Discerning patterns, making connections

Captain Jason Davies-Kildea has received his doctorate following the acceptance of his doctoral thesis, entitled The Salvation Army and the Social Gospel: Reconciling evangelical intent and social concern.

The paper includes a survey of the attitudes of Salvation Army officers and examines differing views on what ‘the Army’ is, what purpose it serves, and for whom it exists. The captain sees the value in The Salvation Army grappling with identity and mission, as a means of acknowledging the past, understanding and safeguarding the present, and shaping the future. The Army’s historic pursuit of holistic theology guards against the offering conditional compassion.

One challenge addressed is the rationale behind the movement's social programs and their relationship to the spiritual work of The Salvation Army. On the one hand this can be seen as a theological question.

However, it is a question that has immediate implications for practice. It appears that not only is there a close and dynamically evolving relationship between what we believe and what we do, but also that they are mutually influencing forces.

Captain Davies-Kildea notes the challenges Salvation Army officers face to ‘successfully transition from corps work into social programs,’ a process that requires ‘both the willingness and capability to embrace a different culture, including changing language and challenging theological constructs’.

He adds that, when this is achieved, officers can ‘retain, perhaps even rediscover, the faith tradition of the Army in ways that put them in touch with a world beyond the sectarian bubble that they had previously known’.

‘In The Salvation Army, where corps and social programs have developed along different pathways, incompatibilities have emerged because they are facing different problems and have different tools for finding solutions.

‘The theology of corps officers has largely ceased to be shaped by the concrete experience of engagement with the poor and the marginalised of their communities. In social programs, while chaplains are adapting both their practice and theology to their social context, their voices do not yet appear to be influencing the wider denomination.

‘Australian social trends clearly point to a decline in institutional religion, especially among younger generations. The future of The Salvation Army, as it is with other denominations, will be determined by its ability to discern emerging spiritual patterns in the community and make meaningful connections to organisational history, identity and mission.’

Click here for the thesis