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

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Dynamic institutions are faithful to their roots and open to their future. This paper explores the art of faithful improvisation as one method to sustain and develop the Christian character of The Salvation Army. In this paper, I outline the concept, discuss how it works and describe faithful improvisation in action. Finally critical questions will be raised for further reflection.

Faithful Improvisation: An introduction

“Dear God, please can I be in the ‘B band?’” At fifteen-years old this was one of my more fervent intercessions. The brass band at my home corps was large enough to form three smaller ensembles throughout Christmas (unoriginally entitled the ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ bands), thus trebling both the amount of carols we played and the money we raised. Now ‘A band’ was the elite ensemble. For younger players however, ‘B band’ was the place to be. Where ‘A band’ played it straight, performing traditional carols by the book, ‘B band’ struck a more contemporary note. Unafraid of the more obscure numbers, ‘B’ band players were neither averse to a momentary musical flourish, a turn or a trill, a flashy descant or a slightly bluesy harmony. We even played unpublished music, not yet approved by THQ. Unsurprisingly, our ‘A band’ colleagues frowned upon us. They even had a four-letter word to describe our antics; in the ‘A band,’ one would never “busk!”

Whether as artistic freedom, spiritual renewal or innovative mission, improvisation can be threatening. As with the ‘A band,’ improvisation and infidelity are sometimes considered one and the same. Yet despite our human aversion to change we know that movements cannot stand still. As a Salvation Army officer once remarked to me, “I’ve never understood why we sing, ‘Change and decay in all around I see!’ Change and decay are not the same things. In fact, if we don’t keep changing we’ll soon start decaying.”¹

Of late, faithful improvisation has become a popular topic of discussion for theologians.² N.T. Wright has famously used it to connect biblical interpretation and church life. “Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide ... such a wealth of characterization ... that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged.” In order to perform the piece Wright suggests that a producer could give the “parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse

¹ Major Samuel Edgar was referring to the line from Henry Francis Lyte’s hymn, “Abide with Me.”

² G. Kelly and R. Rook, *Route 66*, (Uckfield: Elevation, 2011).

themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.”³

In a similar way, Wright argues, the Bible provides the church with the first four acts of God’s story. In the first act God creates the world. In the second we witness the fall. In the third act he calls his people Israel and in the fourth he sends Jesus to save us. The fifth act belongs to the church. Knowing what has come before and how the story ends (with God making all things new), our job is to follow Jesus and fill in the gaps between resurrection and his coming kingdom. If we’re soaked in scripture it becomes possible for us to improvise the fifth act in faith.

Samuel Wells takes the conversation further.⁴ He assures us that improvisation and busking are different. Busking is a musician making it up as they go along. Improvisation, on the other hand, requires an artist to be steeped in their art form. A great jazz musician’s improvisations only work because he has an intimate knowledge of the scales, harmonies and rhythms of his genre.⁵ If we are to develop and sustain the Christian identity of our institutions, Wells argues, leaders must make a similar commitment. That said, “improvisation isn’t about being original, clever, witty or spontaneous. Improvisation is about allowing yourself to be obvious. It’s about being so soaked in a tradition that you learn to take the right things for granted.”⁶

For Wells, as with Wright, faithful improvisation begins with a willingness to engage with God’s story. By rooting our institution in the ancient story of the bible and acting as disciples in a changing world we practice faithful improvisation and develop and sustain our Christian identity.

A friend of mine once spoke on, “The role of the altar call in the New Testament,” at a conference in honour of Billy Graham. He began his speech thus: “There were no altar calls in the New Testament. There were no computers in the New Testament. I believe that altar calls and computers are both excellent devices, and both are useful for the communication of the gospel, but neither of them existed in the New Testament.” He was not decrying the altar call but rather reminding us that biblical ministries find new ways to improvise upon the good news at different times. As Salvationists, we can add our own variations to this theme. There were no brass bands in the New Testament. There were no Salvation Army officers, articles of war, orders and regulations, open-air meetings, adult rehabilitation programmes, youth groups and the list goes on. And yet, these faithful improvisations have

³ N.T. Wright, “How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?” *Vox Evangelica*, 21 (1991): 7-32. This article can be read at tinyurl.com/qaw8tcn. Jonny Baker outlines a useful summary of Wright’s scheme for a Salvationist audience in, J. Baker, “Ruptures, Improvisation And Tradition,” last modified, 2006, <http://www.freshworship.org/book/print/264>. Baker also draws interesting comparisons and connections between scripture and improvisation in contemporary music.

⁴ S. Wells, *Improvisation, The drama of Christian Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 59-70.

⁵ Another way to answer the question as to how we develop and sustain Christian identity would be to explore the possibilities of virtue ethics as proposed by Wells, Stanley Hauerwas et al. A conversation here would focus on the habits that our programmes and institutions should develop. For more on this see, R. Rook & L. Bretherton, *Living Out Loud, conversations in virtue ethics and evangelicalism*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2010).

⁶ “Improvising Leadership,” last modified March 27, 2012, tinyurl.com/nndmmpz. This interview with Wells provides a useful overview on the thesis of *Improvisation* and is accompanied by a short video of the author applying his ideas to church ministry.

not only helped to develop our Christian identity as a movement but also enabled thousands to find their personal identity in Christ.

Faithful Improvisation: Faith in action

Wright and Wells are enthusiastic proponents of faithful improvisation but how does it work and what does it look like? Here we move from the jazz club to the theatre, from music to drama. To illustrate faithful improvisation, Wells makes use of three techniques commonly used by actors.

The first technique is called 'accepting.' In this instance actors accept the scenario they've been given and respond in a reasonable way. As a result the drama continues, if a little predictably. The second technique is 'blocking.' Here the actors find a way to resist the scenario. This can stifle the story and damage the drama. The third, is 'overaccepting.' Rather than simply accepting or blocking, overacceptance offers a dramatic springboard. From here, the actors can take the scene to another level, explore new possibilities and open unforeseen plotlines. Ultimately, it is an actor's ability to overaccept that makes an improvisation worth watching.

For Wells, overaccepting is the key to faithful improvisation both on the stage and in the church. By overaccepting reality we are freed from simply accepting or blocking the challenges that come our way. Once again, this is rooted in the Bible story. Faced with our fallenness we cannot accept the world as it is, for the Bible promises a new creation. Neither should we block the reality of our fallen creation altogether, for God's story points towards a cosmic transformation with human collaboration.

As Christians, Wells suggests, we should overaccept reality, using it as a springboard to tell God's story. "[Overacceptance] is where [we] fit the smaller story that has come [our] way -- which often [we] didn't invite or go looking for -- into the larger story of what God's doing with the world."⁷ The climax of the biblical story provides the perfect example of overacceptance in action. Faced with death on the cross, Jesus doesn't simply accept his fate. Yet neither does he block out the possibility altogether. Instead, he overaccepts his situation. Knowing how his life fits into God's plan, Jesus overaccepts his present reality and turns the unhappiest of all possible endings into the glorious beginning of a whole new story. By overaccepting death, Jesus opens the possibility of resurrection and announces new creation.

Our own movement was the result of a faithful improvisation. Faced with enormous human suffering, William Booth might have accepted the failure of society to care for the poor, for after all, the poor will always be with us. Alternatively he could have blocked out the anguish and carried on regardless. He did neither. In, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, Booth declares that current rulers, politicians, administrators and church leaders either accept poverty as a necessary evil or ignore it. This state of affairs is not acceptable to a disciple of Jesus. From here, Booth proposes not only a groundbreaking analysis of the cause and scope of poverty within the nation but also an ambitious scheme to alleviate deprivation altogether. Booth's overacceptance of this harsh reality becomes the prelude to our story as The Salvation Army. Booth writes, "The plan now has been published to the

⁷ Interview with Samuel Wells on Faithful Improvisation.

world; it is for you to say whether it will remain barren, or whether it is to bear fruit in unnumbered blessings to all the children of men.”⁸

As Wells argues and Booth demonstrates, overacceptance is the key to faithful improvisation. In 2000, Gary and Hannah Bishop moved to Openshaw in Manchester to plant a corps in one of England’s most disadvantaged communities. Working with the Message Trust, a mission organisation reaching young people through youth culture, Eden Openshaw, became a dynamic expression of 21st century Salvationism. Gary and Hannah’s story is told in a book entitled, *Darkest England and the Way Back In*. Committed to the last, the lost and the least, their improvisation was faithful to their knowledge of scripture and spirit of Salvationism. Gary writes, “Towards the end of *In Darkest England...* Booth makes it clear... that the work on behalf of the poor should not be eclipsed by any other aspect of service or activity which the Army engages in.”⁹

In 2006 Gary and Hannah received the terrible news that their friend Jason had been found dead. Along with his girlfriend Jilly, Jason was one of the first people that Gary and Hannah had befriended in Openshaw. The couple had been long-term heroine users but, with the help of Gary and the team, had got their addictions under control and eventually had a daughter, Molly. Not long after this, events took a dramatic turn for the worse. With their relationship breaking down Jilly ran home and Jason wound up in prison. Six months later Jason arrived on Gary and Hannah’s doorstep. He was out of prison, clean from drugs and desperate to call Jilly. Having borrowed their phone, Jason’s pleas for reconciliation would be among the last words that Gary and Hannah heard him speak. A few days later Jason overdosed and died in the room he rented from a disreputable landlord. His body lay undiscovered for two weeks.

Gary and Hannah refused to simply accept the tragic events surrounding Jason’s death and resisted the temptation to block out the pain. In their attempts to remain faithful to Jesus, the one who overaccepted death to bring about resurrection, they chose to improvise. Gary and Hannah vowed to do everything in their power to prevent another member of their community meeting the same tragic end. This led to the creation of Justlife, a project working with homeless and recently homeless adults and families. Beginning with a weekly lunch in the Army hall where homeless friends could find a hot meal, medical care, help finding housing and a listening ear, Justlife now occupies a refurbished doctor’s surgery and provides daily care and support for some of the city’s most vulnerable people.

Gary’s team now provides training, counseling, medical care, housing support and employment programmes in two cities. Since 2008 the Justlife centres have received 19,838 visits, supported 454 vulnerable adults and rehoused 203 victims of homelessness.¹⁰ The project has featured in the national press and Gary received a bursary from a national newspaper to undertake an MBA to research sustainable social enterprise at one of the UK’s leading business schools.

Gary and Hannah have paid a high price in planting a corps, befriending a broken community and founding Justlife. That said, given their knowledge of the gospel and their

⁸ W. Booth, *In Darkest England and the way out*, (London: Salvationist Publishing, 1890).

⁹ G. Bishop, *Darkest England and the way back in*, (Carlisle: Authentic Media, 2007), p133.

¹⁰ G. Bishop, “Justlife 2008-2013: The Facts,” (paper presented at the Justlife 5 Year Celebration, 2013).

Salvationist roots, these decisions and actions might appear, to use Wells' word, as "obvious." Whatever the case it is clear is that Gary and Hannah have learned how to develop the Christian identity of their programme through the practice of faithful improvisation.

Faithful Improvisation: Critical questions

With Wright and Wells we discovered that faithful improvisation starts when we locate ourselves in God's story and enact his good news in the world. As with Booth and the Bishops, this becomes possible when we refuse to simply accept or block the realities we face and transform these challenges into opportunities to re-enact the story of resurrection. If we can learn to do this, our Christian identity will not only be successfully sustained but will develop and grow through this fast-moving world.

In conclusion we will raise three questions for Salvationist leaders to consider.¹¹ Firstly we come to the role of the Bible and theology. Our ability to engage in faithful improvisation rests upon our capacity for biblical interpretation and theological reflection. As Salvationists, the aim of our improvisations is not ultimately faithfulness to our institution but rather to God, his word and his plans for creation.¹² Either way, successful improvisations, as Wright and Wells point out, demand a depth of scriptural knowledge and an ability to locate our projects and programmes within God's story. As a relatively young movement, The Salvation Army, until now, has favoured action over reflection and mission over theological reflection. However, if we are to mature and grow we will need to take theology more seriously, increasing the theological insight of our leaders and the biblical literacy of our members and staff. This we will enable our programmes and our personnel to improvise faithfully.

Secondly, we must consider our tendency to accept and/or block the different scenarios that come our way. It is perhaps unsurprising that a uniformed organisation has largely chosen uniformity over diversity on issues such as doctrine, hierarchy, ordination and membership. That said; faithful improvisation relies on our ability to question all existing realities. Likewise our comfort with consistency and continuity can, at times lead us to block new ideas and innovation. If we are to successfully foster our Christian character as an institution we must resist the urge to equate faithfulness with an unquestioning acceptance of the past or anxious dismissal of the future. To learn the art of faithful improvisation we must challenge our current conventions and embrace reality in order that we can enact the gospel in new ways.

Having told the story of Justlife, I note this is no longer a Salvation Army programme. The time available prevents further explanation as to why this is the case. That said, there is some personal sadness that our institution was unable to harness and host this faithful and fruitful improvisation. As Gary remarked to me recently, "I feel *more* like a Salvationist than ever before." To develop and sustain our Christian identity in the 21st century will require a greater willingness on our part to encourage improvisation and license innovation within the institution.

¹¹ We will explore some of these further during and following the presentation.

¹² At times God's character and plans may do damage to our institution as it currently exists.

Thirdly, we must reflect on our ability to overaccept the issues that come our way in the light of the good news. In short, we are called to translate every project and programme, every incident and innovation into an outworking of the gospel for the communities we serve. If our leaders are equipped to reflect theologically upon the issues we face, our corps share an understanding and love for the Bible and our programmes are prepared to meet contemporary challenges head on, then the Christian identity of The Salvation Army will be developed and sustained in many different ways. Some of these expressions and experiments may appear dangerously new and yet strangely familiar. This is the nature of faithful improvisation.

At midday on December 24th the Southsea Citadel 'A band' would finish their Christmas caroling programme. Not so the 'B Band.' We would head off to provide Christmas music in numerous pubs, hotels and holiday camps into the early hours of the morning. After only a few hours sleep we would start all over again providing much needed Christmas cheer for patients in hospital. Through it all we performed our controversial renditions and repertoire with the scandalous embellishments and improvisations that caused the 'A band' such horror. And yet, upon reflection, which ensemble most faithfully represented the Christian identity of The Salvation Army? The old men who packed up and went home early having done everything by the book, or the young musicians who stayed up into the night, got up early in the morning and took each and every opportunity to perform the Christmas story to anyone who would listen.