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“How can we develop and sustain a Christian character in Salvation Army institutions and programmes?”

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I will address this question – “How can we develop and sustain a Christian character in Salvation Army institutions and programmes?” – in regards to my experience in running a Kroc Center as well as my recent experience in providing leadership from a divisional perspective to a couple of large drug and alcohol addiction treatment programs in Hawaii where we are working on bringing “mission” central to their daily programming.

Can The Salvation Army conduct mission work in these state-of-the-art Ray & Joan Kroc Corps Community Centers or are these centres simply another jewel in Mrs Kroc’s material crown? Criticism has been directed towards Kroc Centers by some on the inside and some on the outside who would comment that they are a distraction at best from the Army’s primary mission of saving souls and serving suffering humanity. And at worse, these Kroc Centers will be the demise of the Army in the future. If we are really honest with ourselves, we could say the same thing about any Salvation Army service or programme that does not keep “mission-focused.” Kroc Centers are different in that they have the potential to magnify both the positive or negative efforts and outcomes in large and conspicuous ways.

Looking at a Kroc Center with all of their amenities such as swimming pools, fitness centres, performing arts theatres, climbing walls, recording studios, indoor soccer fields, birthday party rooms, running tracks, spinning rooms, ice rinks, football fields, boxing rings, aerobic studios and the entire infrastructure that makes all of this work, some might comment, where is the mission in all of this?

Not only is the programming and infrastructure overwhelming but the officers are tasked to manage a very large budget and a staff that can double-in-size most divisions’ existing staff. This requires officers with significant management experience and the people-skills to work in a high functioning operation to keep this all going. These are not the simple, by comparison, Red Shield Centers or Boys and Girls clubs that many might be accustomed to which operate under a model where programming is primarily for after school kids and staffing is minimal at best. Rather, the Kroc Centers need to operate very much along the line of a for-profit business, keeping a sharp eye on the bottom line and providing programs that are on par with any high end fitness centre in a community or region.

Most of these Kroc Centers operate 7 days a week from 5am to 10 pm and they have as their primary business function the need to produce positive revenue otherwise they can financially sink the division. This requires a constant focus on the “business” side of running a

Kroc Center with the understanding that this business model provides a service that must be delivered at the highest standards or the customers will move their membership to one of the other 20 fitness centres in town.

Not only does the officer have to manage the internal expectations of the Division and Territory but the officer also must manage the external expectations of the communities in which the Kroc Centers reside. Many of these communities have invested significant resources in these Kroc Centers. Because of this, they expect The Salvation Army to deliver on its promise to provide a world class community centre with its broad diversity of activities. For most, the promise was also made that these Centers would be open to everyone in a community without reservation. Done properly this is a beautiful thing as it brings together all classes of a community under one roof to participate in a myriad of programs. While this is a function of mission, this – of itself - is not The Salvation Army's primary mission.

The concern by many in the Army is that the Kroc Centers will cause us to go down the same road as the YMCA and contribute to and even accelerate the Army towards "mission-slip" that is occurring across much of our organization in the Western World.

This begs the question as to what is the mission of the Kroc Centers. It should be the same mission as every other Salvation Army mission station, whether it be a corps, social service center, addiction treatment program, preschool or camp. The mission of every Salvation Army is this: To preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.

What is mission?

It is the primary objective of an organization. It is what determines how resources are spent and where they are spent. The mission is its main reason for existing and it needs to be front and centre in all that is done. Done properly in Kroc Centers, mission must drive the customer service approach. Mission must drive programming. It should determine the office culture. It should motivate the fitness and aquatic staff. It should even drive the maintenance team, marketing team and all public relations efforts. The officer must be the mission champion. In every meeting the officer must ask the question; how does this fulfil our mission of preaching the gospel and helping others? This is a question that does not get asked enough and needs to be brought to the forefront in all Salvation Army Mission Stations.

Mission in The Salvation Army brings to central focus the saving, redeeming, grace-filled power of Jesus Christ to save the lost from their sin and shame. It is that two fold mission of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and meeting human needs in his name without discrimination that must be evident in all we do.

This mission brings together the two greatest commands communicated by Jesus, which is to love God and love others. This is central to Salvation Army theology and practice and over the years we have used a number of ways to describe this two fold mission: Heart to God, Hand to Man. Soup, Soap, Salvation. Save Souls, Grow Saints, Serve Suffering Humanity. Some would argue that the practice of this two fold mission is not or cannot happen in a Kroc Center but I would argue that it can and is happening in centres across the country. In the Coeur d'Alene Kroc Center for example, more people are getting saved in the fitness centre than in the Corps. Why? Because the fitness staff are being very intentional about helping people to identify their greatest need which is to not lose weight but their need for the Saviour.

These ideas are central to who and what we are as a movement and must be interwoven into everything we do. We cannot do one to the exclusion of the other. It is not enough to provide material assistance but do nothing about a man's spiritual need. It is not enough to tell a broken person about Jesus without also addressing their basic needs of life. Too often these are divorced from our institutions and even more so from our corps. But they must go together.

Equally, it is not enough to teach a child how to swim or help a person lose weight if we leave out the fact that their greatest need is for them to discover Jesus. This mission of Preaching the Gospel and meeting human needs must and can take place in a Kroc Center Institution just as it ought to in every Salvation Army mission station.

How can a Kroc Center meet mission?

Build on the strengths of the Kroc Center

We looked for ways to leverage the strengths of the Kroc Center with all of its activities to engage our scholarship families. We held scholarship meetings where all scholarship members were required to attend annually. During these meetings we would highlight every department and program in the Kroc Center for two reasons: The first was to connect them with a person in that department that they could go and speak with to find out more about the activities the program offered. The second was to showcase all of the different activities that our scholarship families could participate in.

Another reason for holding the scholarship meetings was to allow us to share success stories of other scholarship families and individuals and how they either got in shape to run a race, how they lost the weight they had always wanted to, or how their child involved in the homework center had improved their grades. We wanted them to know that we were there to help and that they could be successful in whatever positive changes they desired to make. We wanted them to see this pathway of hope.

Focus on a few at a time

We realized very quickly that we would not be able to go very deep with 5,000 people on scholarship simultaneously, but we could go deep with a select few. Therefore our efforts were to get away from the model of trying to help every family in need and instead intentionally focus on a few that we could help permanently get off their dependence on social services. The goal was to find those 10 families from the several thousand that were really serious about change and to assist them in this change by creating a tailored case management plan.

Connect them to the Corps

Another key element of this was to connect them to the corps activities. We really believed that a big part of their success was to connect them to the corps and a small group where they would gain new friends and have that faith community that would hold them accountable and provide the support and resources during this time of transition and change. What occurred is that these small groups really took on the responsibility of providing amazing support for these families. These small groups purchased needed items for families, paid the rent for families and helped them to get connected to the right resources to help them become successful. They followed an Acts 4 model of the church in making sure that "there were no needy persons among them."

Engage in helping others

One of the most powerful tools was to get scholarship families engaged in giving back. This is quintessential William Booth and was a key element to the founder's success. Those living on public assistance often feel that they have nothing to contribute to help others. However, once they discover that they do have the resources, though not always monetarily, they learn that they really do have something to share or give back. To be successful in this you have to come up with creative and simple ways to engage. Some of these programs were seasonal such as "Families Feeding Families". This program takes place at Thanksgiving and gives every member of the Kroc Center the opportunity to purchase a \$25 dinner for a family at Thanksgiving. Another is "Clothe a Child." This is an opportunity for a person to volunteer by helping a kid shop at a department store to purchase \$100 worth of new clothing. Throughout the year these engaging opportunities were created to intentionally provide opportunities for giving back.

Leadership Team needs to be an On-Mission Team

One of the things that we discovered is that it is imperative that the leadership team of the Kroc Center be made up of strong Christians who are fully committed to the mission of saving souls and helping others. Some on our leadership team were not believers and while they were supportive of the mission in concept it really was not the priority of their life and thus there was always some push back. Other Kroc Centers have been much better at making those key leadership positions ministry-participant positions that require not only a statement of faith but also full involvement in the Corps. This has proven to be the key in helping not only the scholarship families but also to help all Kroc members and other staff to see that the Corps ministry really is at the heart of what we do.

While it is true that in most Kroc Centers you will not find a food pantry or homeless outreach program you will find a large group of people on scholarships. Some Kroc Centers have made an intentional decision to focus on how to discover the deeper extended needs of these families on scholarship and then wrap services around them that more thoroughly help them deal with their poverty. Through this intentional effort they are discovering how to fulfil our mission of helping others.

When done right, instead of the Army going out to the community with outdated evangelical outreach methods like open-air meetings the Army can BECOME the community gathering place with thousands of souls entering our doors each week. From that wonderful and attractive position, we need the Kroc Centers to be highly focused on connecting the people to our Christ-centered activities therein. The lost are now knocking at our door and are happily coming in. To paraphrase scripture, the "fish" are swimming into our nets gladly.

We can choose to look at Kroc's with prejudicially biased and blinded eyes and fail to see their relevance in building the Kingdom, or choose to look at Kroc's as "paradigm-shifting cures" divinely designed to open our eyes to re-align our mission to be relevant in our world today. I believe God's design for Kroc Centers is to lead us into a new, holistic, relevant ministry; to deeply encourage and fully equip the Body so it can boldly engage to lead souls to Jesus through our unique mission of Saving Souls, Growing Saints and Serving Suffering Humanity.