early days of the Army, William Booth took Bramwell on a field trip to a local pub. As the door hung open the Army founder told his son, "These are our people." This is an identity that we don't quickly embrace, but one that everyone gives us credit for.

The world applauds us for our treatment of the poor, but some Christians still fail to embrace the marginalized as one of us. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world" (1 Corinthians 4:13). If we want to be true to our mission, this isn't a bad posture to take. It places us on a par with Christ who was crucified on a garbage dump, a Mile End Waste of sorts, well below those that society places at the margins of our world.