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The background and roles of the Salvation Army in providing social and faith-based services

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Introduction

At the beginning of the annual Christmas season in the United States and many other Western countries, red kettles appear at shopping areas, sporting venues and other places where people gather. To most, these kettles are the face of The Salvation Army [TSA] and provide their initial introduction to some charitable work as their cash donations will provide gifts and meals to families (Zavada 2015). To others, they view TSA as a place to donate old clothing and furniture for resale in the thrift stores operated by the adult rehabilitation centres (Hazzard 1998). What the majority of these people do not realise is that these are simply two popular and ubiquitous services of a world-wide religious and charitable movement that has been underway for 150 years.

This chapter discusses the religious orientation of The Salvation Army. It explains their organisational structure; highlights the major services it provides; explains in-depth one field of services, substance misuse, as an example of their faith-based service provision; and discusses two controversies relating to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people and the privatisation of services in which The Salvation Army has been involved over the past two decades.

Founding of The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army was founded in London, England in 1865 under the leadership of General William Booth, a Methodist minister who was concerned about the effects of rapid urbanisation. The beginnings of this evangelical movement in Victorian England parallel similar efforts in addressing and alleviating the troubles of rapid industrialisation and emergence of social insurances found in Northern Europe and North America (Walker 2001).

William Booth and his wife, Catherine, left the New Methodist Connection Church in London when they would not allow him to minister to those the Booths believed were in the most need and to whom they were dedicating their lives. Booth’s perspective was further influenced by his observation that the cab horses in London, which were used to pull carriages and carts, were treated better than some people (Booth 1890). Booth began the Christian Mission, which eventually became The Salvation Army, funded by money he raised from donations from
bar patrons and others (Walker 2001). While many thought this to be improper, Booth was noted as justifying the efforts by stating ‘Once the money is cleansed by the tears of the widows and orphans, it was blessed in God’s eyes’.

While Booth began providing services in the East End of London in the 1860s, his more formal framework for service delivery was outlined in his book In Darkest England and the Way Out (Booth 1890), which remains an essential or recommended reading in many higher education programmes of social work and human services. This visionary book took what is now considered an early holistic approach, consistent with social work and environmental values. This was accomplished by realising the need to view the mind, body and spirit when working with individuals, families and communities that had become disenfranchised by the lack of concern from the government and other citizens.

Just as contemporary social work values the role of biology, psychology, sociology and spirituality (NASW 2008), Booth was astute in his stance that understanding the overall needs of people arises from addressing the needs of the soul as well as their body. Booth took the approach that there were certain aspects of improving the quality of life of others that governments and societies were not well equipped to accomplish. He had an early awareness that without feeding the stomachs of persons in need, he and his followers would not be able to feed their souls (McKinley 1995).

Because of Booth’s strong belief in providing direct services to marginalised individuals, his organisation has been at the forefront of social services since it was founded, despite being primarily a religious organisation (Hazzard 1998). The religious basis under which TSA operates is revealed in its motto, ‘Blood and Fire’, in which the red signifies the blood shed by Jesus Christ and the yellow represents the fire of the Holy Spirit (Eason and Green 2012).

The Salvation Army’s organisational structure

The religious orientation of The Salvation Army highlights the major services it provides, and explains the organisational structure. Booth liked the perceived efficiency of a military structure in mobilising forces and addressing emergent human need (Winston 2000). Since its beginning, uniformed officers, including both men and women, have been ordained ministers. A similar organisational structure is followed throughout the world.

Although it has a hierarchical structure, service provision is very decentralised as local corps programmes respond to local needs. The TSA is lead by one General (William Booth being the first). International Headquarters is based in London, England because of its founding there in the 1860s. Territorial Headquarters (THQ) offices are located worldwide with several countries having more than one THQ (e.g. the United States has four THQs) whereas in other countries THQs may be combined (e.g. Canada and Bermuda share a THQ). At a more local level, programmes and corps services typically report to Divisional Headquarters (DHQ), which in turn are accountable to their THQ. It is at the THQ that Commissioners elect the General; THQs are also where governmental and foundation contracts are signed, and from where monitoring of social services is organised. TSA’s mission statement reflects these principles, and states:

The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal Christian Church. Its message is based on the Bible. Its ministry is motivated by the love of God. Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.

(The Salvation Army 2016)
The Salvation Army

The stated mission to serve the human needs of vulnerable and impoverished populations underscores The Salvation Army’s range of services. Among these services are disaster relief, international development, women’s ministries, anti-human trafficking efforts and schooling. Services are provided in the form of material and financial provisions, education, coordination of resources and on-the-ground support.

On a global scale, the delivery of international healthcare is TSA’s core service element. These programmes are usually funded through donations, and operate out of the World Services Office. The prioritisation of healthcare is an extension of the Christian healing mission as modelled by Jesus Christ, who was believed to have cured those with chronic illnesses, those with disabilities and helped the families of the deceased. The Salvation Army believes that the most effective healthcare, particularly in poor communities where individuals are more prone to preventable diseases, is done within homes and families (The Salvation Army 2015c). From this perspective, especially in the global South, there is a focus on community-based healthcare interventions wherein trained local corps members empower community members to take ownership of their health. The Salvation Army rejects what they believe is a secular approach to healthcare in which expert providers wait for the sick and suffering to come to them for healing. Instead, TSA uses an egalitarian ‘covenant partner’ approach to healthcare in which they move services ‘out of the building and into the communities to meet people where they are’.

Although The Salvation Army is firm in its stance that healthcare is most effective when it can be brought into homes and communities, much of their ministry occurs in war-torn, deeply impoverished societies. Because of this, TSA has established institutional bases that act as anchors in the communities. Across the more than 120 countries, these bases include 20 general hospitals; 45 maternity hospitals; 123 health clinics; 440 hostels for the homeless; 228 children’s homes; 116 homes for the elderly; 60 homes for the disabled; 57 reprimand and probation homes; 41 homes for street children; 41 mother and infant homes; 77 care homes for vulnerable people; and 104 homes for refugees. In addition, The Salvation Army has 2,286 educational outreach institutions. TSA conservatively estimates that between seven and eight million workers are currently involved in healthcare programmes and community development. Addiction treatment and recovery services are a particular focus of healthcare service efforts since Booth made this one of his focus populations. Worldwide, The Salvation Army has established 204 residential recovery centres for addiction and substance misuse (The Salvation Army 2015d).

Despite this large international infrastructure, local Salvation Army corps programmes are the foundation upon which spiritual activities including Bible study, fellowship meetings, religious services, music programmes, youth activities and pastoral counselling are provided. Spiritual services are available to, but not mandatory, for social service programmes and treatment clientele and the centres’ surrounding neighbourhoods or communities. TSA services and programmes typically evolve via local advisory mechanisms and the input of various community stakeholders. Local administrative units have community advisory boards and committees composed of residents and concerned citizens, who provide guidance on the specific needs of the community. An important concern is whether the increasing centralisation of management impedes the ability of local units to organise when responding to the expressed needs in a community. This issue will become even more critical as TSA continues to increase its programmatic activities by creating new agencies while continuing to support many existing ones (Weinberg 2001).
Salvation Army social service provision in the United States

When The Salvation Army first came to the United States, it arrived in a country in which Christian social activists had, since before the American Revolution, played significant roles in shaping egalitarian views for the equitable distribution of resources (Wallis 2008). Since then, The Salvation Army has played a vital role in shaping contemporary social service delivery. It marshalled resources to develop a system of addiction treatment centres, particularly in the substance misuse and addictions arena with its establishment of adult rehabilitation centres (designed as work rehabilitation services) and Harbour Light programmes specifically for the treatment of addiction. These were developed in response to the period’s societal conditions using TSA’s spiritual, organisational and financial resources.

The backbone of service provision is the delivery of emergency services that have been historically known as ‘soup, soap, and salvation’. These services take many forms and include disaster relief, homeless shelters, emergency food services and utility payment assistance. Not all services are provided at all locations as the menu of service options remains based on demonstrated local need, the level at which the organisation’s workers can provide services and availability of financial resources. Many locations have limited financial resources and are therefore unable to hire professional social work personnel. These locations most likely provide basic support services.

Throughout the evolution of their history in the United States, The Salvation Army has adapted to local and national trends (Taiz 2001). For example, during the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, The Salvation Army expanded their corps programmes and focused more closely on immigrant groups such as Chinese and Scandinavians (McKinney 1995). As the Great Depression arrived, responding to basic needs, including providing food and shelter, required greater attention. Despite the fact that The Salvation Army in the US contracted during the post-World War II era because of white flight from urban cores (Reed 1981), Harbour Light programming grew following World War II and the Vietnam War as more service personnel returned home with addictions. An upward trend appeared in programme use and funding following major US military involvement as service personnel returned to the US. Social programme planners must ask whether this surge in interest reflected a greater ability to fund such programmes, or if it is due to the result of increased need demonstrated by service personnel exhibiting indicators of post-traumatic stress or some other disorder.

The Salvation Army currently operates a variety of programmes including shelters, thrift stores, adult rehabilitation programmes, orphanages, camp programmes for children, gift giving for the children of those who are incarcerated, day care, re-entry programmes for ex-offenders, choirs and brass bands, and Sunday church services. Given that it is one of the world’s largest charitable organisations, in addition to contracts with various governments and foundations, it relies heavily on individuals to give money. Nevertheless, the costs of service provision remain comparatively low given that ordained ministers, who have taken a vow of poverty, are the primary operators of social services. An example can be found in the provision of ex-offender services that operate with only a 3 per cent overhead (Drucker 1989).

As The Salvation Army is primarily a religious organisation, services are viewed as secondary to their spiritual mission. This is an important distinction as the United States Constitution mandates a strong separation between church and state. Therefore, social services provided through governmental funding, whether it be federal, state or local, cannot require participation in religious activities as a basis for receiving those services.

In order to provide a more concrete and sophisticated example, we will discuss briefly The Salvation Army’s comprehensive array of treatment services in several North American cities. These are named Harbour Light programmes, in which detoxification, residential, outpatient
and other services are provided. Similar to other TSA programmes, these services are provided within a religious setting in which the clientele may choose to participate in spiritual services. A similar organisational structure is followed throughout the world (The Salvation Army 2015b).

These Harbour Light Centres provide a range of no/low-fee, holistic recovery services to those with substance misuse and addictions, as well as offering residential (including detoxification services) and transitional housing, group and individual therapy, vocational training and leisure activities. In response to the need to provide treatment services to adults (primarily men), TSA developed their network of substance misuse treatment facilities beginning in Detroit in 1939 that then spread throughout the United States and Canada. Charitable donations and private funding from foundations to serve a predominately white alcohol-abusing population initially funded these Harbour Lights facilities.

Since the 1960s, these programmes and services have sought and received large amounts of governmental funding to treat a more racially and ethnically diverse population with multi-substance misuse problems (Wolf-Branigin 2009). While focused initially on men in recovery when first initiated, in recent decades TSA has increasingly provided services to women that address their unique needs. For example, in Detroit, Michigan, for the past 20 plus years, TSA has operated a programme specifically for women with addictions and are pregnant and/or have children under the age of three years within a residential treatment service.

Given The Salvation Army’s fundamentalist orientation in the Christian religion, their substance misuse treatment services typically have applied Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] principles to supplement their daily regime. Spirituality relating to the belief in a higher power, in approaches such as AA and other self-help movements (Alcoholics Anonymous 2007), remains instrumental in some approaches to addiction treatment. While several early leaders of Harbour Light programmes became sober through their involvement in The Salvation Army and self-help movements, current programme directors tend to have advanced academic degrees in social work and human service related fields. As it has been since TSA’s beginnings, the continued role of spirituality in clients’ belief systems and whether these clients choose to participate in treatment services demonstrates the clients’ desire to enter and successfully complete treatment (Wolf-Branigin and Duke 2007).

Most Harbour Light treatment schemes have options that can last for approximately six months, with typically a 55–60 per cent programme completion rate (Wolf-Branigin 2009). This length of time includes involvement in both residential and outpatient treatments as funding sources over the past two decades prefer briefer periods in the more expensive residential services. All of the programmes have an optional religious component, which cannot be required if a programme receives any governmental funding from the local, state/provincial or federal level. In 2014 alone, The Salvation Army served over 148,000 individuals with substance misuse issues. Because of the relatively advanced and formalised level of services, many of the Harbour Light services receive external accreditation from organisations such as Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities [CARF] International or The Joint Commission. These accrediting bodies are voluntary international bodies that provide a review of the organisation’s operations and, if successful, assure that minimum standards are met. This allows for the programmes to obtain additional funding from specialised contracts and insurance companies. All services abide by local/state licensing standards.

**Recent controversies**

Given the plethora of areas in which TSA operates and its fundamentalist Christian roots, it is no surprise that it has met occasional controversy. This is most apparent in respect of the rights
of LGBT individuals and some contracts into which the organisation has entered. Although the officers, soldiers and employees are expected not to discriminate in service provision since the late twentieth century, controversy has stirred regarding The Salvation Army’s fundamentalist views on the civil rights of LGBT individuals. This has impacted on several governmental funding contracts in the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand and other parts of the world.

Representatives of TSA state that there is no scriptural basis for discrimination against LGBT individuals, and they have publically stated that they do not discriminate in their hiring practices or in their services. However, there has been some discrepancy between the various Territorial Headquarters’ agreeing and signing service contracts as local, state and federal anti-discrimination policies. This includes some highly publicised actions and stances taken by the organisation both at a Territorial Headquarters level, and in some national and local chapters (Jones 2013).

In their position statement on ‘Marriage and Family’ that was available on the organisation’s website until 2012, TSA stated that the Bible both directly and implicitly condemns homosexuality. The statement noted that any attempts to ‘establish or promote such relationships as viable alternatives to heterosexually-based family life do not conform to God’s will for society’. These views have been evident in TSA’s political fight against LGBT civil rights in various chapters.

Numerous public scandals regarding what some might call their dated views on LGBT rights has forced TSA to commit to examining their official stances and their political activism. In 2008, the organisation made a public statement noting, ‘The Salvation Army remains focused on building bridges of understanding and dialogue between itself and the gay community’. In 2013, the organisation removed links to ex-gay conversion therapy providers from their website. As of now, The Salvation Army emphasises its official ‘no discrimination’ policy in both its hiring and service practices; however, the organisation has yet to express full support for equal civil rights for LGBTQ individuals (The Salvation Army 2015a).

In recent decades, a different concern has arisen as state governments in the United States have contracted services to TSA in order to shed responsibility for their provision and reduce costs. One example is the former General Assistance programme in the state of Michigan that provided a monthly financial stipend to single adults (Sherman 1995).

The emergence of the Charitable Choice movement in the United States in the late 1990s has highlighted tensions within TSA as to who it employs and what services it provides. Charitable Choice was a federal initiative encouraging the contracting of governmental funds to faith-based organisations in order to provide direct services to children, adults and families (Carlson-Thies 2001). Under this programme, TSA received governmental funding while discriminating against the employment of LGBT workers (Blackwell and Dziegielewski 2005).

Conclusion

The Salvation Army provides a spectrum of social services worldwide in order to address and alleviate need. Local Salvation Army corps and programmes are often viewed by social workers as last resorts for placing their clients with diverse financial and other human service needs. While those working in the social services field appreciate this approach, recent controversies in the areas of LGBT rights and the TSA’s role in receiving governmental funding in order to privatise services will be problematic to many. Social workers will rightfully feel some conflict with their past positions on LGBT and neo-liberal positions; however, at the local social service provision level, these views tend to be non-existent.
References