

Crossroads – A Reflection

By Captain Sandra Pawar

In 2017 I went on a one-day trip to Calais in France. I went to what they call the jungle which was an open space in Calais that had become home to thousands of refugees. The majority of these refugees were young men, usually unaccompanied minors, who were trying to find a way to get into the UK. They would often make attempts by climbing on trains or jumping in trucks. It was incredibly dangerous and often resulted in death. What impacted me the most from my day in Calais was seeing all these young men, roaming the muddy and dirty campsite just biding their time. We talked to one young man after the other, and they were genuinely nice people just looking for a safe place to live. They missed their families, and their homeland and all had been on a terrifying journey to get to where they now were. They were nice, but they were also frustrated and angry. Angry that people did not seem to care about their plight and that no-one seemed to be fighting in their corner. They were desperate to escape and to belong somewhere.

I left Calais that day with these people in my heart and my mind. Not too many months later the French Government bulldozed the campsite. People were left to fend for themselves. Unaccompanied minors were allowed to stay in a Government site next door but there was no-one in charge and it was a very chaotic and messy situation. So, for months on end, these unaccompanied minors were now staying in a fenced-in site, all by themselves. There were no adults to protect or look after them. It was very much a Lord of the Flies scenario.

I share this story because I felt that we let these young people down. We showed them that they were not significant, they were not valued, and they were not wanted. I came away determined to do everything I could to ensure people knew they were seen and they were of value. I believe strongly that in order for people to thrive they need to know they are valued and that their lives have meaning and purpose.

How we in The Salvation Army deal with those who feel forgotten, rejected and abandoned in our communities will have a massive impact on what happens to them in the future. There are so many organisations, groups and religions vying for attention and allegiance.

I think that we as The Salvation Army, have the amazing opportunity to enter into the lives of people in our community and support those who feel rejected, alone, abandoned and unheard and to help them know their value, to help them use their voice, to help them find a community who cares and ultimately point them to Jesus.

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Listed below are three specific ways we can do this;

1. meet people at the crossroads,
2. invest in people
3. give people a role to play

If we as a church want to make a difference in the lives of the hurt, lonely and rejected of our society, then we need to be there in those crossroad moments. You see we needed to be there in Calais when the young men were trying to find a safe haven, when they were abandoned and left alone. We need to be there when new immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers come to our doors looking for help because they don't know the culture or the language. We need to be there when young people are roaming the street with no direction or purpose, when they are struggling to find their place and their value in the world. We need to be there when the seniors in our corps are feeling isolated, alone and like no-one cares. We need to be there when those addicted are looking for someone to just sit with them in their pain. We need to be there. We need to be there and we need to meet them at their crossroads because if we don't, someone else will and that may not be who or what they need.

We need to not only meet them at the Crossroads but to also journey with them and invest in them. It means we don't just show up in the initial crisis, but that we journey with them throughout their journey, we help them find housing and schooling, English classes and grocery stores that sell the spices they need. We help them enter a rehab program and we spend time listening to people's stories. We introduce to them to people in the community who can mentor them and support them. Building actual relationships with people is so meaningful and investing in them speaks volumes. It shows people that we truly care and that we think they are worth the effort. Journeying with people is rarely easy, but it is always worth it.

Lastly, I think people are looking for something to do, to be part of, for a role to play. They want to be able to be a part of something important, to fight for a cause. We need to create safe spaces where people can make powerful impacts in their communities. We need to give them something powerful to believe and invest in. We need to give opportunities for them to be leaders in their communities and the opportunity to help others. We as The Salvation Army are perfectly poised for this kind of thing. We need to embrace who we as a church have been called to be and use our resources and our unique identity to bring out the best in people.

Who do you need to meet at the Crossroads today? Who in your community needs to hear that their life has value today? I missed my opportunity in Calais and I pray that I don't miss an opportunity again.

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