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GLOBAL CONVERSATION SESSION 2B

“How can we make our voice heard and speak prophetically from our experience?”

Colonel Geanette Seymour
Director of the International Social Justice Commission
International Headquarters

In the book “Called To Be God’s People”, the report, implications and challenges of the International Spiritual Life Commission, the following statement appears:

“The ‘healing of a hurting world’ and the need for prophetic witness in the face of social injustice’, as advocated by the Commission, must be seen as more than wishful thinking. We who have received complete love from Christ are called to give transparent witness to justice, peace, equality and holiness through actions which redeem and re-order the world.¹”

“The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine”, chapter 8, as it explains and expands The Salvation Army teaching on justification, grace and faith as they pertain to our salvation refers to The Salvation Army social action and advocacy for social justice as a “consequence of our salvation.”²”

“A prophetic witness in the face of injustice.” “Advocacy as a consequence of our salvation”. How do we make our voice heard and speak prophetically from our experience? If the Salvationist, individually, is called to this purpose, then it follows that The Salvation Army, organisationally, is called to this task.

In the context of our organizational heritage, we continue to follow the principles of William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army. Paul Bollwahn analyses of the principles put forward by Booth in 1890 to guide the development of our social service ministries. These underpin the practical application of our social mandate but, I believe, are applicable to all Salvation Army ministry:

1. Programming must lift up and facilitate change at the personal level, whenever matters of character and conduct are at the root of individual or family dysfunction.

¹ Street, 1999, pp. 69-70

² Handbook of Doctrine, 2010, p. 176

2. Effective intervention must include strategies that alter social circumstances and outside forces as they contribute to suffering.
3. The scale of the intervention must, by design be commensurate with the human outcomes and life changes sought.
4. Effort must be sustained over time, sufficient to support long term growth.
5. Efforts must be specific, measurable, realistic, feasible and motivating, yet practical in every sense.
6. Intervention must not unintentionally injure those it is intended to benefit;
7. While assisting one individual or population our intention must not negatively impact the well-being of others.³

Note particularly, the second of the seven principles. To William Booth, advocacy for change in social systems was an imperative to his vision. William Booth initiated the mandate for system change, explaining in principle that responding to initial need only begins the recovery. Altered conditions are required to sustain it.

Still today The Salvation Army understands that charity and goodwill are simply not enough. Effectiveness for the Army requires that conscience and conviction spur us to social action, where mercy meets the cause of justice in the world. A world where the wealthiest 1 per cent have income equivalent to the poorest 60 per cent; where more than 1 billion people live on less than US\$1 per day. A world increasingly crippled by poverty of hand, beat down and bruised by poverty of spirit.

One Salvation Army General, Arnold Brown, spoke of this global experience: “The front line of The Salvation Army must always run through the agony of the world.” Therefore, The Salvation Army, whether it is the local worshipping community or the international administration, social justice is rooted in faith and characterized by action, particularly on behalf of the oppressed. It must have a voice – our voice. We have a unique capacity to speak prophetically from our experience.

The Salvation Army historically is known for showing practical concern for the needs of suffering humanity and its solid reputation in the countries in which it serves make it particularly well suited and placed to speak prophetically on issues of concern.

So what does it mean to speak prophetically as The Salvation Army in our age? “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and invoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”⁴

If we, The Salvation Army, are to speak prophetically, we will take the contradictions we know exist from our experience of life and ministry and challenge the existing perceptions

³ Booth, 1890, pp. 107-111 as quoted in *Communion with the Poor* by Paul Bollwahn, ISJC Speak Out online Conference, 2012

⁴ Brueggemann, 1978, p. 13

that continue to alienate people on the basis of gender, colour, age, wealth, education and poverty.

We will, while understanding through wisdom and empathetic conversation the cultural norms that hold a group of people together, challenge the cultural practices that ostracise, damage or demean.

We will challenge unjust practise including our own, ensuring that not only do we offer a high quality of service provision but we ensure that there is clarity about why we offer the service and therefore a resultant congruence with social justice practise and purpose that is inclusive and values participants as our brothers and sisters. Not a service that just “serves the poor,” a distinctive and separate group of people, a people separate from ourselves, classified by their service need– homeless, hungry, domestic violence, addict. By ensuring congruence of service and purpose we create a capacity to advocate “with” the world’s poor and oppressed and not only speak for them, thus in some cases exacerbating their alienation and powerlessness. Instead we create environments that allow the poor and oppressed to speak on their own behalf, influence service provision offered and so begin to change their circumstance and impact the sustainability of the service outcome, community capacity and lives of individuals.

The Salvation Army will be speaking prophetically when it not only responds to human need compassionately with high levels of professionalism and effectiveness but also responds to the circumstances that create the need for effective social service response whether based in corps or institutionalised Salvation Army practise. The prophetic voice will speak to or create understanding that:

Addresses issues of injustice

- Name the injustice specifically

Designs strategies to alter systems

- Name the system(s) that need altering if current injustice is to be undone, and sketch the ways that system relates (or those systems relate) to other social structures presently.

Values vulnerable people as agents of change

- Name the categories of people who are victimized by the present injustice. How could they be discovered and engaged?

Offers expertise to implement objectives

- Name the kind of expert knowledge and skill that will be needed for success. Who in the group has that knowledge and/or has the capacity to acquire it? What do we know that we can share?

Convinces power structures to alter policies

- Name the political, business, cultural and/or other social leaders who are presently in charge of the systems identified under D above. What do we know about them?

Who are their chief staff people? How do we make contact? What does the conversation sound like?

Accesses like-minded people to join the cause

- Name other groups– local, national, global– that are on record as having a passion about this issue or related issues. How could they be contacted? Who will contact them?

Changes perceptions, practices and behaviours

- The point of advocacy is not making noise or making headlines, it's making change in the lived experience of victims. Name what will constitute success of an advocacy campaign: itemize “key indicators” that will provide evidence of success.

Years for justice that leads to sustainability

- Nurturing and monitoring long-term system change requires long term commitment by advocates. Have people commit in some practical way to the next step in their activism. Do not give up quickly– be a team.

For many of us, even thinking about addressing situations of injustice or speaking prophetically is intimidating. The issues seem insurmountable:

- Lack of education
- Inaccessible healthcare
- Poverty
- Addiction
- Climate change/Global warming
- War
- 25,000 children a day dying needlessly
- Unsafe water

The issues are entrenched and complex:

- Racism
- Gender inequality
- Crime and violence
- Unemployment
- Family dysfunction
- Political/Organisational corruption

We feel inadequate, overwhelmed and often helpless. We respond through The Salvation Army to the presenting demand but what do we do about the causes of that demand? When hurricanes, earthquakes, fires strike – we rally. When disaster strikes our neighborhood or community – we rescue. When other parts of the world need our help to respond to crisis – we go. We spare no effort to respond to the trauma of the short-term crisis. Our individual and collective actions are commendable.

The challenge to maintain that same sense of urgency in response to the longer-term justice predicaments in our unjust world is overwhelming. There are a myriad of reasons.

The problems are too enormous, too far away, too complex, inequities are inevitable, people have created their own problems, it is too hard, I am only one person, we don't do that, we would have to change too much to engage that way!

No one re-orders the shape of society by their own might. Our world is made up of social structures and organisational networks. We are connected.

Mechanisms exist that allow us to think big and implement what needs to be done to move toward a more just world.

Organisations, denominations, religious alliances, community service agencies, ethnic groups, media consortiums, NGOs all have social power, whether our advocacy is with government, business, volunteer community groups or within our own organisation or team, the essence of the messaging, our prophetic voice needs to be clear, intelligent, factual, consistent and insistent. A voice of wisdom. A voice geared to the audience it is addressing and willing to be part of the response, not just the demand for change.

Jesus demonstrated His vision of mission. He creatively translated his theory of living into acts of mercy that created sustainable change. He related to others with aspiration for their spiritual and physical wholeness. In his teaching, in his preaching and his actions, Jesus created opportunities for people whose existence was curtailed by life-denying forces. Jesus envisioned what did not yet exist. He championed freedom from oppression, exclusion, inequity, sin and injustice.

The Old Testament demands:

“Shout out, do not hold back! There is no time to speak softly. The risks are too high, the people of Israel are on a dark path, their postures are pious but their deeds are evil. The prophet Isaiah blows his trumpet– ‘God’s people are pretenders, they fast in public to feel good in private, they parade virtue but practice vice, their form of godliness is drowned in their hypocrisy.’ Then – the prophet takes a deep breath and changes his tone – ‘There is still time to worship and pray and be still, but true Godliness breaks out of the prison of self-interest. Fasting is converted into feeding the hungry, prayers are translated into shelter out of the cold, worship inspires the work of lightening the load of the poor, the oppressed are given keys to unlock their restraints.’ The light of justice breaks into the dawn of a new day. And the God who waits for hypocrisy to subside and injustice to be defeated whispers, ‘Here I am.’” (Isaiah 58:1-9a, paraphrased)

We are not alone – we have each other. We have a mission that must go beyond the immediate response. We need to be agents for change willing to spend some Salvation Army organisational collateral. We need to and have capacity to and information available to speak prophetically. Can we be silent?