

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 3A

“How does serving suffering humanity transform people as disciples?”

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In considering the role of service to the suffering in the transformation of people as disciples, The Salvation Army can pull from a collection of nearly 150 years of experiences, testimonies, and fruitful legacy, which can indeed confirm for us that service has a key role in making disciples of Jesus Christ. So vast is this virtual collection of experiences, that despite our efforts, we could never completely statistically define it, biographically record it, nor can it completely be summarized. Nonetheless, this collection in all of its vastness lingers with us like the fragrance of heaven. It has a voice in the songs we sing, it speaks to us constantly through testimonies in our meetings, it has life in the countless numbers of men and women, boys and girls, restored in their relationship to God.

This service perpetuates service, as individuals take up their cross and follow Jesus, by answering His call to serve as adherents, soldiers, local officers, and officers in a beautiful unbroken chain of service, that wraps the globe and connects the past and present. Like stones tossed into a lake, even the smallest act of mercy done in the name of Jesus causes a ripple effect, which transforms outward from the initial impact between recipient and the servant, then moving further to the witnesses, and even further to the wider community. As individuals we know from personal experience, and as an organization we have learned in powerful collective ways, that service to the suffering indeed has the propensity to transform us to be more like Christ.

It is helpful to explore in deeper context the question of *how* serving suffering humanity transforms people as disciples. We know that serving suffering humanity is beneficial in the lives of believers. We know this because we sense the benefit of this service not only in the physical realm, but in the spiritual realm also. We are not a confused people on this matter. We know that service cannot save us. It cannot earn ourselves nor anyone else places in heaven, but it can point others to the one who has earned that place for us. And it helps us to be better disciples of Jesus Christ.

Of course, The Salvation Army must also consider the possibility that there are certain ways of serving that cause regression in the disciple's transformation experience. For example, the kind of service which springs from shallow motives and builds up the servant's faith in his or her own resources has a destructive capacity. We do not serve out of our abundance; we serve out of weakness and our depravity.

We can serve in essentially three ways. First, from a position of strength and privilege, we arch downwards towards the sufferer, while not yielding our strength or our privileged position. This can promote pride. Or, we can demote ourselves below the sufferer and attempt to push them up out of their plight, in essence suffering for the sufferer. This lacks dignity. Better yet, we can stand shoulder to shoulder, together in our need before the Lord, recognizing that we each suffer in our own ways, in essence suffering with the sufferer. That service to the suffering, which causes the servant to rely upon the strength of God, recognizes that Jesus is the ultimate answer to the particular problem being dealt with, and effectively causes self to diminish and the presence of Christ in the life of the servant to increase. It is the kind of service that has the potential to transform both the servant and the sufferer into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. It has the power to transform because it reflects the incarnation of Christ.

Christ's presence on earth did not signal the end to all suffering. When he stands in the synagogue and reads from the scrolls:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour” (Luke 4:18-19)

There were countless numbers of people suffering from all forms of diseases and all of the physical conditions described in the prophecy from Isaiah, which Christ read. Did Christ have the power to do all of those things in the short years he walked this planet? Sure. We know from Matthew 28:18 that all power in heaven and earth was given to him.

Satan certainly knew and understood this truth. When Jesus was tempted to turn the stones into bread in the desert, perhaps the greater temptation was to set about solving the issue of world hunger. There is no doubt he could have turned the stones to bread and fed himself. He could have turned the whole planet into a chunk of bread and fed the hungry of the world. Perhaps Satan's temptation was to get Jesus to go about the easiest route of serving suffering humanity. Jesus could have taken the easy cosmetic approach. Like modern medicine perhaps, he could have erased the symptoms of the disease instead of destroying the disease itself.

We know that Jesus suffered himself seeing the marks of sin upon the beauty of His creation; he wept over the spiritual condition of Jerusalem, he wept at the pain caused by the death of his friend Lazarus. The fact that he was troubled by the fallen condition of humanity is recorded

in Scriptures on numerous occasions. He was the only man walking that knew what the world was supposed to be like, to look like, and to feel like. All of the death, disease and human disaster, which he encountered, were as foreign to him as heaven is to our earthly vision.

Yet, he did not come with an institutional answer to our suffering. He came with an incarnational one. He had no three point plans to end poverty, no political campaigns to foster world peace. He opened no soup kitchens, no homeless shelters, left nothing in his will for charitable organizations. There were plenty of organized efforts to help the suffering, but Jesus did not join them. In fact, he quite often found himself in contradiction and condemned by those very institutions. Yet, wherever he went, hungry were fed, naked were clothed, and oppressed were released. Though these symptoms were disappearing in his presence, Christ knew they were only indications of a deeper problem. His problem tree had sin at the base and he had the plan, a mission, to offer Himself.

Jesus continually looked through the suffering world and with laser beam love, loyalty, and devotion to the mission for which He came, stroke right at the heart of the cancer. That cancer of the soul, disease of the heart, had a cure. His name is Jesus.

In John 9 we read the story of a miraculous healing. "As he (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" (John 9:1-3). We then see how the man's life was transformed, "I was blind, but I now see!" (John 9:25) and he went on witnessing to those around him. He started seeing in more than one way, not only in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense, as well. He was transformed as a believer, as a disciple, and we see here an example from Jesus' time on earth of how serving suffering humanity has the potential to transform people as disciples.

In the Scripture passage mentioned above there is a process that the blind man goes through. First, he is noticed, then he is touched, he is healed, and he has a chance to witness. He becomes a disciple because Jesus and his disciples were on a mission. For him it all happened in one day. For others, this process might take a long time, several years, and involve points of contact with many different people along the way.

In our corps and community centres around the world we have an array of programs and social services projects; we know the theory and excellence of how to serve, but perhaps we are embarking upon an era where we need to dig deeper into *how* this service transforms people as disciples.

In my experience serving in America and abroad, I have encountered individuals and families coming to receive food assistance, help with paying bills, a roof over their heads. During the

process many would find that the homelessness of their body was nothing compared to the homelessness of their soul, that the deficit of their bank account was nothing compared to the deficit in their relationship with God, and furthermore, the surplus of their wealth was no measure of His blessing. Grasping this mystery, perhaps we can become even more effective in our three-fold mission, to love, serve and disciple.

Perhaps the balancing act that is ever before The Salvation Army is the part we play in the world between serving suffering humanity and making disciples, because when we reflect upon how serving suffering humanity makes disciples we engage with the question, are we a social service agency or are we a church? Commissioner Andy Miller, retired National Commander of the USA Territories, often echoed this question in conferences around the world. He would answer, 'If we do it right, you can't tell the difference.'

Therefore, service to suffering humanity transforms both servant and sufferer through service that is incarnational in its expression of God's love. Firstly, when we serve the suffering we are almost immediately confronted with the reality that we do not have the answers. We recognize that we, as the servants, are not the answer, and we are certainly not sufficient in ourselves. We are not offering a program, we are offering Jesus. He is the answer.

Secondly, serving teaches us to obey. He commands us to do so. Also, he set before us an example as he washed the feet of his disciples, and as he met the needs of those around him.

Thirdly, the entrance of sin fractured the relationship between God and creation. When we serve suffering humanity we fulfil the Isaiah vision and role of being a restorer (Isaiah 58:12). We help bring shalom back into creation. When we are part of Christ's mission, how can we not grow closer to him in our discipleship?

Fourthly, in service the heart is broken and sensitized. For the suffering there is the recognition that someone cares. When we serve with broken hearts for the broken hearted, we experience once more that the incarnational Christ is still walking, still breathing, and still bringing healing.

Fifthly, serving suffering humanity helps us to focus on those things God cares about most and causes us to cast aside those things that are fruitless. For the one being served, there is the realization that God has not forgotten them, and that he has a plan for their lives.

We want and need to be excellent in our approach to meeting the needs of those around us who are suffering. In doing so, we must pull from the best sciences we know to combat slavery, homelessness, poverty, and the like. But we must never forget that we are the beating, broken, bleeding heart of Christ, urging people back into community. It is this powerful, incredible symbiosis of principles with sound theory and 'roll up our sleeves' courage, conviction and compassion, which has power to transform in this world, making and developing disciples as

the suffering are served. General Albert Osborn reminded us that our life is “Christ’s broken bread”, our love is “His outpoured wine”. This is the offering God uses to transform the world.