

**The Salvation Army**  
**2014 USA Salvation Army Conference for Social Work and Emergency Disaster Services**  
**25 to 28 March 2014, Orlando, Florida**  
**GLOBAL CONVERSATION SESSION 1C**

**“What is The Salvation Army’s theology as we serve suffering humanity?”**

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For most of us the everyday reality of our ministry is serving a never-ending queue of suffering humanity. People impacted by the scourges of poverty, loneliness, addiction, criminal offending, homelessness, human trafficking, illness, illiteracy, social isolation, unemployment, abuse, and other human suffering.

Internationally, this torrent of human need is responded to by a Salvation Army ready with immediate care, crisis management, practical love, professional skills and training. Motivating Salvationists to make such a response is the impact and reality of God’s love and salvation operating in their individual lives. Salvationists are pragmatic people, and The Salvation Army a pragmatic organisation keen to respond immediately to need rather than spend time reflecting on the theology that might lead to this serving of suffering humanity.

From the post-war period to the 1990s, the approach of The Salvation Army in New Zealand in meeting need was similarly pragmatic, albeit using where possible the best of healing therapies and professionally competent staff. Although leadership would have denied it, the link between serving human and biblical theology had become organisationally isolated and theologically tentative.

Over the past ten years in New Zealand a change has occurred that has seen a stronger link between the Army’s theology and the services meeting need. A closer alignment between evangelistic and social theology, corps and social services, theology and practice, social service and social reform has occurred to the point that it could be said the link between the theology of the Army and suffering humanity is strong.

This change had mixed drivers, including: a more aggressive and comprehensive territorial mission setting process that has unified theology and practice; an organisational change that has seen most corps embracing Community Ministries (the name of our frontline welfare centres), Just Action social justice conferences, the birth of Recovery Churches in addiction services, a deliberate Christian mission focus on social services, and the establishment of The Salvation Army Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit (SPPU).

Theologically-based approaches to serving suffering have developed as Salvationists have more deeply understood and appreciated The Salvation Army’s historical mandate and theology.

At this stage it is too early in the change process to know whether what we are observing is a permanent change in how The Salvation Army in New Zealand undertakes its ministry, or whether other environmental or international factors may arrest this approach.

I offer, therefore, in this paper a description of the New Zealand journey in this change as an example of what Salvation Army theology can look like when serving suffering humanity.

From an early period, The Salvation Army in New Zealand—in line with international trends—separated its evangelistic and social wings administratively, financially and missionally. This separation became entrenched, to the point where the social and evangelical work of the Army happened in two entities with Salvation Army officers divided into either ‘field officers’ or ‘social officers’.

This divide increased in the 1950s to 1970s as social and health services in New Zealand moved to more strongly specialise and professionalise. The result was an external environment demanding more professional practice, staff better educated in social sciences and the requirement of more accountability in government funding contracts.

The Salvation Army’s theological imprimatur on its social service operation at this time could best be described as a loose belief that loving God meant loving others—hence, ‘social services’ were justified as Christian acts of love. While this practice model of Christian love was appropriate overall, the theological understanding and rationale for service was not well articulated or understood. Christian pragmatism rather than Christian theology influenced how The Salvation Army undertook its social and public ministry.

In the 1980s a rethinking of the integration between service and theology commenced in The Salvation Army. Contributing to this change were external environmental factors and greater concentration on biblical truth.

Strangely, an economic philosophy contributed to The Salvation Army reconnecting in greater depth to its theological foundations. The dominance of economic liberalism as the major public policy doctrine in New Zealand came with a Labour Government in 1984 and changed how New Zealand acted as a society and how individual ‘Kiwis’ treated each other. Self-interest, individualisation, dominance of the market, secularism, competitiveness rather than cooperation, and an increasing gap between rich and the poor became increasingly the markers of New Zealand life.

These economically liberal policies resulted in a new poor. People found themselves in poverty, disenfranchised from the norms of New Zealand society, in low-quality housing, with limited employment opportunities, often victims of crime, and susceptible to social hazards.

One impact of this altered New Zealand on Army corps was a reinterpretation of corps mission, worship and service. This following what had been a loss of certainty in corps ministry created by the church growth movement and theological uncertainty. There were obvious links in this new economic liberalism to the situation for the poor in Booth’s London. Salvationists became more interested in embracing the historical mandate of the

Army and the theological roots of Wesley and Booth. Similarly, in social services, a new emphasis on creating Christian community was added to professional practice and therapies.<sup>1</sup>

The result of weaving people into a patchwork of Christian community means the marginalised have become known, named and included within Salvation Army communities in corps and social centres. Our congregations in New Zealand have become less middle class, with many congregations increasingly comprising people from Salvation Army social services. The embracing of economic liberalism in public policy was a wakeup call that helped the Army in New Zealand rediscover its theological roots.

Another external factor influential in the reconnection of Salvationists with their faith taproots has been increased awareness in New Zealand public life of bi-culturalism and the honouring of the Treaty of Waitangi. The Treaty of Waitangi is the founding document of New Zealand and was between indigenous New Zealanders, Māori and the British Crown. In recent years, New Zealand has been challenged to better recognise the bi-cultural partnership created by the Treaty in public policy and in its social and economic life.

Although New Zealand is traditionally a very secular state, to more fully recognise Māori people, there has needed to be greater regard for faith and the spiritual dimension of life. These are two essential elements of Māoritanga.

One public aspect of this is in the Māori religious ceremony and prayer (karakia) associated with pōwhiri (welcomes) at government occasions. This recognition also provides new opportunities for faith communities to receive public acknowledgement of their own faith heritage. An example of this is found in a Memorandum of Understanding between The Salvation Army and the Ministry of Social Development. The document reads:

The Ministry of Social Development acknowledges that The Salvation Army is an evangelical church and human resources provider, with its message based on the Bible, its ministry motivated by the love of God and its mission to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and meet human need without discrimination. This involves The Salvation Army in caring for people, transforming lives through God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and working for the reform of society by alleviating poverty, deprivation and disadvantage and by challenging evil, injustice and oppression.<sup>2</sup>

This statement is a significant acknowledgement of the faith tradition and motivation of The Salvation Army in its contracts with Government. By incorporating The Salvation Army mission in its partnership agreement Government not only recognises the right to encompass spiritual processes in the transformation and care of people, but also recognises that on occasions the Army will change and oppose government policy and practice in seeking the reform of society. I suspect this opportunity to have Government sanction and encouragement of our spiritual as well as humanitarian purposes is reasonably unique internationally in The Salvation Army.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shaping the Future of the Army, Territorial Strategic Mission Plan* (Wellington, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Social Development and The Salvation Army' (2006)

The Treaty of Waitangi then is another example of an external influence that has served to nurture a rediscovery and reemphasis of The Salvation Army's theological story and journey.

Internally, the rediscovery of theological roots includes: a greater understanding of the biblical theme of justice, a deeper faith-to-life connection, increased biblical literacy, and a desire to be missional in a way that makes a real difference in people's everyday lives. As a result, social service work is now largely integrated into Salvation Army corps. Ten years ago, few Salvation Army corps included social service expressions as part of their congregational life. Where social assistance was given, it would have been undertaken by a corps officer. Now, nearly all New Zealand corps have a community of social expression, with appropriate training and engagement of soldiers and adherents. Increasingly, the community is seen as the centre of corps mission.

Salvationists seem willing to embrace actively that part of our theological DNA which understands that no one is beyond redemption or separated from the grace and love of God. Five years ago, the territory commenced addiction rehabilitation work alongside the Mongrel Mob, one of New Zealand's largest and most troublesome criminal gangs.

This work was difficult for Salvation Army Addiction Services to undertake because of the almost universal community rejection of these gang members by New Zealanders and the gang's insistence on contributing and commenting on all treatment methodologies. Without a strong connection to our theological and biblical mandate, this work would have failed. Professional treatment methodologies alone could not have been effective or sustained what turned out to be a very challenging journey. The faith component and theological touchstone enabled officers and staff to remain 'with' the Mob despite immense hurdles. Through this programme numbers of the mob have turned their life around and beaten their drug and alcohol habits.

As The Salvation Army in New Zealand has rediscovered its Wesleyan and Booth roots, the territory has focused its ministry on the causes and not just the effects of poverty and need. Nine years ago, the territory was led to question the effectiveness of its social services operation in achieving real change for those it served. In a 2003 survey it found that despite significant efforts in social provision, the Salvation Army had failed to arrest a decline in the social circumstances of New Zealand's most vulnerable groups in all the areas in which it was working.<sup>3</sup> Although some people came to faith and thousands were cared for, with regard to the gospel imperative to create a more just society, we were achieving little.

To change this situation, Salvation Army leadership established a specialist unit focused on engaging with social policy and the causes of injustice. This new entity, 'the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit' was deliberately housed in a Salvation Army social service centre in South Auckland where some of New Zealand's most deprived neighbourhoods were located. The Unit's purpose was defined as 'working towards the eradication of poverty in New Zealand'. It undertook this purpose by seeking New Zealand's social and economic agenda. These individuals were generally leaders in the community, government, politics, business and commerce.

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<sup>3</sup> Work undertaken by Bonnie Robinson in 2001 looking at the effectiveness of Salvation Army Social Services in South Auckland

The methodologies used in the engagement with these leaders included:

- an annual programme of social policy research
- regular publications to provoke and stimulate debate from our theological and biblical understandings around issues of social policy and social justice
- deliberate engagement with four hundred or so individuals seen to be the most influential in creating public policy
- organisation of an annual national (Just Action) conference focused on issues of biblical justice, social policy and social justice
- judicious use of the media to raise public awareness on key social policy issues
- the establishment of relationships with individual politicians and political parties represented in the New Zealand Parliament.

One of the most influential pieces of work undertaken by the Unit is the publication of its annual State of the Nation report. Six of these reports have now been published. At the beginning of each year the Army brings its theological and biblical framework alongside public policy, examining: the state of New Zealand's children, the adequacy of work and incomes policies, adequacy of housing provision, progress in eliminating crime and moving towards a more rehabilitative punishment regime, and progress on a range of social hazards. Evidence is that Government is increasingly introducing policies to address these areas.

Apart from its external influence, the work of the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit has been influential in supporting a renewed understanding and outworking of the foundational beliefs of biblical justice in the life of Salvationists. Deepening awareness of injustice has caused an increasing group of Salvationists to be interested in social justice. Social justice has become part of the territorial mission agenda with one of four mission goals being to fight injustice. Ten years ago such a social reform mission goal would never have been accepted as a strategic goal of The Salvation Army in New Zealand.

Without at all diminishing its place as an evangelical church and social service provider, the Salvation Army in New Zealand has become increasingly known as a movement for social justice and institutional change. Recently, the head of a leading government ministry said, 'The Salvation Army is the strongest church body in New Zealand in terms of advocating for socio-economic change. MPs get jittery when they know a SPPU report is imminent.'

There is no doubt that The Salvation Army in New Zealand is more intentionally integrating its theology with its mission to serve suffering humanity. It better articulates the truths of the gospel in collective situations and environments. In doing so, it has found it is possible to be a provider of social services receiving government funding and still provide robust critique and criticism from our theological and biblical understandings of that government's social policy. We are making a pastoral response by linking people to communities of hope, and to social and spiritual holiness in new and exciting ways. This linking of theology and service has produced an Army willing to fight for what it believes and prepared to challenge the leadership of the nation. For many, this has been a welcome development in our public ministry that they feel is worthy of their support.

Additionally, as Salvationists have reflected more deeply on the genesis of their faith they have been drawn to a more integrated community approach that sees holiness not only in individual but also in collective terms. As there has been an increasingly outward focus, with faith re-energised in the lives of Salvation Army worshipping communities.

In New Zealand the better integration of Salvation Army theology in our mission of serving suffering humanity is contributing to a unification and renewal of the missional purpose of The Salvation Army in New Zealand. It is helping us bridge the great divide between church congregations and social expression by returning us to the intention of God for the Church: that we would be integrated in our mission expression, and that we would proclaim the actuality of God's integration with the social and public spheres of his world. God is present and invites us to be present also.