Recapturing a Salvationist Vision for all of Earth

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“A Vision for the Lost, or a Lost Vision?”

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Introduction

Since its inception in some of the dirtiest and most polluted areas of London in eighteenth century England, a potent mixture of evangelism and social justice have been at the heart of The Salvation Army. William Booth’s vision aimed to remove people from awful situations, both temporally and spiritually, at a time when the Industrial Revolution had a firm grip on many facets of society. So one might assume that over one hundred years later, in light of current environmental degradation, related concern, and the increase in specifically ecological Christian literature, this same movement, and the individuals that comprise it, should be interested in combating environmental degradation and economic decisions made at the expense of those who can least minimise the related harmful effects, inclusive of both human and non-human life. Given this, it would seem important to examine the extent to which reducing harmful environmental change (as an act of social justice on behalf of the poor and marginalised) and caring for God’s creation are incorporated within the agenda of The Salvation Army, 100 years after Booth’s ‘promotion to glory’.

In my experience as a Salvationist I feel the issues of sustainability, environmentally conscious living, simplicity, and generally just caring for God’s loved cosmos have not played a significant role in many Salvationist’s personal agendas, or The Salvation Army as a movement. I believe they should be. Furthermore, I wonder if
The Salvation Army has by and large bought into the popular Western materialist/capitalist paradigm that the Earth is here to provide resources for humans, viewing Earth in more mechanistic terms rather than God’s cherished creation. Have these attitudes towards Earth been to the detriment of both humanity and the greater fullness of creation? This essay begins with a brief sketch of the current level of environmental degradation, which, if latest estimates of climate variation are accurate, reveals the poorest will be the most likely affected from climate variability and further environmental degradation. Christian perspectives on environmental issues will also be briefly discussed before bringing both Booth’s vision of greater connection to the land into clearer view. It ends with a call to renew our connection with God’s creation personally, communally and corporately and work to bring peace and healing to all of God’s loved creation.

**Ecological Issues, Awareness and Resistance**

From the dawn of time humanity has had an ecological impact through the interconnected nature of our being-in-the-Earth. However, the past two hundred years have seen a marked increase in pollution and environmental degradation perpetrated against Earth and its various ecosystems to an extent never before experienced. The exponential rate of growth in population, industry, economic forces, transportation and numerous other factors, beginning in earnest around the time of the Industrial Revolution have contributed significantly to the dire situations we see around the world. More recently, particularly since the 1960’s with the publication of volumes
such as ‘Silent Spring’\(^1\) and articles such as ‘The Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’\(^2\), there has been rising awareness of the multiplicity of ways humanity has not taken sensible or sensitive care of the earth that sustains it. The rapidly expanding bodies of literature focusing on the broad topics of anthropogenic climate change, environmental degradation and interrelated social and ecological upheavals are testament to this emergent understanding of humanity’s place in and being part of the biosphere.

Reports disseminating the scientific basis for anthropogenic climate change and potential effects on earth systems and life forms have progressively publicised a worsening situation\(^3\). Economic reports and predictions\(^4\) and international food, water


CSIRO, *State of the Climate 2012.*

and security reports\(^5\) also point to the benefits of taking action towards reducing carbon dioxide and carbon dioxide equivalent emissions sooner rather than later. These reports and the peer-reviewed scientific literature these reports are based on\(^6\) point to severe consequences for life on earth if current business-as-usual models are maintained\(^7\). Coupled with the significant human impact on God’s created order, the poorest have been, and without decisive action, will continue to be impacted most negatively from both climate variability and more generally through the placement and disposal of rubbish and pollutants. Through a lack of resources to combat


There is also resistance from numerous circles to Christian-based environmental concern. Langmead’s review of articles focused on the ‘greening of mission’ in an evangelical Christian context asserts there is a fairly common thread which appears to be a need to ‘justify the legitimacy of creation care theology’. Nonetheless, the dialogue between Christian theology and ecology and other general Christian-based literature on environmental issues has blossomed, particularly since the publication of Lynn White’s article in which the Christian tradition is argued to have brought about an incorrect view of power and place on earth which has in turn been a primary driver of environmental degradation. As an example of the large


amount of literature available, Conradie\textsuperscript{11} attempted to gather a bibliography of 5000 specifically Christian theological work on ecology published between 1975 and 2005. The increasing amount and depth of literature in the spheres of religion and ecology is helpful in moving towards a ‘greener’ church and increasingly holy and holistic Christian faith communities and individuals.

**Extending the Scope of Salvation Army Mission**

Of relevance to the mission of The Salvation Army, Langmead\textsuperscript{12} refers to Rene Padilla’s perceived dichotomy between church mission and kingdom mission. Church mission has an ‘eternal’ focus, primarily the saving of souls; whereas kingdom mission takes on a far wider and holistic scope, where followers of Christ are encouraged to partner with the Missio Dei on Earth in practical and physical ways. Habel\textsuperscript{13} extends Padilla’s bilateral mission descriptors, with the suggestion that Christian mission has over time progressively encompassed three elements. Habel’s first element involves mission focused primarily on the saving of souls, echoing Padilla’s church mission. Padilla’s kingdom mission is then distributed throughout Habel’s next two elements.

\textsuperscript{11} Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for further research*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 11 (Stellenbosch, South Africa: SUN PReSS, 2006).

\textsuperscript{12} Langmead, *Integrating ecological mission into mainstream mission*.

The second element broadens the idea of mission and includes bodily and community-focused evangelism (social justice). The third, and broadest sense of mission, takes the whole of creation as the focus of salvation, redemption and healing.

I contend Habel’s progression is applicable and relevant to the Salvationist context. Historically The Salvation Army has certainly focused on the first two elements. The ‘salvation of souls’ is a constant theme in the Army, along with particular focus on assisting those experiencing suffering, poverty and hopelessness. I believe the focus on the first two elements has sidelined broader discourses around the value and care of non-human nature within this same progressive movement that endorsed the equality of women\(^\text{14}\) appropriate cultural praxis\(^\text{15}\), and creatively using new forms of media (film, theatre, song, drama) to spread the Gospel message of love and hope\(^\text{16}\).


Historical Salvationist Pro-environmental Praxis

There are strong signs of value and care given to non-human nature within Salvationism, particularly the Booth family.

Alas! There are crowds of men and women, especially in our great cities, who are almost compelled to live very unnatural lives, herded together in factories, offices, mills or workrooms, breathing exhausted air through long hours of every day. 17

Florence Booth discerns the social, economic and related ecological issues that have been an important part of much of The Salvation Army’s work. The ‘Darkest England’ scheme set forth by William Booth 18 aimed to see people saved spiritually from sin and temptation, and saved physically from the pollution and poverty that pervaded the increasingly industrially-based English society. Basically, the scheme involved three phases: phase one incorporated ‘city colonies’, to first give people hope within the impersonalized towns; phase two included ‘farm colonies’ and small holding farms to give opportunity for people to escape the city life and as Booth-Tucker also hoped, to reunite ‘the manless land with the landless man’ 19; whereas the final phase consisted of ‘overseas colonies’, to further expand the communal vision of hope to other lands including Australia.

17 Bolton, Booth’s Drum, 144.


19 Winston, Red-Hot and Righteous, 103.
It is one of the loveliest days the earth ever rejoiced in. The water is running up in dimpling ripulets [sic] just before me, and all nature seems to be luxuriating in the perfection of happiness. It is a joyous thought that altho’ the world is so marred and blighted by sin, there is still so much of beauty and enjoyment in it left, as it were, as a type and earnest of its coming emancipation.

Catherine Booth’s words show to some extent her deep love and gratitude for creation and her aesthetics of nature, from which we can discern further deep love and gratitude for the creator. Catherine’s love for both creator and creation has influenced to some extent the trajectory of The Salvation Army. William Booth spoke of his wife’s whole soul being ‘full of tender, deep compassion. [He thought] that she suffered more in her lifetime through her compassion for poor...animals than some doctors of divinity suffer for the...wide world of sinning, sorrowing mortals!’

One assumes it was Catherine’s love for animals that affected both the value placed upon vegetarianism

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20 David Bennett, ed. The Letters of William and Catherine Booth (Brisbane: Camp Hill Publications, 2003), 226.


within the Booth family\textsuperscript{23} and the inclusion of a section within The Salvation Army’s Orders and Regulations for Soldiers:

A soldier within The Salvation Army should be kind-hearted, and should manifest love and gentleness especially in their connection with the animal world. To inflict or to witness cruelty should be impossible. Not only should they avoid causing unnecessary hardship on animals, but should be willing to lend a hand to aid or relieve any suffering creature.\textsuperscript{24}

Other figures within the earlier days of the Army valued green space for recreation and pleasure, such as James Barker\textsuperscript{25}, reflecting Richard Louv’s\textsuperscript{26} recent description of the loss of interaction and connection with nature and its physical and mental effects on children as ‘nature deficit disorder’.

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\textit{(Originally published as ‘Mrs. Booth of The Salvation Army’. London: James Nisbet and Co., 1900).}
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\textsuperscript{26} Richard Louv, \textit{Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder} (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005).
However, within The Salvation Army today, is there knowledge of historical pro-ecological Salvationist praxis, exemplified in the Booth family and elsewhere? Are members of The Salvation Army aware of current levels of environmental destruction? Are Salvationists aware of the theological and scriptural imperatives to care for the Earth? Are they doing anything about it?

The Current Situation and Looking Forward

My own research to date finds literature connecting views of nature and Christian mission from a Salvationist standpoint are relatively scarce, however there is still much hope for the future and wonderful resources are currently available. Salvation Army and ecology related literature is increasing. Various Salvationist literature includes:

- Lucy Aitkenread, “Is Green the New Red?” The Salvationist (6 June 2009), 7;
- Cornelius A. Buller, “Ecology in a Damaged World.” Word and Deed, November 2001;
- Hanna Ferguson, “From Vision to Reality”, All the World Vol. 49 Number 1, 2011;
- Raelton Gibbs, “A Growing Admiration”, All the World Vol. 48 Number 1, 2010;

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websites contain positive environmental attitudes, including a strong statement on responsibility for the earth from Canada and Bermuda Territory’s Ethics Centre. This statement is wonderful in its scope, depth and insight and I would strongly recommending The Salvation Army worldwide to take heed of its message, and to support similar statements, and most importantly – act upon these statements in ways that heal and lessen our personal and collective impacts on the Earth, within all areas of The Salvation Army.

In light of modern society’s use and abuse of Earth, I argue the mediation of the Christian faith, through The Salvation Army broadly, and personally by Salvationists, should therefore seriously take this issue into account. Missiologist David Bosch would agree that Christian-based mission and praxis in ‘Western culture must include an ecological dimension. The time is long past that we can afford to exclude the environment from our missionary agenda’.

I see clear links between increased pro-environmental thought, action, and understanding of the biblical imperative to care for creation with a wide range of


beneficial outcomes for The Salvation Army. I would argue the benefits are not only financial, practical, evangelistic, mental, health, but also spiritual:

- Financially; being more responsible stewards of resources, energy and materials can only improve the financial situation for The Salvation Army.

- Practically; to be increasingly seen as an organization, church and people that care and are aware of our relationship and impact on Earth in today’s society (not ‘green-washing’, but actually taking active steps), is another positive step towards increasing community support for the Salvation Army.

- Evangelistically; I see an increased awareness of environmental issues within The Salvation Army as a positive and wonderful point of resonance with many in today’s society. To share a common concern with those who are not-yet-Christians for Earth, and bring the message of love and hope that Jesus has for all of Earth has great potential for growth for the Kingdom of God.

- Mentally; my own research to date has seen people express contentment and feeling closer to God when spending time in the garden and spending time in nature, reflecting Frederick Booth-Tucker’s views to unite “the landless man with the manless land”. 31

• Health-wise; raising awareness of positive lifestyle choices in areas of food choice and consumption can only be of benefit to Salvationists, The Salvation Army, its clients and the Earth.

• Spiritually; an increasingly holistic view of God’s web of life and our place within it brings an increased sense of wonder and praise, giving of glory to God through worship and holy living, reflecting early Salvation Army leadership, particularly Catherine Booth. Our understanding of holiness must include care for God’s Earth through our everyday actions.

Utilizing Langmead’s adapted action plan to incorporate environmental care into the Church’s mission, The Salvation Army should:

1. Recognise the biblically announced mandate to care for creation and develop policies, structures and aims that characterize a culture of earth-care.

2. Model personal lifestyles of simplicity and earth-keeping, living as Christ would among us today.

3. Provide environmentally-sound development programmes among the poor with ecological awareness, procedures and actions.

4. Train ministers, missionaries and church members in the principles and practice of Christian ecology, as well as encouraging them to reproduce the message.32

In concluding this brief essay, a letter printed in The Young Soldier in 1973, presents a helpful confluence of many of the points raised in this essay and calls Salvationists to further their theology, attitudes and praxis to further reflect the life of

32 Langmead, Integrating ecological mission into mainstream mission.
Jesus through increasingly holy/holistic Kingdom-focused mission and bring healing to all of God’s cherished creation:

The world I would like to see would have no pollution, no violence, no racism, no riots, no wars. Didn’t Jesus say ‘Love one another as I have loved you’? If we had followed what Jesus said we wouldn’t be in the state of near-disaster we are in now ... The kind of world I would like to see is the kind of world God intended it to be.  

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