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**“How can we serve suffering humanity with few resources?”**

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This question is excellent and I am so glad that it has been brought up for our reflection at this conference. At the outset I would like to state two things: The first is that although suffering humanity encompasses various types of people, I have chosen to address the poor, inasmuch as The Salvation Army has historically had a bias for the poor. This was recently reaffirmed by General André Cox when supporting the Pope's call to eradicate famine when he said "As Salvationists we have been called to serve the world's poorest people - those who have nothing". Secondly, resources for the purpose of this paper will be understood as financial, because depending on how we work, other resources will be available, as I will mention below.

Before we go any further I would like us to remember that The Salvation Army started out with its main focus on the poor in the East End of London. Initially "preaching" the gospel to them, but further on, understanding that the "submerged 10th" of England also needed a practical gospel to bring about effective change. Although the ambitious Darkest England Scheme had that intention and offered the most diverse opportunities to the poor, it would seem that The Salvation Army in the years that followed (with few exceptions) developed its help to the poor on a very institutionalized basis. Due to various economic and social situations, it took on the role of a provider of services - hence the slogan "Where there's a **need** there's The Salvation Army."

This institutionalized and provider way of working led to the Army having to set up structures to keep the machine going and to make things more functional by dividing its mission into "Field and Social" work at a very early stage in its history. As The Salvation Army opened fire in more and more countries around the world, and especially in poorer countries the "provider" and "institution" stream flourished. The difficulty with this being

that as the Army took on this role, it made itself responsible for finding the financial resources to keep this structure moving forward.

Looking back on recent history we will find that situations outside and inside the Army brought about changes of practice. Outside the Army, we can mention the evolution of social sciences over the last decades and their impact on the understanding of development and the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1974. This raised the social/evangelism discussion among evangelical Christians brought on by Latin American theologians Samuel Escobar and René Padilla among others. Inside the Army discussion began to emerge regarding changes of practice. So much so that The Salvation Army held an International Development Conference in London in 1986 to discuss and reflect on this subject and how to move forward in what had become a changing context.

However, it would seem that an important turning point for The Salvation Army was not so much the debates going on outside the Army, important as they were, rather The Salvation Army was facing real situations and was having to deal with much tougher questions and find immediate answers. The HIV/Aids pandemic was sweeping through Africa, thousands were losing their lives, children were left orphaned, whole families disappeared and hospitals and clinics (including those of The Salvation Army) were not capable of dealing with such a "health" disaster. What were they to do with all the infected people? How to deal with all these families? How to tackle such an enormous problem if institutionalized health could not cope? How would there ever be enough financial resources for a problem of this magnitude? Answering these questions helped The Salvation Army to have to think through its "modus operandi" and begin to work outside the framework of its institutions. Somewhere had to be found to put up all these people ... there were not enough beds in the hospital/clinic. Somebody had to look after all these sick people ... the hospital/clinic did not have the staff to do that. Somebody had to help prevent this pandemic from spreading even more ... the hospital/clinic could not because it was overwhelmed by looking after dying patients.

How could this tremendous problem be solved? Only by involving the community! The community wanted help from the hospitals/clinics, but the hospitals/clinics needed help from the community. In other words, they needed to work together to face this enormous problem. Many of these people who were poor and were in the process of losing their lives, or were having to deal with the grief of losing loved ones, or were trying to readapt family life after so much loss, were the ones that helped The Salvation Army to see a way forward for mission in the 21st century.

The fact that the problem was so great led to the understanding that The Salvation Army's way of working in that context – institutions that helped those in need – did not function. The financial strain was obviously far too great. However, this experience has led to over 20 years of action/reflection, action/reflection not only of ourselves, but also involving ourselves with other organizations that have been grappling with the same situation. In the case of The Salvation Army, it would seem that this action/reflection process has made us think how our theology and our understanding of Christ's mission, his life and his teaching should not only affect the way we act, but also and especially the way we work – in other words how we see the poor, how we react to poverty and our understanding of development.

So, how do we face it? What is the method? What manual do we follow? Unfortunately it is not so straight forward. There is a working model, there are basic biblical beliefs, there is the mission of taking the transforming gospel and consequently there is a great measure of expectation and hope, but there are no easy answers!

The starting point is stepping out of our buildings and "safe places" and walking alongside people as Jesus did - starting where they are. We should probably start with John 1:1-4 - the Incarnation. Following *The Message* translation (God has moved into the neighborhood...), Leonard Sweet has boiled this text down to two words: "Be There". In order to "Be There" Jesus left his home on high and became one of us. He lived on earth, he knew poverty, he knew what it was not to have a place to go to rest. He met and lived amongst poor people, sick people, those who could not fend for themselves - he called them blessed. To be there is not necessarily to provide, but it's about knowing people's concerns and worries, their hopes for the future and how they relate to each other.

Salvation Army doctrine teaches us that God is everywhere and his grace is already at work in the lives of people when many times they themselves do not know it. More than that, all people were created in the image of God, the implications of which are: firstly, that we are equals, we are not superior (all of us have sinned and fallen short - Romans 3:23), people should be respected for who they are and moreover, for what they can become. Secondly that our God is essentially a relational God, and therefore, his creatures are also relational - they need other people, they need to feel loved, they need to feel they belong, they need to feel that they are wanted and valued. Thirdly, God is creator, and therefore people made in his image are creative, innovative and can come up with new ideas and alternatives.

The story initiated in the prologue continues throughout John's Gospel and we learn that Christ died for each one of us, and although some people may not yet have discovered this for themselves, we as Salvationists know that no one in the community is beyond the

redemptive love of God, in fact no culture or community is beyond that love. Therefore, because of Christ, transformation is at their fingertips.

Putting this all into practice and, with the help of God, going through a process of action/reflection/discussion/change/action/reflection... has shown Salvationists that:

- God is already at work in communities before we arrive, his grace is already there, even though we don't expect to meet him in such "dark" places, where the signs of sin, suffering and pain are so evident. He is working and because of his grace - people have a longing for him.
- We walk alongside people as equals, not as superior beings because we know Christ - we may have had more opportunities, but we are not superior. Therefore the way forward and possible solutions for the community are worked on together - they don't drop-in from the outside, and everybody needs to be included in this process.
- As Gods creation, people are essentially relational and although perhaps they are in need of the Lords redemptive power to heal broken relationships, they need one another and can work together (team work).
- As Gods unique creation, people are like their creator. They have the ability to think, to have ideas, to innovate and to bring about change for themselves and for those around them.
- The redemptive power of God to heal broken relationships can also heal and transform them, "...and refine the evil nature, till it glows with grace again" (SA Song Book 324).
- The community as such has many gifts (that have been given to them by God - even if they do not yet recognize it) which may be as diverse as land, social networks, animals, savings, intelligence, schools, equipment, production, etc. Things that can improve their life and that of their neighbors.

These are just some aspects of the gospel message that I have picked out to reflect on. There are many more, but in having our focus on the transformation that God wants to bring about and putting this into practice by being there and walking alongside people, we can be certain that we are helping to build the Kingdom of God. How all this actually works out in each community, the time schedule and the outcomes are unknown at the start, but they become clearer as the process moves along, as we "preach" many times without words, as we depend on the work of the Holy Spirit to touch people's hearts and mend broken relationships, as people begin to understand that they are the object of God's love, and are treated with respect and their thoughts and ideas are taken into consideration.

As we do this we also need to keep two important aspects in mind: Firstly, our role needs to be that of a facilitator - being there with people, getting people talking, connecting people with similar situations, identifying leaders in the community, and stimulating all involved to move forward, being light, salt, etc. whilst always remembering that we are also learning in the process. Secondly, it is important to be inclusive and make sure a participatory approach is possible, where everybody feels that they have been involved.

### **What does all this have to do with serving suffering humanity with few resources?**

Well people, families and communities (suffering humanity) can come up with solutions for their situation and need to be heard and acknowledged. We do not want to bring in solutions from outside. We want to help people to be able to pinpoint available local individual and community assets, connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness and also engage local institutions. This does not necessarily mean that all their problems will be solved and that they will not need financial help.

However, it does mean that:

- People will be involved and use their insights, creativity and abilities to be stewards of their own communities and its concerns, and establish their way forward;
- People will begin to understand that they deserve to be listened to by the authorities and society in general. Therefore questioning, enquiring and obtaining responses from Governments as to why they have been treated differently (i.e. why they have no schools in the community, why their streets are not paved, why they do not have access to electricity etc.) leads to them advocating for more attention and the fulfillment of their rights as human beings, as citizens and especially as Gods creation. Advocating for change should make Governments and society more aware of peoples situation, and it is expected that this will also bring about structural changes in communities and, consequently, financial benefits;
- The financial help that may still be required will have been identified by the community and therefore can be administered by them effectively;
- In identifying local resources first, it is most likely that fewer resources will be necessary than if an outside-in solution had been found.

### **Conclusion**

Despite all that has been said about institutions and The Salvation Army as a provider, we must not be naive enough to think that these two things do not have a time and place in The Salvation Army. They most certainly do and we need them. However, if we are intentional about wanting to serve suffering humanity and bring about transformation, both of individuals and of their communities, we need to begin to reflect on at least two points. One is that, on a long term basis, there are not going to be enough resources available to do mission the way The Salvation Army has traditionally done it. Two is that we are aware as an institution that there are other ways of working which, even though they are far more challenging and we have less control on how things will develop, they are Bible based, and they enhance human dignity and respect for God's creation. It would seem that these two points pose at least four main questions for The Salvation Army:

a) As The Salvation Army moves more and more towards working with communities, what challenges does this bring to the training of officers and lay people and to our on-going training programs?

b) As The Salvation Army system measures effectiveness by statistics and financial reports, how will it measure the impact of working with communities?

c) As The Salvation Army works more and more with communities, can it work differently with its own internal community? What challenges does this bring to The Salvation Army as an organization?

d) As working with communities functions on a long term basis, and is about creating relationships, trust, etc. what challenges does this bring to our appointment system? How will it relate to promoting and validating leaders that want quick results and want the job done?

Tough questions require reflection and tough decisions for such tough times as these. May the Lord help us to keep our focus on his mission, which he has invited The Salvation Army to be a part of.