

“Priestly Pastors” Sacred Cow

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Are officers control freaks or are congregations abdicating their responsibility?

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The idea of “the priesthood of all believers” is an enchanting one that shimmers like a mirage in a dry desert. We glimpse it, long for it, reach out for it and fantasize about how wonderful everything will be once we get to it, but in reality we never seem to get there.

Some officers are control freaks, power hungry and too insecure to allow others to share their pulpit or trust them with any significant decision-making. But only a very few are like this, a tiny minority. The majority would dearly love to give power away, to have their people step up and take more ownership in the life and mission of their corps and ease their overwhelming burden. Most corps officers are overworked and live with the constant feeling that they will never quite catch up or get a handle on everything.

Most officers now serving in the field were trained in a hierarchal, top-down system of authority that concentrated power in the hands of the commanding officer (for example, the corps council is, at the end of the day, an advisory board with technically no decision-making power or even voting rights). The culture that birthed the Army’s present-day leadership is one in which newly minted officers are expected to assume power and to regard delegation of authority warily. Added to this is a workload of unrealistic proportions and the Damoclean sword of failure hanging overhead. It is a system by nature more punitive than affirmative. It offers a paycheque which, in spite of all the supposed extras, can lead to a culture of dependency. Many officer families find themselves in a state of institutionalized poverty, living from payday to payday. The loss of autonomy—the voluntary surrender of one’s future and particular calling to the organization—seems noble to a 20-something starting out. But add a few years of ministry in the field and, for many, hindsight reveals it to have been a Faustian bargain, particularly as new ministry models and methods

open up and, along with them, new opportunities for non-officer personnel.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that an entitlement mentality can start to pervade the thinking of some officers. Often unconsciously, they start to tighten their grip on those tangible indicators of their worth and value, such as being in charge. Is it really any wonder that many work themselves to the bone trying to be all things to all people and win the approval of an organization that values hard work and busyness? So we inevitably end up with priestly pastors.

Keeping the Ship Afloat

I also believe that most people in most corps have the expectation that officers should be about their Father’s business, doing most of the tasks they are presently charged with. The bottom line for the majority of churchgoers is that they are busy as well—busy with their lives, jobs, families, leisure and hobbies. Their church involvement forms one aspect of a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional lifestyle that is becoming increasingly fast-paced, complex and difficult to manage. The threat of being overwhelmed with life is constant. There is simply “never enough time.”

So most Salvationists will come to church on Sunday, and maybe once during the week to a sectional practice, Alpha course, Bible study, prayer meeting or youth group. As for the rest of the time, the prevailing attitude is: “I’m busy,” or “What about the other people in the church?” or “The person up front with the red epaulets is getting paid to do this. It’s their job, so they should get on with it. After all, he has all day to simply do church stuff, with no other responsibilities so he can be more focused and committed.” Such assertions will undoubtedly raise the ire of committed lay people who are active and mission-focused in their local settings. But, for the majority of adherents, soldiers and attendees at Salvation Army corps

across the territory, this is the way they think.

So it's a bit of a stalemate. The local church has to be organized somehow or it simply won't do anything. A pure democracy is a functional impossibility. At the end of the day, the church is a voluntary organization and, as anyone who has ever worked with volunteers knows, commitment and consistency is always a challenge. Someone (i.e. the corps officer) needs to call the shots, make the decisions, pick up the slack and make sure the ship stays afloat. And, as stated earlier, most laity really wouldn't have it any other way.

Ownership and Involvement

At Corps 614 in Regent Park, Toronto, we have been able to mobilize most of our members to serve. If you show up at a Sunday meeting, for example, you will notice that neither I nor my wife as corps officers appear to do much. The worship team leader arranges the order of service and leads the congregational singing. Our prayer co-ordinator organizes prayer, which comprises a good chunk of time in our meetings. Our preaching schedule is drawn up three months in advance and utilizes various people in the corps (I preach once every three months). The meal after the service is prepared by different congregants on a rotating basis. There is a strong sense of ownership at the corps and, when my wife and I are away for the weekend, it's not a big deal.

This principle of ownership and involvement carries through every ministry and aspect of corps life. It is by no means a perfect system, but overall I would say that our adherents, soldiers and regular attendees at the corps are part of a church culture with high expectations for personal involvement. The corresponding benefit for them is a high degree of input into the life and direction of the church. It works both ways.

If I had to attribute this to one single factor, it would be the fundamental shift in focus that we decided early on would be a defining characteristic of 614—namely, that our emphasis would be on *the community* rather than *the church*. This may not sound like an earth-shattering revelation, but it has become significant for us.

The church growth movement and its various offspring (Natural Church Development, seeker-sensitive services, mono-cultural and ethnic churches, etc.) have informed The Salvation Army in Canada and Bermuda for the last quarter century. Their principles have guided how and where we plant new corps, our attempts to revive failing congregations, our evangelistic strategies and our mission

imperatives. The movement's many strengths aside, the focus of the church growth movement is the church: "The local church is the hope of the world," as Bill Hybels likes to say. Be this as it may, the "law of intended consequences" means there is an inevitable drift toward internalism and the commodification of faith. When it is all about "the church," then the size of the church (how many people show up for Sunday worship), the church building (size, accessories, even carpets), worship styles, behavioural boundaries and denominational distinctives become all important. These aspects end up defining the culture of that particular faith community and all the focus and energy is directed toward them.

In order to attract people to our churches, we need to have relevant, cheerful, well-produced services ... you know the drill. According to this thinking, the Sunday service becomes the defining moment in the life of the church. And our creative efforts are invested in making a better, more attractive "product" so that people will come to us. And these people are most definitely consumers who live in a world with a myriad of competing choices in every area of their lives. Their choice of church and extent of their personal involvement is no different. The officer becomes the product manager, working hard to improve the brand, to better customer relations, to train the "salespeople," and so to increase sales. They're the ones getting paid to do this and so have the time and energy to focus exclusively on it. They are, in fact, the CEO.

Change in Focus

At 614 Regent Park, however, choosing to focus primarily on the community, rather than the church, has changed everything for us. It means that our benchmarks for success have changed significantly. It is no longer about how many people show up on Sunday, but rather, in our specific neighbourhood, that there are less shootings because of our presence; that people are less afraid and consequently more children play outside; that there are more conversations about God. We have taken our inspiration from Matthew 5:16-17, Jesus' metaphor of salt and light. We see our incarnational presence as "the church" in Regent Park as being salt (a preservative) and light (illumination), and our sole purpose to transform the community by bringing in more fully the Kingdom of God. We don't give much thought to "the church" in the traditional manner, as odd as it may sound.

A by-product of this focal shift is the empowerment and involvement of everyone connected with our corps.

Simply put, everyone understands that the goal is to get the church into the community, not to get the community into our church. The path that we have instinctively followed is consistent with a larger trend in these postmodern times. In part, it's a reaction against the perceived excesses of the church growth movement. But it also signals a generational shift with the up-and-coming Young Turks wanting to do things in their own way.

In his 2002 book, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, Robert E. Webber categorizes evangelicals into three broad sections: Traditional Evangelicals: 1950-1975; Pragmatic Evangelicals: 1975-2000; Younger Evangelicals 2000-present. He also

ascribe certain traits in ecclesiology and praxis to each group.

In a similar vein, Reggie McNeal published a book in 2003 entitled *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. In it, he addresses similar issues by outlining the new reality of postmodern life and posing dialectical questions for the Church.

Both of these studies point to that fact that unless The Salvation Army starts to think fundamentally differently about how we do church and how we engage in mission, then the priesthood of all believers will remain a mirage. Tipping over sacred cows will be the least of our worries.

The Younger Evangelicals

This chart comes from Robert Webber's book *The Younger Evangelicals* and does an excellent job of showing some of the differences between the modern (traditional and pragmatic evangelicals) and the postmodern (the younger evangelicals)

	Traditional Evangelicals 1950-1975	Pragmatic Evangelicals 1975-2000	Younger Evangelicals 2000-
Theological Commitment	Christianity as a rational worldview	Christianity as therapy Answers needs	Christianity as a community of faith. Ancient/Reformation
Apologetics Style	Evidential Foundational	Christianity as meaning-giver Experiential Personal Faith	Embrace the metanarrative Embodied apologetic Communal faith
Ecclesial Paradigm	Constantinian Church Civil Religion	Culturally sensitive church Market Driven	Missional Church Counter cultural
Church Style	Neighbourhood churches Rural	Megachurch Suburban Market targeted	Small Church Back to cities Intercultural
Leadership Style	Pastor centred	Managerial Model CEO	Team ministry Priesthood of all
Youth Ministry	Church-centred programs	Outreach Programs Weekend fun retreats	Prayer, Bible Study, Worship, Social Action
Education	Sunday School Information centred	Target generational groups and needs	Intergenerational formation in community
Spirituality	Keep the rules	Prosperity and success	Authentic embodiment
Worship	Traditional	Contemporary	Convergence
Art	Restrained	Art as illustration	Incarnational embodiment
Evangelism	Mass evangelism	Seeker Service	Process evangelism
Activists	Beginnings of evangelical social action	Need-driving social action (divorce groups, drug rehab)	Rebuild cities and neighbourhoods

Present Future

Reggie McNeal

New Reality	Wrong (Old) Question	Tough (New) Question
Collapse of Church Culture	How do we do Church better?	How do we deconvert Churchianity to Christianity?
Shift from Church Growth to Kingdom Growth	How do we grow this church? (come to us approach)	How do we transform our communities? (go to approach)
A new Reformation - Releasing God's People	How do we turn members into ministers?	How do we turn members into missionaries?
Return to Spiritual Formation	How do we develop church members?	How do we develop followers of Jesus?
Shift from Planning to Preparation	How do we plan for the future?	How do we prepare for the future?
Rise of Apostolic Leadership	How do we develop leaders for church work?	How do we develop leaders for the Christian movement?