

How To Be A Soldier... When You Don't Have A Local Corps

The Problem

Briefly: sometimes Salvation Army soldiers experience a change of circumstance that places them in a community which has no corps.

Scripture tells us (in many places, including Matthew 22:34-40) that we have two primary requirements in life: to love and serve God, and to love and serve the people He created. This is reflected quite well in the Army's Mission Statement in the phrase "to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name". We, as soldiers, have decided that we can and should do our loving and serving in the Army. It provides a structure and organization that helps us be more faithful and effective in fulfilling the requirements of love. We can spend less time and effort on figuring out "how do I?" and more on accomplishing our mission.

We each, when we became a soldier of The Salvation Army, made certain commitments when we signed a document called "Soldier's Covenant" (or an earlier version known as "Articles of War"). Among them is this commitment to spreading the gospel and working to meet the needs of others: "I will be faithful to the purposes for which God raised up The Salvation Army, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, endeavouring to win others to Him, and in His name caring for the needy and the disadvantaged." So far we're doing fine, I can do those things with or without a nearby Corps.

The next paragraph however, clearly speaks of being engaged in work at the corps: "I will be actively involved, as I am able, in the life, work, worship and witness of the corps, giving as large a proportion of my income as possible to support its ministries and the worldwide work of the Army." Does the phrase "*as I am able*" relieve us from any obligation if the nearest Corps is impracticably far away?

Perhaps not, let's continue: "I will be true to the principles and practices of The Salvation Army, loyal to its leaders, and I will show the spirit of Salvationism whether in times of popularity or persecution." The three paragraphs, taken together, clearly demand a continuing commitment, particularly considering the commitment to "*support [the corps'] ministries and the worldwide work of the Army.*" How then do we resolve this tension?

A secondary problem is that one of the "human needs" that the Army meets is a need for social connection: the corps, like other Christian churches, functions as a social club for its members. This fellowship is not the primary purpose of the corps, but it is a major component of its success. In addition, the Army develops a spirit of camaraderie that connects us with fellow soldiers throughout the world. We lose our connections to this rich network of fellowship. Much of this social need can be met by joining in fellowship with another local Christian congregation, but camp meetings without Army songs and uniforms will be strange.

Possible Solutions

If The Salvation Army has a non-corps unit -- such as a Service Extension unit or a hospital, residence, or other social service program -- in your local community, it might be possible to actively support the ministry being conducted by that unit. There may not be a need for a Songster Leader there, but most Army programs have opportunities for volunteers, so talk with the leaders to see how you could best serve there. This is certainly consistent with our commitment to support the ministry and worldwide work of the Army.

What service do we typically perform in the corps that we might continue on our own? Certainly a variety of Community Care Ministries might still be open to us. I used to teach a Bible study at a nursing home as part of my CCM activities; that might still happen whether there is a local corps or not. **However**, if we perform these services *as representatives of The Salvation Army* without the direction of a local Corps Officer or other authorized official we may expose the Army to risks they cannot control. Certainly such arrangements must be authorized and supervised by the appropriate headquarters, and arrangements must be made for properly reporting statistics and accounting for any finances related to such activities. We can continue to serve on behalf of and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we must give all the glory to Him and take all the blame for failures upon ourselves -- and leave The Salvation Army out of it unless we have a formalized (in writing) appointment from headquarters.

To maintain our "Army spirit" we might try virtual membership: select a corps, perhaps in the city where your DHQ is, to affiliate with. If they offer online live streaming or recorded video of their Sunday meetings that is a bonus, you can join in their worship experience (although without the face-to-face fellowship opportunities). Of course there are many Army websites available offering Army music, Army discussions, and Army teaching to us at any time. It may also be possible to occasionally make a visit in person to activities at your selected corps, much like ancient Jews traveled three times each year to Jerusalem to worship. Might it also be possible by such means to arrange for participation in Divisional and Territorial events?

If we have the good fortune of knowing other Salvationists in our local community they will also, obviously, be facing the same problems discussed above. It may be possible to organize monthly get-togethers to sing Army songs (bring your own songbook), catch up on Army news, pray for and otherwise support one another, and perhaps even enjoy a proper Army cup of tea. Just remember that it's not an official Army meeting so we'll have to leave the Army's name out of our group's name.

Conclusion(s)

Losing a corps affiliation does not mean that we can no longer be faithful, effective soldiers. Resigning from our membership in the Army in order to join another Christian fellowship, one which provides the structure and context for our commitment to love and serve, would not be a shameful thing -- nor is it an inevitable outcome.

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