

## OUR TIME

# Persons with Disabilities

## Series: Taking a stand Exploring the Army's International Positional Statements

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Members of the International Moral and Social Issues Council (IMASIC) reflect on The Salvation Army's International Positional Statements.

### STATEMENT OF POSITION

All people are made in the image of God and are of equal intrinsic value. Thus, The Salvation Army celebrates difference and seeks to treat all people with dignity and respect.

Many people around the world experience discrimination due to disabilities. The reality ranges from stigma or negative attitudes to deeply engrained and systemic exclusion. The Salvation Army's response is to go beyond minimum national legal requirements and to make it possible for persons with disabilities to be fully included and to flourish.

We know less of who God is and how God appears in the world when people with disabilities are excluded. Inclusion is beneficial for everyone. Diversity within our communities and congregations strengthens us and shapes our mission and ministry. The aim of all Salvationist practice is to ensure that we are a church that makes the embodied gospel accessible for all.

Download the complete *International Positional Statement on Persons with Disabilities* at [salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips](https://salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips)

## **GROUNDS FOR POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY**

All human beings are created in God's own image, uniquely reflecting God's nature and character (Genesis 1:27-31). God's creation is signified by diversity and that diversity is good (Genesis 1:31; Psalm 8). God loves and values every person, giving each one equal dignity and worth, and commanding us to love and value each other.

The Bible tells the story of a God who values those who are outcast, powerless and weak in the eyes of society. While reflecting the context of its day, Scripture recognises the real experience of exclusion that can result from disability (Luke 17:11-19). The Bible acknowledges pain and hardship as a part of the human condition (e.g. in the Book of Job). Paul states that when we are weak, God makes us strong (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus showed compassion for people with disabilities (Mark 1:41, Matthew 9:20-25) and urged his followers to do likewise (Luke 14:12-14). He corrected the assumption that disability was caused by the sin of a person or their parents (John 9:1-3), and he challenged social stigma by touching and eating with the socially marginalised (Matthew 9:27-30; Luke 19:1-10). God's creative intention is that we are fulfilled in community, living in relationship with God and each other. Paul described the community of the Church as a body, stating that 'those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable' (1 Corinthians 12:22). The perceived weaker members help to shape our knowledge of God, and without them we are less. In order to know God more fully, everyone needs to be fully included. The gift of being is profound. It is only together with all the saints that we can comprehend the love of God (Ephesians 3:18).

In its international mission statement, The Salvation Army declares it will meet human needs in the name of Jesus 'without discrimination'.<sup>1</sup> *The Handbook of Doctrine* describes the ideal of The Salvation Army's third doctrine as 'God-in-community who reaches out to create community. It is the very basis of the inclusive gospel. From its beginning, The Salvation Army has consistently proclaimed this gospel, calling people of all nations to respond to the love of God. We seek to include and welcome into the family of God those who feel themselves to be excluded from society.'<sup>2</sup> It is the aim of all Salvationist practice

to create communities 'which reflect the inclusiveness, genuine acceptance and mutual love of the triune God.'<sup>3</sup> It follows that we are not a complete church if people with disabilities are not among us.

## **PRACTICAL RESPONSES**

The Salvation Army recognises the contribution of those actively engaged in addressing issues of ignorance, neglect or discrimination against people living with a disability. One of the primary desires of people living with observable or invisible disabilities is to be treated as ordinary human beings, created in God's image and called to dwell in mutually supportive communities. In most instances, to respond to this desire will require a collective shift in attitudes of both heart and mind. Such attitudes and responses can be promoted, modelled and taught, to a certain extent. The goal of any response should be to eliminate a dividing line between 'us' and 'them'. Drawing on its theological understanding of God's view of people with disabilities, The Salvation Army notes the following:

1. The Salvation Army recognises the breadth of international advocacy regarding the human rights of people with disabilities, and seeks to better contribute to that advocacy, particularly in regard to the elimination of poverty and discrimination towards people with disabilities.
2. The Salvation Army embraces, promotes and models an understanding of persons with disabilities as people created in the image of God, with a unique and invaluable contribution to make in all aspects of life in community.
3. The Salvation Army fosters reciprocal ministry rather than the temporarily able-bodied ministering to people with disabilities. We are stronger together when we integrate every person into every fibre of our worship and mission.
4. The Salvation Army seeks the engagement, consultation and active involvement of people with disability when developing and framing general Salvation Army policies, human resource policies, as well as those specific to disability.
5. The Salvation Army acknowledges that the following aspects and considerations in relation to disabilities are a necessary part of its ongoing commitment to enabling all of God's children to flourish within the Body of Christ:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/Mission>

<sup>2</sup> *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* (2010), p75

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p76

- Raising awareness
- Engaging in specific training
- Employing universal building design
- Embracing recognised 'best practice' communication preferences and initiatives.

6. The Salvation Army community is encouraged to have a greater understanding of the interdependence and mutuality inherent in supporting each other through the journey of life. We seek to respect the autonomy and self-determination of all people.



**COMMISSIONER  
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Experts generally agree that there are more than 516 million persons living with disabilities in the world today. The word 'disability' can include persons with both personal impairments and societal restrictions. People can become disabled due to, but not limited to, accidents, poverty, injuries related to war and violence, pollution, cultural practices, birth defects, ageing and degenerative diseases.

Joni Eareckson Tada, quadriplegic since 1967, states that 'the need is overwhelming and universal. Disabilities do not discriminate, and they touch the lives of everyone. The needs cross all borders, nationalities, ethnic groups and languages.'

According to the Gospels, all people are presented as 'people in need'. Yet throughout the New Testament, Jesus intentionally prioritised the needs of the most vulnerable, giving them their deserved place of Kingdom honour in society. Intentionally living out this priority in the Church today is an example of one of the ministries that most clearly points to Christ's heart of compassion.

Jesus never missed an opportunity to share his Father's heart of compassion. All celebrations

were to include everyone in the community because the inclusiveness of the gospel needs the contributions of the whole Body. If the able-bodied do not see what those who live with disabilities can give, then the whole Body suffers. We are not a complete Church if all are not represented.

In Acts 2:41-47, it was abundantly clear that everyone was represented in Jerusalem when the birth of the Christian Church was recorded: 'That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. Everyone around was in awe - all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved' (*The Message*).

This passage shouts inclusion and joy: two indicators of God-centred Kingdom living! Here we find many welcoming words; life together, the common meal, common prayers, everyone, all, harmony, everything in common, corporate worship and celebration! Everyone was invited to the table, and everyone's gifts were received and appreciated. Needs were met, and the people were exuberant and joyful! There were no divisions, no separations, no comparisons and no judgement within the priesthood of believers.

These words from our *International Positional Statement on Persons with Disabilities* affirm The Salvation Army's commitment to growing congregations by welcoming and valuing the contributions of our brothers and sisters living with disabilities: 'The aim of all Salvationist practice is to ensure that we are a church that makes the embodied gospel accessible for all.'

And so, as today's priesthood of believers, we move forward in love, committed to sharing the gospel of Christ inclusively, celebrating God's Kingdom on earth, as it is in Heaven!





### **CAPTAIN MACKAN ANDERSSON**

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### **PERSONAL REFLECTION**

During my first year at the officers' training college I was accidentally poisoned by medicine and lost my eyesight. In my panic at having become blind, what frankly surprised me was how nobody at The Salvation Army expected this to be a problem! There was no talk about me having to quit training, or any real discussion on how this would change my ability to serve.

That whole experience cushioned the blow of becoming disabled in midlife. I could concentrate on how to be a blind husband, a blind father, and even a blind martial arts coach. But I didn't have to think about how to be a blind officer! I was blind, yes. But God had called me to officership and God equips those he calls.

I had been fooled to think it was the other way around - that God called especially gifted people to his service. But the truth was that God had a plan for my life, regardless of my physical condition. He had decided to 'guide me along the right paths for his name's sake' and to let his 'staff\* ... comfort me.' My training instantly became an exercise in trust, to 'fear no evil, for you are with me.'

A lot of things have been very hard as an officer, as I am sure you can imagine. But I don't focus on those things. Instead, I want to write about what God has done in my life and how I've been blessed.

Firstly, I don't have to be confronted all the time with those health and beauty images made to make me feel out of shape and ugly.

Secondly, I have been freed from the stigma of status. You might be surprised what you can learn about a person when you actually listen to them, not being hindered by status symbols or pre-conceived ideas based on what they wear or how they carry themselves.

When I read the IPS on full inclusion of people living with disabilities I was moved to tears. I cried because I felt validated on a new level. I also cried because I was so proud to be in a part of the Church that thinks, acts and believes that the Body of Christ is incomplete without everyone's contributions.

I might have lost my eyesight, but God gave me vision.

*\*I think of the Psalm 23 'staff' as being used like my cane: something to feel what is before my feet, so I do not fall.*

### **RESOURCES**

Brock, Brian, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2019.

Shurley, Anna Katherine, *Pastoral Care and Intellectual Disability: A Person-Centered Approach*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas, 2017.

Solevåg, Anna Rebecca, *Negotiating the Disabled Body: Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts*, SBL Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 2018.

Yong, Amos, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011.



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**PERSONAL REFLECTION**

Our daughter, Isabelle June, is 26 years old. She has Down's syndrome and verbal apraxia. Our whole family goes to church every week because we feel welcome and included. This makes us different from almost half of families with special needs children.\*

This is Isabelle at the corps - she welcomes people, giving hugs to whoever wants them, and makes sure everyone knows what is happening in her life. She sits in the front row for the holiness meeting and often sleeps, snoring during the sermon. The corps officer has become used to it.

But she's awake for the music. She enthusiastically sings the four notes she knows, even if they aren't in the song, raising or clapping her hands. Often, she dances. One week, after the holiness meeting, someone said, 'Don't ever stop her from dancing. It blesses me every time. I wish I could be that free.'

She often asks loudly, 'What's for lunch?' in the middle of the Scripture reading. When I mention her in a story from the pulpit, she exclaims, 'Mom, you're embarrassing me!' - even though I'd asked her permission. When people come down from the band, she gives them high fives.

She often goes to the mercy seat. Sometimes she takes an imaginary friend. Sometimes she asks an adult she likes to pray with her. If she doesn't go herself, she tells me when someone has so I can go to pray with them.

She's invited to participate meaningfully, and she does, because she loves Jesus and her 'church people'. In Sunday school, she reads the Scripture aloud (with a little help). She performs worship dance solos. And she sends out birthday cards to everyone at the corps.

Do I still feel awkward when she is 'finished' and walks out in the middle of the meeting? Yes. Do I still struggle when she talks loudly and will not

be redirected? Yes. Does the congregation still embrace her, me and our whole family? Yes.

Will we keep going? Yes.

Inclusion must be intentional, missional. If we do not intentionally include, we will unintentionally exclude. Inclusion is letting everyone participate meaningfully because we understand we are better together.

Here's a start. Talk with me. Sit with me. Ask what I need and how you can help. Greet my child. Be glad to see us. Notice when we're gone and check in on us. Then we'll keep coming.

**Questions for reflection:**

- What are your reactions to and attitudes towards people with disabilities in worship?
- How can you intentionally include people with disabilities and their families in your congregation?
- How can you prepare to welcome people with disabilities?

\* [dsq-sds.org/article/view/813/988](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/813/988)



**JOHN McALISTER**

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**PERSONAL REFLECTION**

When my son, K, was a toddler, he exhibited several characteristics that raised concerns, such as a speech delay, hand flapping and a tendency to line up his toys in rows and patterns. Shortly after he turned four, K was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

An estimated one in 66 children in Canada is diagnosed with autism, encompassing a specific set of behavioural and developmental challenges that affect their communication, social and play skills. The use of the word 'spectrum' is important, as every person is unique and displays their own combination of characteristics.

My initial response to my son's diagnosis was to try to fix the situation. I researched what I could do to make him better, such as applied behavioural analysis (ABA), which is the most widely used therapy for autism. It is viewed by many psychologists as the best method to improve social interaction, teach new skills, and minimise negative behaviours in autistic children. However, as I took my son to his ABA sessions, I started to feel uncomfortable about the process, particularly with how he was rewarded whenever he mastered tasks and goals that focused on having him behave in a more 'normal' fashion, rather than on helping him to explore his emotions or to grow and develop as a person.

Every time that my son apologises for flapping his hands or for talking to himself, I want to cry because I know that someone, somewhere, has told him that what he's doing, and who he is, is somehow wrong. Autism is not something to be cured or eliminated, but rather a neurological difference that needs to be better understood and appreciated, with all the beautiful strengths - and sometimes painful weaknesses - that come with it.

I now realise that when my son was first diagnosed, I was the one that needed to be fixed and made better, not him. I was too quick to mourn the expectations I had for him, instead of seeing the gift in front of me that God had placed in my life to protect, nurture and learn from. While not sugar-coating the significant challenges that autistic people and their families face every day, I am striving to celebrate a philosophy of embracing neurodiversity, in which I acknowledge the value, significance and contributions of every person and the varying ways in which they view and process the world around them.

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