

A Little Truth and Reconciliation

How The Salvation Army is Working with Former Children in Care

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From the 1920s through to 1980 The Salvation Army operated homes around Australia. Boys and girls in care could be as young as 6 and as old as 16. Many came from families unable to care for them—single fathers who had to work, homes where the mother had become mentally ill. Some were placed by the courts.

It is now clear that some homes in some years were awful places. There were managers, particularly in the boy's homes, who ran hard, ultra-strict regimes. A boy could receive 12 cuts of the cane, and bed wetters could be made to stand with the wet sheets over their heads.

A few managers or assistants physically or verbally abused young boys. And there were some sexual abusers. Research into Catholic priest in the US suggests 1-2 % have been paedophiles. We can confirm a similar ratio. But possibly it was higher.

How many children lived through seriously difficult experiences? We can make an estimate for sexual abuse based on research into abusers in the general community. One study of 67 child molesters (which excluded people who molested family members) found that they admitted to more than 8,000 sexual contacts with 959 children, an average of 14 victims each. In this group of offenders, the number of victims per offender ranged from 1-200. (Parkinson 2003). So we can work with 14 as an average. If there were only 10 child molesters in our homes around Australia then they would have had 140 victims.

The impact

What impact did the homes have? In the worst cases the impact on some has been terrible. It includes:

- Difficulty forming good relationships
- Depression
- Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome
- Anger problems
- Substance abuse
- Sexual difficulties
- Employment problems

The Survivors Come Forward

Up until the 1990s most survivors endured their struggles in silence. Quite a few would tell Salvation Army personnel how angry they were, generally in informal contacts. For its part, the Army did little to respond corporately.

Around 12 years ago I heard a talk by Canon Jim Holbeck who leads the Healing Ministry at Sydney's St Andrews Cathedral. He remarked, 'I think God tried to get the churches to do the right thing by victims of abuse, but when he could not, he turned to the courts to do it.' In the end the legal process began to wake up former providers. At the same time the helping professions were empowering survivors. So men and women began to approach the Army with complaints. Some got themselves lawyers. The same thing was happening with other churches and charities.

Now straight away here was a huge risk area—for litigation, legal fees, compensation, and for loss of public trust. In Canada the Anglican Church ran schools, and the law states it is not a necessary ground for liability that the Church knew of offending behaviour. In 2002 that Church reached an agreement with the government to meet costs up to a total of Can\$25 million. So the financial risk is huge. In Australia The Salvation Army is easily the best-supported charity, so serious loss of reputation could be very damaging.

The Army responds

Aware of these risks, the Army began formulating a response plan. Like other churches and charities, we initially took a *safety first* approach. We opted for *mediation and investigation*.

One of our people would meet with the survivor, listen and empathise. They would offer to pay for counselling. This was the mediation.

Meanwhile we would investigate the claims. Our lawyers would get involved. Their duty is to protect their client, so their approach would often be, admit nothing, dispute claims. They might get adversarial. Our policy was we would meet the cost of counselling, but we would not pay compensation unless a claim was proven, preferably in a court of law.

This was an attempt to simultaneously manage the risk, and also be kind to people we badly wanted to help. In the end we often did neither.

I think of a man I spoke with recently, who first approached us some years ago. At that time he was listened to by our representative, and that person wrote him some wonderfully kind letters. But the letters stopped short of acknowledging wrong or making an apology (*admit nothing*). This man is still angry. The empathy is not enough.

He told me, 'I never wanted to take legal action against the Army; I just wanted to get the man who abused me. But when the Army put obstacles in my way (*dispute claims*) I had to in the end.' Eventually he received a substantial compensation payment, but as I said, he remains unhealed and angry. In terms of bad publicity he is still a risk to the Army.

This is not the only instance where the safety first approach has failed. Over the past three years Army children's homes have been criticised on Four Corners, in newspapers, on ABC Radio, and at the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care (Penglass 2005). Many of the people who spoke out had already approached the Army and been unsatisfied with the response. Some had already received payments.

The question therefore emerges: Is there a way that both bring justice and healing, and simultaneously manages the risk?

A Reconciliation Approach

I think we are finding there is. I speak here only of the area I am responsible for—NSW, Qld and ACT.

We have gained a framework from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When apartheid finished, the new government had to decide what to do about the many political crimes that had been committed, and the terrible legacy they had left. One way to tackle this would have been to pursue retributive justice. But they decided that would have been very slow and expensive. Plus, as Desmond Tutu says, they wanted 'to move the country beyond the cycles of retribution and violence that had plagued other countries during their transitions from oppression to democracy' (Tutu 2004).

So they opted for a different kind of justice which Tutu calls restorative justice. Tutu explained: 'We contend there is another kind of justice—restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is seeking to restore a broken relationship, to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence' (Tutu 2000).

In March 1994 the South African Parliament passed the bill setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. December 1995, President Nelson Mandela launched it with Archbishop Desmond Tutu as chair. It worked until July 1998 and was, I have heard, compulsive viewing on SA TV.

I might add that one man told us his experiences had had a big impact on his children. He suggested we write to them. So we did, and apologised, and this helped them. So have done this with others too.

What about the perpetrator? Of course if the person wants to engage the police we will cooperate. Quite often if the retired officer is alive we will send the complaint to them. I say to the person who has approached us, 'I will send it to him. Most likely he will deny everything, but at least he will have heard what you have to say. I promise you he will hear it.' And they do deny, but it seems to help the survivor.

Then we make some offers. Generally we offer to pay for counselling. And then we will offer an ex-gratia payment. I will say, 'It is not technically compensation; it is however a tangible expression of our regret.'

Now this is an area of risk. It is costing us significant money. But we must do it. We have no moral choice. What's more I believe we are avoiding larger costs if things go to litigation.

In a way the offer is part of the truth and reconciliation engagement. It tells the truth that we believe them. It says our regret is sincere.

Outcome

So what have been the outcomes from this approach? Consistently, almost universally, we are getting feedback that the engagement has healed wounds and brought resolution. One psychiatrist wrote to thank us, saying his patient's symptoms abated. An advocacy centre also wrote to say how much the approach is helping their clients.

Some people have gone into counselling. Their meeting with us may have been the start of a long process of healing.

I am pleased to say we have been able to engage some people who have had longstanding disputes with the Army. Some of them now are good friends, and are sending others they know to us. We get the impression people are reconciling with this church which was their foster parent once and which let them down.

There is one other fascinating outcome. It has been said that sexual abuse is 'murder of the soul'. Living in a harsh, over-strict or cruel home damaged the soul also. One man told me, 'The Salvation Army beat God out of me.' I have been surprised that in as many as nine out of ten cases, the person will bring up God at the end of our conversation. I never raise the subject, but so often they do. I have gained the impression that our encounter has cleared away a little of the garbage and pain which has stood between this person and an enjoyment of God.

Conclusion

This way of working is not reliant on 'objective' evidence or 'proof'. It holds just as important the human dimension, the person's own experience and story. It calls for judgment, compassion, and the ability to engage with people.

A truth and reconciliation approach based on human values, interpersonal encounters, and truth telling is bringing excellent outcomes for former children in care, and for risk management for The Salvation Army.

References

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