

# The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 26 Revised:



## What I've learned about coaching

### *Some recent coaching impressions*

If you travel around New Zealand, you'll see evidence everywhere that the national church is slowly dying, but some Salvation Army corps and other churches are growing against the national trend - and a few churches are becoming very large.

Why do these churches/corps do so well when most struggle and even die?

Here are six interconnected pieces of the jigsaw I've picked up through extensive coaching over the last few years.

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### 1. Leadership is the key that opens all the doors

**Leaders of growing churches and corps have a feel for the big picture things** that lead congregations to grow.

They know where they're going and how to get there. They know how to find a compelling vision, shape it so it commands attention, and share it so they get people on board. And they know, as Bill Hybels says, that a vision is a picture of the future that produces passion in us – and that passion is the fuel the leaders and people run on.

Struggling and dying congregations, by contrast, are under led.

Their leaders may be godly people; but till a coach comes alongside them, they struggle to find vision, shape it, and pass it on to people so they run with the new dream. As Proverbs 29.18 says, 'where there is no vision the people perish'; ie, people in the church die on the inside and people outside the church die without anyone reaching them.

**Leaders of growing churches also have good relational skills.** They've worked at learning how to connect with people, hear where they're coming from, and motivate them to get on board.

And **leaders of growing congregations gather wisdom over time** and develop a feel for correct decision making.

*So, how do we get these leaders?*

A few are born with a flair for leadership; most become good leaders 'through effort and hard work' as a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century US sports coach put it – and coaching gives the quickest return on that effort and hard work as I see day after day. Indeed, I've found the sky's the limit when it comes to coaching because coaching takes pastors and leaders who aren't making an impact and turns them into leaders who grow corps/churches.

Coaching leaders to be effective is the fastest way to turn congregations around!

## 2. We'll struggle to grow a corps/church until we find a compelling vision

I see this principle illustrated day after day as I move from congregation to congregation.

As I mentioned, some leaders and churches know exactly where they're heading and how to get there – and they tend to follow Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church* model or the model captured in the graphic included in Leadership Letter 22. So they grow.

Other leaders and churches have great ideas but the ideas are disconnected and rarely come to anything because the way ahead doesn't have sharp definition or graphic shape.

John Maxwell put it this way:

*Mission provides purpose – answering the question, why? Vision provides a picture – answering the question, what? Strategy provides a plan – answering the question, how? The leader's effective communication of the vision makes the picture clear. The leader's effective modeling of the vision makes the picture come alive.*

And then he makes this further comment about vision: 89% of what we learn is visual, 10% is audio and just 1% is learned through the other senses.

Generally speaking, the clearer the vision the faster the congregation will grow because the people put their energy into the few high-growth activities that make a difference – and large churches in particular give very high visibility to their dream.

A compelling vision that grips and inspires people is an absolute requirement to grow a church over the long haul.

## 3. We can't grow a corps/church without mastering Sunday mornings

That was one of the first discoveries I made when I went on the road 22 years ago and the last few years have confirmed this. We struggle with Sunday mornings in several ways.

We **choose songs**, often performance songs, that are difficult to sing – the music team loves them, but ordinary people can't handle them and find them a bore. Over time, some get so frustrated they leave and try another church.

We also still '**do church**' for the present church family, when 1 Cor 14.23-24 and the 7 *Practices* book say we should do it both for the present family and those who haven't joined yet. And **our preaching** is often weak and doesn't connect well with Christians and pre-Christians at the same service – one Sunday service being all most congregations can manage.

We worked on these and other challenges Sunday after Sunday at the church (in point 5) that got the attendance lift and new members, looking at everything from the moment people arrived in the car park to when they returned to the car park to go home.

I now work with other congregations in the same way because we can't grow a general church without mastering Sunday mornings as these other churches also show.

#### 4. We can't reach the crowds until we think 'steps, not programmes'

Another discovery I made is that the number of people we work with during the week may not have any bearing on the number of people who come to Jesus and go on to membership/soldiership.

So we may have several hundred people in our Mainly Music network without any of those people coming to Jesus over a 12 month period – nor anyone coming to faith from other activities.

What's the solution? It's to pick up on the third big chapter in the *7 Practices* book – 'Think Steps, Not Programmes' (Practice #2), where we're encouraged to make every step easy, obvious and strategic (p.94).

That's what the 10-15 percent church (in point 5) does, as well as raising the bar on Sundays. Their strong weekday family ministries have an increasing flow-on to Sundays and on into membership. That's also why The Salvation Army encourages "conversations of connectedness" so corps/centres develop easy steps between weekday social programmes and Sunday worship - exactly as the *7 Practices* book tells us to on p.94.

Another church I coach has done something very 'smart'. They had a fortnightly Community Meal on Wednesdays for Single Parent families and Friday night programmes for children and youth. They shifted the Single Parent Family Dinners to 6.00pm every Friday before Kidz Army meets at 6.30pm and Youth Hangout at 8.30pm. So now the whole Single Parent Family meets together over tea, the pastor mixes with the families and the children stay on for the evening programmes. It's a stroke of genius and is just starting to impact on Sundays and people's faith journeys.

This congregation is playing it by the book knowing that to reach the crowds they must put the right steps in place.

#### 5. A 5-10% lift in focus and excellence will change many congregations

Twenty years ago when I was wrestling with these things, a pastor told me that the difference between a growing church and a plateaued or dying church of the same kind may be as little as five percent. He knew because he took a dying church in one of our cities and grew it to become a very significant church.

The coaching book I've used extensively over the past year, the *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* (by Stanley, Joiner and Jones), makes that point very strongly – particularly in the two 'master chapters' on Clarifying the Win and Narrowing the Focus. When a pastor I coach thought through Clarifying the Win, it changed his ministry.

The 5-10 percent principle gave us the breakthrough we were after in another congregation I coach.

They'd been struggling for years to break through a tough attendance barrier, so one day I said to the pastors that I believed they'd get through it if they lifted the standard of the Sunday morning services by 5 percent. They did. In fact they went much further. They lifted the services by 10-15 percent and applied the same principles to their weekday ministries.

Twelve months later the church was through the barrier and had gained a crop of new members.

Provided a church is not seriously dysfunctional, a 5-10 percent lift in focus will change the church.

## **6. Attendance and life change statistics are key indicators**

Many leaders struggle with numbers.

Some see everything in terms of numbers, some dismiss them as irrelevant, and some even seem to exaggerate them. Most struggle to keep them in balance and tie them in to the big picture of where their congregation is heading.

**Sunday morning attendances** are the first indicator of what's happening in a congregation: sustained rising attendances indicate growing interest in what the congregation is doing, persistent declining attendances point to something negative in the congregation that needs addressing – and I've never seen an exception to this rule.

**Responses** are another indicator of what's happening in a corps/church. When churches falter conversions and enrolments for membership/soldiership go down, when churches move into sustained growth conversions and enrolments go up. Attendance at disciple-making small groups is another indicator of where a congregation is heading. When small groups fade the congregation loses momentum, when small group numbers grow the impact on the congregation is enormous. Conversions, enrolments, and small group attendances are life change indicators.

Wise leaders never play off attendance numbers against life change indicators. Rather, they hold both in balance, and in the words of Jim Collins' magnificent phrase, they embrace the "Genius of the AND".

Constant evaluation, and celebration of victories, is thus the focus of the final Practice (# 7) of the *7 Practices* book because if we don't know what's going on in our congregation we'll find it difficult to grow it over the long haul.

Attendance and life change statistics are key indicators of where our corps/church is heading.

**Additional Note:** This brief survey of the road ahead hasn't developed a related mission dynamic that The Salvation Army and other churches believe is important, which Robert Schuller puts this way: 'find a need and fill it; find a heart and heal it; find a problem and solve it.' But we'll explore that in the Letter on *Steps, not Programmes* because that's where this principle belongs.

## **In conclusion**

These are the **pieces of the jigsaw** I've picked up over the last few years, each piece part of the larger whole, and each to be explored in future Letters.

Growing a congregation isn't easy now, but year after year I see that when we get the basics right, the rest follows.

*To grow a congregation, we must grow our leaders, sharpen our focus, win on Sundays, think steps and not programmes, inspire our people with a compelling vision, and evaluate our performance and strategies.*

When we focus on these things, our congregations grow!

### **To discuss at leaders meetings**

Looking back on this Leadership Letter, what are the areas in your congregation/centre that may need more unpacking and strategising as future Letters come out (note the areas now for fuller discussion later)?