The Salvation Army
and the mission of
between recycling
Recycling Week in mind, Salvationist you recycle more effectively Recycling Near You website: in your local area, go to the MATT SEAMAN ecotheologian With national connection recycling has been part of recycling has been part of Salvation Army mission and ministry since the early days of the movement. While recycling is most immediately apparent in the ministry of The Salvation Army through Salvos family or thrift stores, it is not just material goods that find new life; our ministries have also rejuvenated and reconditioned many hearts, souls and minds for the glory of God. This “making old things new” is not unique to the ministry of The Salvation Army. As we read in Ecclesiastes 1:9, “what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun”. Recycling is a fundamental part of the conditions God wills us to live by, whereby trees, plants, living creatures and humanity all return to the earth. As we read in Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return”. So why does such an old idea seem so new? For much of human history recycling has been more through necessity rather than being more environmentally friendly or “green”. For many in developing nations, necessity is still a primary reason for recycling. In Australia, during the earlier 20th century, economic depression and wars provided significant reasons to “reduce, reuse, and recycle”. It has only been in the past 60 years that consumerism and the economic prosperity of the Western world has removed the need for such frugality and created the potential for great waste in terms of food, materials and energy. Sadly, our lack of responsible stewardship with the resources provided to us has seen major increases in the levels of waste from consumer goods, associated pollution, and adverse impacts on God’s earth. It is in this context that the concept of recycling has taken on a new importance.

Booth’s Vision
In 1890, The Salvation Army’s founder, General William Booth published In Darkest England and the Way Out. This was an extensive scheme that aimed to bring salvation and hope to the “submerged 10th”: the homeless, unemployed and other marginalized groups within society. General Booth saw the need for employment, affordable goods, and was concerned about disease, the amount of waste and its impact on the land. As part of this scheme, Booth sought to introduce “Household Salvage Brigades”. These recycling brigades were to go from house to house to collect unwanted books, rags, paper, tin, shoes – any items that had the potential to be reused. The Salvation Army Canada Thrift Stores website puts it well: “More than 100 years ago, General Booth recognised and responded to social and environmental challenges that we continue to face today, further illuminating not only Booth’s insight and social conscience but his compassion. Booth’s legacy lives on through the work of The Salvation Army and the recycling retail brilliance of the Salvation Army Thrift Stores”.

The widespread and well-regarded recycling centres otherwise known as thrift, Family, or Salvos Stores in Australia can trace their history back even further than General Booth’s “In Darkest England” scheme. During the 1880s the Prison Gate Brigade in Melbourne began a salvaging program to provide work for those who had been released from prison and to provide funds to keep the program financially viable.

The focus of Salvation Army recycling programs was, and still primarily is, to provide jobs for the unemployed, cheap goods, and funds with which to financially support the work of the Army. However, the environmental benefits of the significant amount of recycling that takes place in Salvation Army thrift stores worldwide is considerable and inspiring. Hence, thrift stores are increasingly seen as way to recycle and care for the wider household of God.

Biblical Principles
Richard Daake and Derek Jarmola, co-authors of the paper Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources, state that Jewish tradition has enlarged the principle of Deuteronomy 20:19-20 – “do not waste or destroy” – into guiding principles that include: Using only as much of a resource as you need; and don’t needlessly destroy any resource. Daake and Jarmola also consider that the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 in John 6:12 fits in with these principles and gives us insights, such as: God is not wasteful; God expects us to be prudent and frugal in our use of resources; wasteful, wanton use of resources is contrary to a biblical way of life; all resources are precious, not to be thrown away without thought for tomorrow or for the needs of others; and we are to handle excess resources wisely and carefully even if they are waste.

With National Recycling Week, biblical principles, and Salvation Army mission in mind, consider how you might more effectively reduce, reuse and recycle the resources that God has blessed you with in order to reduce your impact on God’s loved creation.