



Sweden Ethics Conference

As I write this, I have just returned from a teaching engagement in Sweden. The Sweden and Latvia Territory had invited me to speak at their Ethics Conference.

The Conference was the first event of its kind in the Army in Sweden, and one of the few anywhere in the Army world. Altogether about 150 people registered—five from Latvia, one from Norway, and the rest from Sweden. A third were officers, the remainder lay salvationists. To see the energy each participant brought to the weekend was a tremendous confirmation of the work and the faith of the Territory's Ethics Committee that had organized the event.

They named the conference "Life, Death, and Everything In Between" to indicate the range of issues up for discussion. The actual agenda couldn't contain them all, of course, but there were seminars on quite a number of topics. One focused on the concept of "man-view" (the literal translation of a Swedish word), in which the nature and value of being human was examined. Genetics and biotechnology, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, marriage and divorce, family values, use of alcohol and other drugs, ethical guidance for youth, and intercultural relations were all discussed.

In many cases their issues are our issues, but sometimes they come with a twist. For example, we are used to racial and cultural diversity (which is not to say that we always handle it ethically). This is a new phenomenon in Sweden,

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however. For hundreds of years they have had a very homogeneous population. One race, one language, one culture, even one church.

Much of this is changing rapidly. As of the beginning of this year, there is a separation of church and state—no longer is the Swedish Church the state church. Strife in other parts of the world has meant an influx of refugees. Political ties within the European Community mean that workers can now move as freely from Italy to Sweden as Americans can move from Maine to California. As a consequence there are new languages, new religions, new lifestyles making their presence felt in the streets of Sweden. Some Swedes welcome it; some resent it. Everybody is having to adjust. They must engage their ethics to ask what counts as unjust discrimination and what counts as legitimate preservation of tradition.

Over the years the Sweden and Latvia Territory's Ethics Committee had written Position Statements on a number of topics, including one on intercultural issues. But it was the Committee's realization that the Position Statements had to get off the paper and into the hearts and minds and conversations of ordinary salvationists that led them to propose this conference. What good is it having an official statement if people don't know about it, or know about it but don't believe it?

Obviously the Committee had tapped into something the grassroots also thought was important. Some of the Conference participants will either cultivate an area of expertise or make use of the expertise they already have in order to help the Ethics Committee write new Discussion Papers or Position Statements. And a

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number of new Corps-level ethics study groups will spring up as a result of the Conference. This kind of buy-in is very good news indeed!

But I think the unanimous passion of those attending was that The Salvation Army speak up more clearly, more frequently and more forcibly in the public debates about the issues. “What good is it for the Army to exist,” one person asked, “if it doesn’t *stand* for anything?” Contrasting the present situation with notable events earlier in Army history, they wondered how come we have become so silent. Was it a fear of losing favor and support? Was it that we had caved in to political correctness? Was it that we had no ideas to share?

Although I was listening in on a debate in a language I didn’t understand, the sentiment was one I understand only too well. In many parts of the Army world the passion is that we have a voice in the public debate of public policies.

If that is agreed, what needs attention is discernment as to which issues are to be addressed and in what ways. And by whom. I was very pleased to see that the Swedish answer was not “The Territorial Commander.” Commissioner Rolf Roos, their TC, was present, and it was evident that he endorsed the Conference call for action. But the call is not only for The Salvation Army, but also for ordinary salvationists to take up the challenge of getting themselves informed, taking individual responsibility to write letters, arranging meetings with opinion-makers, and so on.

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Being engaged in public debate in order to see that the voice of ethics and conscience is heard in that debate is risky business. But what I heard these Swedish salvationists say is that not to speak up is no longer an option.

As they take new steps, I am reminded of words of Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *The Irony of American History*: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."

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15 March 2000

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