

What If Every Denomination Were Like the **SALVATION ARMY?**

A Modest Proposal for Transforming American Church Life

BY TODD LAKE

*While women weep as they do now, I'll fight;
while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight;
while men go to prison...as they do now, I'll fight;
while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, I'll fight;
where there yet remains one dark soul without the light of God,
I'll fight—
I'll fight to the very end!*

William Booth, Final Public Appearance, May 1912

C.S. Lewis wrote once that we are not as holy as the apostles for the simple reason that we never intended to be. We cannot become what we have no intention of becoming. And it is clearly the case that American churches do not serve the poor because they do not intend to. Certainly there are exceptions, and readers of *PRISM* are aware of a great amount of the Christian community development work in the United States. We should be thankful for Lutheran Social Services, for Caritas and the St. Vincent DePaul Society, for the Christian Community Development Association, and the myriad parachurch agencies that bring Christians together to serve the poor in Jesus' name.

But the major denominational service agencies are something other than the denomination itself. They are a special interest group within the denomination, just as the para-church agencies are special interest groups. They are good and they are needed, but they are not churches doing the work of the

church. In fact, their existence points to the fact that churches, for the most part, want to outsource their contact with the poor. So they create entities that can do good Christian things on behalf of the poor. The local congregations themselves, however, do not view such engagement with their community's needs as a constituent part of their identity.

Check out just about any church's website, and you will find under the heading "services" a list of worship opportunities. Under the heading "ministries" you will discover a host of programs serving your needs in the areas of children or grief or handbell ringing. What you will not find, for the most part, is ministry as the New Testament understands it.

One shining exception is the Salvation Army. Some would say, "Wait a minute, that's not a church, it's a social service agency." Even those of us who learned at some point that it is a denomination, and not a Christian social service agency, have failed to ponder the significance of that fact. The Salvation Army is a church, just like the Methodists and Baptists. It has ministers and educational requirements for ordination and choirs and Sunday morning worship and Sunday school and has even had a few church splits in its history—a sign of genuine denominational status if ever there was one.

The Army, as it is known, differs from the other denominations in only one key respect: It believes that commitment to the poor in one's community and in the world is not optional for a church. That's it. It is not peopled by better Christians or smarter Christians or even less contentious Christians than the rest of our churches. Its distinctive mark is not its uniforms but rather the simple fact that it has insti-

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seemingly innumerable programs for urban children and youth, people with AIDS, those needing assistance with food and utilities and rent, and signature programs like the annual Angel Giving Tree.

What would it look like if all denominations acted as the Salvation Army does? Let's do the math. The Salvation Army has over half a million members in the United States.* You can multiply the Army's number of ministries or people served by the appropriate number for your denomination. For example, if you are a Southern Baptist, multiply by 32 (there are 16 million Southern Baptists in the U.S.); if you are United Methodist, multiply by 16. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has almost 3.5 million members, so if it were like the Salvation Army, its members would do seven times what the Army is doing.

Lutherans (ELCA), for example, would multiply these figures from the Army by 10, meaning that if they were doing on a per-member basis what the Salvation Army is doing,

*The Army actually divides its adherents into two groups: Members (449,000) and Soldiers (115,000). The members may teach Sunday school, share in worship, etc. Soldiers are those who have signed the "Articles of War," which include a standard Wesleyan doctrinal statement followed by "therefore..." It is here that the soldier pledges to devote him- or herself to be faithful "in His name, caring for the needy and disadvantaged" and to be involved in the "corps" (i.e. the community centers run by the Army) in order to fulfill the pledge. Soldiers and officers wear uniforms, while others do not.

they would operate 5,420 group homes and 570 medical clinics to serve the poor. Further, they would provide holiday assistance to almost 50 million people and help 1 million individuals who are trapped in substance abuse—all this while conducting the full range of traditional activities more closely associated with a Christian church.

The cities of America would be transformed in remarkable ways if every denomination were like the Salvation Army. Every time someone proposes refurbishing Sunday school space, or building a family life center, or going on a youth ski trip, it is an opportunity to speak up on behalf of the poor. Serving them is not optional in the kingdom of God; it is part of what makes it the kingdom of God. We need to begin quickly transforming our churches and denominations into places where Isaiah 58—known as The Salvation Army Charter—is the order of the day. As General Booth wrote in the preface to *In Darkest England*, "I have keenly felt the remedial measures usually enunciated in Christian programmes... to be lamentably inadequate for any effectual dealing with the despairing miseries of these outcast classes. The rescued are appallingly few—a ghastly minority compared with the multitudes who struggle and sink in the open-mouthed abyss." ■

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