



Business Ethics

For me as an ethicist one of the most inspiring stories of Salvation Army history is the story of the Lamprell Street match factory.

In 19th century England fires had to be lit for the basics of daily living.. Electric lights, stoves and furnaces were yet to be invented. So matches were a significant commodity. Unfortunately the most common matches were made using yellow phosphorus. “Unfortunately” because the phosphorus poisoned numbers of workers in the match-making industry. They would get the chemical on their hands, and then into their mouths if, for example, they ate without washing first. There it would cause “phossy jaw”—necrosis of the tissues—sometimes resulting in loss of teeth and disfigurement of the jaw. Even death. For their efforts the workers were paid a pittance. Having little education, few employment skills and no legal protection by way of workplace health and safety regulations, they couldn’t do much about their situation.

But William Booth could. A factory building on Lamprell Street in East London was purchased and renovated, and in May 1891 opened as a Salvation Army match factory. Manufacture was totally free of the toxic phosphorus. And the employees were paid up to 60% more than the industry standard.

“Darkest England matches,” as they were known, came to the attention of some prominent Britons. Canon Wilberforce recommended them to his congregation in a

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sermon he preached in Westminster Abbey. Even the Prime Minister of the day, W.E. Gladstone, became a customer.

By the end of 1901 the factory had been taken over by the British Match Company, and what happened from then on I don't know. But in the ten years the Army operated the factory, it showed itself to be a model employer.

That's what ignites my imagination. The Salvation Army was not trying to corner the match-making market; it was demonstrating that business could be done more ethically. Employees could be treated with greater respect, they could be paid more decently, and customers could get value for money. It took many years (and the efforts of more than just William Booth), but eventually all match-making in England followed the Army's direction.

I believe I became aware of this story in 1985, at the International Youth Congress in Macomb, Illinois. Colonel George Church had had the Darkest England matchboxes reproduced for distribution. The slogans on the boxes caught my eye— "Our work is for God and humanity" and "Fair wages for fair work." I had long been proud of the Salvation Army's commitment to charity, but here I was faced with the Army's commitment to justice in the workplace. In this respect the Lamprell Street match factory was different from our soup kitchens (important as they are). The soup kitchens resonate with Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." The match factory resonates with Luke 10:7 "the worker deserves his wages" and with the prophet Amos, who shamed the wealthy for their exploitation of the common laborer (e.g. Amos 5:11)

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At the turn of the millenium what are the counterparts to the Lamprell Street factory, I wonder? Because there are still unethical employment practices this is a fundamental question for Christian ethics. I've started asking my students and family what they think. Maybe *New Frontier* readers will help.

We know the answer is not another Salvation Army match factory. Matches are no longer so important. But is there something similarly important to *our* way of life that is being produced at the expense of those who produce it? Workers in the US are better protected by safety codes and minimum wage laws than the young girls of East End London were. But today we participate in a "global market," and fair wages at home doesn't necessarily mean fair wages everywhere. Can an international Salvation Army be the example of a better way?

Michael Rion of Cummins Engine Company writes about ethics in the workplace. Ensuring business ethics, according to him, requires codes of ethics, ethics education for employees, and in-house support in interpreting the ethics code. But all that will fall flat he says without exemplary ethical leadership from the top. What he doesn't mention is the power of exemplary ethical leadership from the *competition*. In its way and in its day the Army's match factory purposely provided that kind of challenge. And maybe, by the way it does "business" today, the Army could intentionally provide a similar challenge and example.

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