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## **RAINBOW WELLINGTON AND THE SALVATION ARMY REACH A RAPPROCHEMENT: A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD**

“A very significant step forward and an important building block for the future”, is how Tony Simpson, Chair of the Wellington based gay, lesbian and related groups human rights organisation Rainbow Wellington, and Campbell Roberts, head of The Salvation Army’s Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, described jointly issued statements of the two groups made public today.

For the past year, both groups have been considering future perspectives on their relationship.

“This initially arose” says Simpson, “because our board was discussing the role of The Salvation Army in the context of the 25th anniversary of the 1986 decriminalisation of homosexual acts and someone asked the obvious but rarely raised question: what was the Army’s view of this issue at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and more particularly how had that view developed over the succeeding two decades and a half. A great deal has changed in our society over the same period, including the enactment of the Human Rights and Civil Union Acts. So we made contact with the Army and asked them for their views – not, I must say, without considerable discussion and some misgivings. We were therefore greatly encouraged to receive a highly positive response which initiated further discussions.”

As a result, both bodies have been able to arrive at statements which they can endorse.

“It is important,” they agree, “to build on what we share, rather than fixating on past disagreements. The pursuit of social justice for all New Zealanders has long been central to the concerns of The Salvation Army, and both they and Rainbow Wellington endorse the proposition that tolerant and free communities are much more likely to be the product of a just society. We are pleased, therefore to be able to make a positive contribution to that outcome by endorsing each other’s statements issued today.”

These statements are appended to this release.

## **RAINBOW WELLINGTON STATEMENT**

During the events and campaigns leading to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1986 strong feelings were felt and expressed by many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender/ intersex (glbti) community members about the public opposition to that, ultimately successful, change to the law. Although this opposition to the change covered a range of groups and individuals, much of the anger and frustration felt by those seeking change at the time centred on the Salvation Army and the public position the Army took in opposition to the proposed legislation. These reactions were entirely understandable in their context, and are still keenly felt by some of those who were participants in obtaining equal treatment under the law for our community members.

Over the succeeding two and a half decades this feeling has created conflict in the minds of many who, while abhorring the actions of the Army at that time, are nevertheless conscious both of the excellent social work done by the Army in such fields as poverty and homelessness, and in publishing regular analyses of the underlying causes of these problems in our society, and that the attitudes of the Army towards the campaigns of 1986 have changed in important ways.

In addition to this many of those in the glbti community have come to adulthood in a world in which their human and civil rights are much more widely respected than was the situation in 1986, and to whom the events of that time are history rather than personal experience. That is not to say that they should be forgotten; on the contrary it is important that we should all be aware of or recall a time when we were a persecuted minority. Nor is this a matter of forgiveness. Some of our members and friends, we are sure, will continue, as is their right, to feel strongly about the events of those years. But we have further battles before us before we are acknowledged as equals in our society with full equality of rights, and in those battles we need friends and allies as we have needed them in the past. The time has come, therefore, to look forward rather than backwards, and to move on.

We face many challenges and look to the future in meeting them from this point. In doing so we welcome the support we can enjoy from the Army, and they from us, in building and ensuring that future for New Zealand as a freer, more tolerant, and decent place to live for all its citizens.

## **SALVATION ARMY STATEMENT**

The Salvation Army remembers with sorrow the time leading up to the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill as a time when judgemental and prejudiced words were spoken on both sides of the debate.

Although The Salvation Army did not initiate the petition opposing law change in 1986, a few senior Salvation Army leaders did offer the Army's assistance in coordinating the petition. In doing so they identified the total movement of The Salvation Army in New Zealand with this action.

While some Salvationists were clearly opposed to the law change, others were uncomfortable, to varying degrees, with the Army's stated position and took no part in its public campaign. A small group initiated a counter-petition to the one officially sanctioned by the organisation. Regardless of where they placed themselves on the issues involved, many Salvationists were deeply opposed to, and embarrassed by, the intemperate manner in which views were expressed during the debate.

Since the events of law reform in 1986 The Salvation Army has reflected deeply on its actions and the hurtful way some members publicly expressed their view on this legislative change. We now understand that The Salvation Army's official opposition to the Reform Bill was deeply hurtful to many, and are distressed that ill-feeling still troubles our relationship with some members of the glbti community.

Then as now The Salvation Army encompasses a diverse community with a wide range of opinions on this and other subjects. The leadership of The Salvation Army continue to reflect on Christian and biblical tradition, and especially on the themes of justice and mercy, in an effort to further deepen the understandings of our own members and build a more healthy relationship with the glbti community.

We regret and apologise for any hurt that may remain from that turbulent time, and our present hope is to rebuild bridges of understanding and dialogue between our movement and the glbti community. We may not agree in the future on all issues, but we can respect and care for one another despite this.