

A MISSION-SHAPED ARMY

THREE MISSIONAL IMPERATIVES

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I MUST have been out of my mind. Chatting over lunch to an officer, he shared his idea to sign up 125 people to run the ‘Bridge to Bridge’ race in Arnhem in Salvation Army t-shirts in connection with his corps’ 125th anniversary. I am not sure how it happened, but before the lunch was over, I had committed to run the 10-kilometre distance and confirmed it with a handshake. There was no backing out and I now faced a major challenge. I knew what the mission was; however, I was in no form or shape to accomplish it.

The Salvation Army faces a similar challenge – not only to know our mission, but to make sure we are fit for that mission; to make sure we are ‘mission-shaped’.¹

I would like to suggest three missional imperatives for The Salvation Army – three areas that are essential if we want to be mission-shaped. There may be more than three and perhaps these are obvious, but the challenge could be bigger than we realise. The Salvation Army needs, at the very least, to be:

1. Christ-centred,
2. community-focused and
3. corps-based.

This is not a pick ‘n’ mix option, all three are essential and interdependent. Let me explain what lies behind these terms and why they are so consequential.

1. CHRIST-CENTRED

In a movement led by officers who have made a covenant with God ‘to proclaim the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ and to make the salvation of souls the first purpose of their lives, one should not think that being Christ-centred is an issue and yet, sometimes I wonder.

We live in an age where, in some territories, numerous elements of our ministry are carried out by employees with little or no link to the Army besides work. In many countries we can place no demand as to the faith of our employees and, often, the dependency on subsidies from governments or other external funding results in limitations imposed (implicit or explicit) as to what can be preached or shared. How do we remain Christ-centred in such settings?

Christ-centred is much more than ‘Christian’, ‘based on Christian values’ or ‘motivated by the love of God’. N.T. Wright translates ‘Jesus Christ’ as ‘King Jesus’

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to convey the full meaning of the term ‘Christ’ to a contemporary reader of the Bible.² Christ-centred means acknowledging Jesus as Lord and King, living for and with the risen and exalted Christ, and being focused on leading people to submit to his kingship and experience the presence and power of a living Jesus.

Today we often speak about the Kingdom with an emphasis on social justice to such an extent one can wonder whether we are becoming less a ‘salvation’ movement and more one of social justice? No doubt, the main thrust of Jesus’ ministry was the Kingdom of God and this carries with it the dimension of God’s ‘shalom’ – his righteousness, peace and justice. It is, however, interesting to note that when the disciples commenced the mission given to them by Jesus, they hardly mentioned the Kingdom in their proclamation. So, what did they proclaim? Luke sums it up in Acts 5:42: ‘... they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.’ They proclaimed Jesus and him as King!

Being Christ-centred and proclaiming Jesus as King are intrinsically linked with the Kingdom of God. As Alan Roxburgh claims, ‘If we don’t get the kingdom right, we won’t get Jesus right.’³ The opposite is also true, though, and being Christ-centred reminds us that we cannot have the Kingdom without accepting the King. John Stott explains it this way:

‘...the kingdom of God in the New Testament is a fundamentally Christological concept, and as such it may be said to exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord, although the righteous standards of the kingdom.... may to some extent spill over into the world as a result of Christian influence.’⁴

It is not that we do not want to serve suffering humanity, nor fight against injustice. It is, however, a question of getting the priority right. As Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola comment: ‘If we start with the social and political as our reference point, the “social gospel” becomes very much “social” and very little “gospel.”’⁵

William Booth considered that leading ‘the poor’ to Christ was ‘the highest service’ that could be rendered to them⁶ and Justin Welby puts this focus into perspective:

‘It doesn’t matter who you are, there’s only one thing we ever do that lasts for eternity and that’s to lead someone to faith in Christ – when we do that, that’s forever, everything else dies.’⁷

To be a mission-shaped Army, we have to be a Christ-centred Army. We must, like Paul, resolve ‘to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ so that our proclamation and ministry ‘might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power’ (1 Corinthians 2:2, 5).

2. COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

There is an old story of a church that had a large poster outside, stating ‘Jesus is the answer’. During the night a creative person with a good sense of humour added: ‘What’s the question?’ The story may be old, but it serves to illustrate that being Christ-centred is not enough, we also need to be community-focused to be a mission-shaped Army.

This was Paul’s approach: he became a Jew to the Jews, a Gentile to the Gentiles, weak to the weak, and he summed it up like this: ‘I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some’ (1 Corinthians 9:22). For Paul this was what Jesus meant when he told the first disciples: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21). Likewise for us, just as Jesus was sent by the Father to walk and live among the people, so we must step out of our comfort zone and share our lives with the communities we are sent to. ‘How can we,’ Gerard Kelly asks, ‘deliver God’s message to the oppressed if we don’t have their address?’⁸

Being community-focused is more than running programmes and activities in and for the community. It is a mindset, a way of approaching mission and ministry. It is accepting that ‘the church is the church only when it is church for others.’⁹ It begins by getting to know the people in the community we are sent to, sharing their »

» lives, seeking to understand their issues and concerns, and using language and forms that are relevant to their circumstances.

'Incarnational' is an often-used term to describe such an approach; however, Michael Moynagh suggests that it may be more helpful to use the term 'contextualisation'.¹⁰ This is what community-focus seeks: to contextualise by being present and relevant in a local context. This was Frederick Booth-Tucker's approach in India more than 100 years ago, so it is not new to the Army. What is different now is that contextualisation is required not just from country to country, but from town to town and neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

Contextualisation poses challenges though. Not only do we need to create room and acceptance of varied expressions of the Army existing next to each other, but we also need to actively and strategically seek such diversity in unity to become 'all things to all people' and rejoice when we 'save some', even when it happens through an expression of the Army we may not be fully comfortable with personally.

Another challenge is to avoid compromising or losing our prophetic edge. Being community-focused should not – indeed must not – result in 'a bland church [that] simply baptizes the culture, affirming its direction', yet we must remember that the 'opposite of bland is not confrontation but engagement'¹¹ or, as Graham Cray puts it, that the 'gospel can only be proclaimed in a culture, not at a culture'.¹² We identify with the community we care for and seek to understand, while we pray, hope and work for its transformation as it will submit to the reign of God.

We need to adapt and develop forms, expressions and programmes from context to context while staying true to the content of our faith. The gospel, Jesus himself, is the only 'gravitational pull'¹³ we have. Contextualisation is to remove what hinders that pull in whatever climate and culture we find ourselves, as we share 'not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well' with the community we are sent to (see 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

3. CORPS-BASED

I am beginning to get used to the reactions when

sharing the missional necessity for the Army to be corps-based. Many roll their eyes, sigh deeply and look for a chance to move on without offending me too much. In some places today, corps are perceived as an old-fashioned expression of the Army and to talk about corps or corps development is seen as diverting the focus from where it should be – on mission.

The local church is, however, 'God's primary mission strategy in the world'¹⁴ and in Lesslie Newbigin's words an 'unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church'.¹⁵ If we want to be serious about mission and being mission-shaped, then there is no alternative to a corps-based Salvation Army. And yet, to some degree I do understand the reactions described above. It is often not a reaction to the idea of corps as such, but to the kind of corps people have experienced; many corps seem to be more part of the problem than the solution when it comes to being a mission-shaped Army.

Nevertheless, a corps-based Army is a missional imperative. What we need, however, is not just *any* kind of corps. We don't want more programme-driven corps, nor corps where the primary focus is the size of the congregation, the budget or how busy we are. Neither should we fall into the trap of thinking contemporary or alternative forms and expressions in themselves will do it. New forms seldom create new life, but new life often requires new forms. Here too, it is the order that is important.

To have a mission-shaped Army, our corps also need to be healthy and mission-shaped, and get the balance right between their up-, in- and outward dimensions.¹⁶ Corps with an emphasis on equipping people to live as salt and light in the world in their everyday life understand that a focus on the quality of the corps is actually a *missional* focus.¹⁷

Such corps will come in many sizes, forms and shapes. To fully embrace and promote this we may have to revisit our understanding and develop a renewed vision of what a corps is and should be. We may have to get rid of some structures and trappings that we associate with corps, agree on the essentials and then give freedom to develop new forms and practices according to the context.

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This is not a matter of ‘business as usual’. In many places, it will require new focus, giving priority to corps work and acknowledging, beyond slick catchphrases, the value of corps ministry and corps officers. This will call for investment of resources – people, money and training – to create the organisational space and support structure to help corps develop into mission-shaped Kingdom communities.

Corps are not out of date – they are still God’s primary mission strategy. But for the Army to be mission-shaped we need healthy corps and we need more of them. When we plant and develop corps, or as Paul puts it, plant and water, we can expect that God will give the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

RADICAL BALANCE

The real challenge is for all three imperatives to be pursued in balance; not balance as shared mediocrity, but what Christian Schwarz calls ‘radical balance’¹⁸ – an Army radically and passionately Christ-centred, community-focused and corps-based. If we ignore or do not develop sufficiently one area, we lose on our mission shape, and we will be less able to ‘deliver God’s message to the oppressed’, even if we do have their address.

There is much more to say. I have only addressed the ‘why’ and ‘what’ and hardly touched on the ‘how’. That will have to wait for another time, because I have to go for a run now. It is no good just talking about the mission, I (or is it we?) really need to invest in getting in shape for it as well.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A term made popular in Graham Cray’s *Mission-shaped Church*, 2012, Church House Publishing, London
- ² N.T. Wright, *The Kingdom New Testament: A Contemporary Translation*, 2012, HarperCollins, New York
- ³ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*, 2009, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, USA
- ⁴ Quoted by Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 2004, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, UK
- ⁵ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, 2010, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, USA
- ⁶ Alan Burns, *Founding Vision for a Future Army*, 2012, Shield Books, London
- ⁷ Andrew Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby: The Road to Canterbury / Risk-taker and Reconciler*, 2014, Darton, Longmann and Todd Ltd., London
- ⁸ Gerard Kelly, *Church Actually: Rediscovering the Brilliance in God’s Plan*, 2012, Monarch Books, Oxford, UK
- ⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 2001, SCM Press, London
- ¹⁰ Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*, 2012, SCM Press, London
- ¹¹ Eddie Gibbs, *The Journey of Ministry: Insights from a Life of Practice*, 2012, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, USA
- ¹² Ibid¹.
- ¹³ Ibid⁵.
- ¹⁴ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbours*, 2011, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, UK
- ¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lessons on the Nature of Church*, 1998, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, UK
- ¹⁶ Ibid¹.
- ¹⁷ Christian A. Schwarz, *The All by Itself Salvationist*, 2015, NCD Media, Emmelsbüll, Germany
- ¹⁸ Christian A. Schwarz, *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*, 2005, ChurchSmart Resources, St Charles, USA