

## 238: The state of the corps—and the future of ministry—with Jim Sparks

Today, we're diving into some fascinating and hopeful trends that could reshape how we think about ministry and mission.

You might have heard that church attendance is declining, that young people are leaving faith behind, and that organized religion is losing its relevance. But what if I told you that's only part of the story? Recent research from Barna Group reveals that belief in Jesus has actually surged over the past four years, with nearly 30 million more American adults saying they've made a personal commitment to Jesus.



So what does this mean for The Salvation Army? How do we navigate a landscape where spiritual hunger is growing but traditional church engagement remains uncertain? And what opportunities does this present for our corps and community centers across the west?

Jim Sparks is The Salvation Army Western Territorial Mission Strategist. He's been tracking attendance patterns, enrollment trends, and ministry effectiveness across the West, and recently presented eye-opening research comparing the State of the Corps with broader church trends. His findings reveal both challenges and remarkable opportunities—from Junior Soldier enrollments jumping 69% in just two years to successful post-COVID recovery stories that offer blueprints for thriving ministry.

Today, we'll explore the intersection of rising spiritual openness and evolving ministry landscapes, discuss what's working in corps that are connecting with their communities, and uncover practical strategies for meeting people where they are spiritually.

Whether you're an officer, employee, volunteer or supporter of The Salvation Army, this conversation will equip you with insights about the broader spiritual climate and hope for what's possible while staying true to our mission.

### Show highlights include:

- Why corps attendance trends in the West match national church patterns—and where we're seeing encouraging growth.

- The bright spots: thriving youth ministries and post-COVID rebounds in certain communities.
- Why relationships—not just programs—are key to lasting ministry impact.
- How volunteerism could be the gateway for reaching spiritually open but institutionally hesitant people.
- The urgent need to re-engage young adults as a leadership pipeline for the future.
- Catherine Booth’s timeless call to “rise above” challenges and see the bigger picture.

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**Christin Thieme:** Let’s start with the big headline here.

**Jim Sparks:** Okay.

**Christin Thieme:** Barna recently released research showing a 12% increase in Americans committed to Jesus since 2021. So that’s nearly 30 million more adults who say they are committed to Jesus in the last say four years. What’s going on out there?

**Jim Sparks:** Well, I mean, that’s a pretty big number. It’s really nice to say. Of those people, are they in a relationship with Christ? Are they having discipleship or is all that? Those are some of the questions that I have with a number like that. Our corps though are growing right now actually, we are seeing good growth in our corp and we have 60 corps that are higher than their pre-pandemic numbers, so that’s good. And there is growth. I think during the pandemic there was a lot of time to think and evaluate some stuff. I mean, there was a time even early on where there was fear. And fear often leads you to think about your life and larger things in life. So I think that aided some of that on.

And then we’ve seen some movements in the church, some positive movements in the church that has led to some of that. But I think a lot of it comes from self-evaluation through COVID, we had nothing but time on our hands to sit there and think about life. So I think that’s good. But for the corps, I think there’s a lot of really good things happening. And I’m not a pessimist necessarily-

**Christin Thieme:** Necessarily.

**Jim Sparks:** Well, I am in certain areas, but I think I’ve been a critic of a lot of things. But as I’ve gone through the numbers and gone through different other factors on attendance and generational makeup and all that stuff, we’re doing really well. And there is definite growth, like our meter is moving up, and I tracked our attendance for the last 25 years to see kind of the trends and patterns and ours match up with everything else. And we’re definitely trending upward. And that’s a good sign.

**Christin Thieme:** So if you’re looking at the state of the Church versus the state of the corps, you’re saying things overall are encouraging?

**Jim Sparks:** Oh yeah. Yeah, actually, I think so. Yeah. I mean, I could say this, there's not corps that are absolutely tanking right now.

**Christin Thieme:** That's good.

**Jim Sparks:** You could look at numbers and be like oh geez. And there's patterns of that over the last 25 years where you see some corps taking real big hits for whatever reason, but I'm not seeing that right now. And so the ones that took real big hits during COVID have kind of leveled off and/or increasing, but there's not a lot of corps that as far as attendance is concerned, has been decreasing over the last couple of years, which is a positive thing.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, that's great. One thing that's interesting about this big number is that it's tracking commitments to Jesus, people saying they are committed to Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily translate into attending a church and whatever. And so some of that data is not quite as strong that we're seeing. We have a rising belief in Jesus across the country, but there are still signs that people are remaining hesitant about organized religion as a whole. So how would you say The Salvation Army is poised to navigate that tension?

**Jim Sparks:** Well, I think that's something that not just The Salvation Army, but every church is having to constantly work at, because there's skepticism with organized religion. The church as a whole has taken some larger hits with some immoral failures from leaders, and that contributes a lot to that distrust. Some heroes of the faith turned out that they made some very poor decisions, and that sets anyone back. It doesn't matter who you are that's going to set, "Is this all for real? Is this person the same as this person?" We've seen immoral failures, even just in the curriculum that we use and having to navigate what does that look like for us and how does that affect us? And so now things are so much more public and it doesn't take much for one person to speak up, which will then bring other people to speak up. And so I think that contributes a great deal to this kind of distrust to organize relation to church as a whole.

**Jim Sparks:** And some people have not had good experiences in church. They go and they get judged maybe, or someone says something inappropriate to them or not very welcoming, and that's it. That's enough for them. And that could have been their taste. So some of these people, it could have been, that happened to their family 15 years ago and their family hasn't gone to church, they go back to church and it's like, "Oh it's..." , they feel like it's still the same. And so that's a challenge and that's a challenge that every church faces and The Salvation Army kind of face that too. We've had our own chairs of blunders and leadership in different corps, and so having to work through that.

But the Army's strength though is its service and it's opportunity for others. And that in the millennial generation and the Gen Z generation is a very big deal. And there's a shift in church trends where they're really trying to do more social service type stuff and more service anything, which we've already been doing for a really long time. And so I do think we're positioned well for a lot of people to kind of come in because at least they like that part, that service part and The Salvation Army is actually positioned very well for that, where our infrastructure is there for that particular part of the church.

**Christin Thieme:** So I know you have really been digging into this data lately and did a whole presentation not that long ago about the state of the corps, especially across the Western United States. So let's dig into some of these numbers. You mentioned corps attendance, people going to services on a Sunday, and obviously that dropped off significantly during COVID, but walk us through what we're seeing now five years later.

**Jim Sparks:** Yeah, like I said, we have 60 corps that are above their 2019 numbers. It's not that they rebound, they've more than rebounded. And so they were up. We are down 20% since COVID. So from-

**Christin Thieme:** Overall?

**Jim Sparks:** Overall, yeah. Barna's research shows that churches in America are down 20%. We are right in line with everybody else. So while we might look at something because close to it as a, "Oh, it's a sinking ship." We're in the same state of the church as everyone else. And that's what's been fascinating doing all this research is having that Barna study come out while I was doing that research, it was interesting because I was pairing up some of our numbers versus the state of the church that Barna presented and our numbers are lining up exactly. It's weird. It's amazing how many times our numbers lined up exactly with the norm. And even our chart over the last 25 years, I did an overlay of our attendance chart, it matches the pattern of the church in the United States.

So that part was, I thought, very interesting. But what was really positive is that we are above our 2019 numbers in teen ministry. That's pretty big, and that's a hard group to get, and we're doing better than we were prior to the COVID, and then we're in the 90th percentile for babies and children's ministry. And so we've done pretty well as far as rebounding back, particularly with youth. We've done very, very well in that.

**Christin Thieme:** That was one area that jumped out was the junior soldier enrollments. Can you first of all explain for somebody who might not know what a junior soldier is and then why that is a bright spot?

**Jim Sparks:** So a junior soldier is a soldier of The Salvation Army that their age range is between seven and 18. I mean, very rare do you hear 18-year-old junior soldiers.

**Christin Thieme:** I didn't even realize it went up that high.

**Jim Sparks:** I know what's funny is I worked at the Territorial Youth Department for probably five years before I learned that information. I was like, "What?" It's mostly seven to 14 year olds. That's generally what it is because when they're 14, you become a senior soldier. And our numbers are up. I don't know why, but I could speculate that during COVID, when everything shut down, our organization shifted just like everybody else. And I was in the youth department at the time, and people did extraordinary things during COVID that built relationships, particularly with kids. I think it might've been easier with kids. With kids, you could put a whole zip-lock bag full of things to put together crafts and different things.

**Christin Thieme:** Fun.

**Jim Sparks:** Fun, yes. And I think that's what everyone was trying to do, and corps did a very good job at that. And I think because they built those relationships, kept those relationships kept in touch by doing those activities. And perhaps that's stereotypical, but younger people were very easy to get online because they were used to doing it with schools, so they were getting online and having meetups. I think keeping that relationship, this is what the fruit of that was, is these increases in numbers. I don't have actual data to say that that's what it is because we haven't interviewed those kids, but I have to believe that investment is, this is the return on that.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, makes sense. And there's certain areas that seem to be even outliers in this big rebound. The Phoenix Rocks, that is one. I know we've talked to them, but where these just huge numbers of a difference. So what are these people doing differently, do you think?

**Jim Sparks:** It's relationships. Honestly, when I looked at the top 10 performing corps as far as rebound from COVID, without going into super deep detail of all the people involved, the most obvious thing to me is they're very relational, very nice people. When you run into them, you're like, "Oh, that's a really nice person. And they're very relational." And I can't say that that's the only reason why some of these are experiencing larger growth. But you and I would want to walk into a church and feel welcomed. You and I would want to walk into a church and feel like you're part of something and actively engage in a relationship. And that's what anybody wants. And I think that's what these people are good at, is the corps that are growing are growing because they're building these relationships. And those relationships are building other relationships by bringing people in.

**Christin Thieme:** So kids ministry, strong. Teens, strong. What about young adults?

**Jim Sparks:** Not so strong in that. And this is an area that I'm going to really dig deeper on. I don't have a ton of research other than we are only 33% of young adults compared to 2019, and that's a big drop-off. And then we actually saw a percentage drop from 2021 to 2022, and that's the only area that we saw a drop in anything. So we are dropping even more so after the initial shock of 2020 and 2021. I don't know why. And it's an alarming because prior to COVID, just prior to COVID, 2019, we did a national survey, youth survey. And we found actually through all of that, the biggest drop off at the time was middle school because people for years had long said, "Oh, young adults are leaving the church by droves." And maybe they are, and actually maybe in this case that is true, but we were like, "We're not finding that to be true." Because that wasn't true during that time and we couldn't figure that out. And what we found is there's a steep drop-off in middle school.

And we couldn't figure out why, because all of the youth programs that this Salvation Army Army provides middle school is it that's like the centerpiece. And so a part of it is we think that kids in middle school, that's when they start to get more freedom. And if their family isn't going and they've been picked up in different places, they're like, "I'm just not going to go anymore." And so some of it could be that, some of it that maybe the families just not into it. I don't know. It is really hard. But there was a steep drop-off. But now what we've seen is we have a big drop-off in young adults. That's a cause for concern because that is a leadership pipeline for a lot of things that we do that is broken and the

pool's very small on that. So this is stuff that we've been discussing quite a bit in this last year and we're going to be discussing it more and trying to figure out a way to not just bring young adults back, but start to bring new young adults in.

We have camps that does a really good job, and we've just had a whole season of summer camp that brought in a bunch of young adults. The DUYS's has been very intentional this summer of connecting them to The Salvation Army. One of the trends that I really loved, and it's still happening is so at the end of the summer, there's an event called Anthem, or it used to be called WYI. And a lot of camps would bring their camp staff and invite their staff. It used to be just Salvation Army kids could go, and we just kind of quietly were like, "You can just bring whoever." And they were bringing camp staffs, and it was introducing them to a larger part of The Salvation Army than beyond the camps. And I think that helped retain a lot of people. And so DUYSs are doing that now as we speak and being more intentional with the newer young adults being introduced to The Salvation Army.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, that's a good bridge. Okay, back to the Barna data. Barna found that almost 30% of people who don't identify as Christian still say they've made a personal commitment to Jesus, which is an interesting kind of mix there. So how can you solve this problem for the church for us? How can corps, the church as a whole reach these spiritually open, you could say, but maybe church or institutionally hesitant people.

**Jim Sparks:** I mean, I don't have the smoking gun answer on because this is what every church is looking for. And I found an interesting survey that was for Gen Z kids. I call them kids, but they're adults, they're actually adults. And this was a survey for this group that they weren't atheists, but they weren't Christians. And so it was asking about what would draw them to church. And overwhelmingly, the top two answers, overwhelmingly were helping others and helping the poor overwhelmingly.

**Christin Thieme:** So The Salvation Army.

**Jim Sparks:** I mean, when I was reading this, this has nothing to do with organized religion. This was part of a whole other survey or anything like that. And I was like, "We are in the wheelhouse of the Gen Z preferences." And I think a lot of it, what we need to do is introduce those, "This is what we do." This is what we do. We do help the poor and we do help others. It's not just the poor. We help others. And so introducing to them and doing target marketing to this age group to say, "This is what we do." I think the gateway to a lot of our churches is going to be through volunteerism because we do have so many opportunities. I mean, I always marvel how wide The Salvation Army is, even just in the Western Territory. I've been working for The Salvation Army for 24 years or something like that. I still don't know all the programs that we do.

**Christin Thieme:** I know that's true.

**Jim Sparks:** They just kind of pop up and you're like, "Wow, that's amazing." The entrepreneurial spirit of The Salvation Army is still very much alive. And through that creates a lot of opportunity for volunteerism. And I do think that that is a gateway that we could probably be better at in getting people in to see what we're all about. And there's a lot of anecdotal stories out there of people that

were introduced to The Salvation Army through some sort of volunteering thing. Might've been Christmas distribution, it could have been helping with a disaster. It could have been back-to-school kids. And they're like, "Wait, what are you about?" And then when they know, they're like, "I want to know more." And then they step inside the doors.

And if our congregations are very relational focused, very transparent and welcoming, and then that's going to be a good place to be, they're going to, "Wow, this is amazing." And then you'll hear that, "Well, I didn't know you guys were around. I didn't know you did any of this stuff." And so I think more trying to get people, particularly this Gen Z group and Millennials, because did start with the Millennials actually wanting to do something good, be part of something larger than themselves, is through volunteerism and getting them involved in our programs out there, and then introducing them to the church aspect of The Salvation Army.

**Christin Thieme:** Along those lines, You've, I know called for moving from more of a program driven to a relationship driven ministry. What does that shift look like practically?

**Jim Sparks:** Yeah, so practically, program driven ministry really happened because we need to measure something. It's like I can measure through programs because you have 10 programs going and we have to get these programs going. And then relational, that's really hard to measure. And so I do think you need to be both. I don't think you need to shift completely away from programs. You need programs, you need something substantial for them to be at. But really focusing on the relationships with the people in your congregation and diving deep. I've been part of the same congregation since I was 18, and I realized over the last, it started probably just before COVID, a sense of guilt that I didn't, I knew a lot of people in my congregation, but I didn't know them. I would have a surface-level relationship with them.

And some people, I didn't know their names. And so I was like, "Look... ". I had been preaching about relational ministry with young people forever, and I still will preach that forever. And my approach to young people has never changed. I still work with young people even though it's not part of my job, but I realized with adults, I don't do that. I don't have that same approach. And so I made a shift and intentional shift at my corps to be more intentional and getting to know people and asking better questions, asking not probing questions. It's like, "So what do you do for a living? And tell me what that's about. Does that make you happy?" And creating more social capital with people in the congregation. And actually what that's been doing for me is it's been able to connect other people in the congregation that I don't think had been connected, because I'm like, "Oh, you do woodworking? Do you know that he does woodworking?"

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah.

**Jim Sparks:** And they're like, "No." I was like, "Oh, I got to introduce you guys." And then now they're talking about woodworking every week. And so having a little bit more of that, wanting to connect people, wanting to really understand who they are, because when there is times of trials and toughness, you will already have that in, you'll already have that social capital. You'll already have that trust to be able to walk through some of those difficult things. That's what I want for myself. I don't

want strangers rolling up on me. And so I think moving towards thinking through that a little bit more of relationship, how do we create a program that is relationship based, that is constantly feeding relationships? So in your program, whatever it might be, if it's a home league or if it's a youth program, are you doing small groups? Are you actually getting to know the people?

I talk about this at camp all the time. You could go a whole week and not know any of your kids because you haven't actually talked to them. You haven't actually gotten to know them and what they like and what they don't like. So how do we do that and how do you intentionally put that in? And programs are nothing without relationships. So I just think we need to be focusing a little bit more on how do we get a little bit deeper into relationships with people without being crazy, obviously there's got to be some boundaries for sure. But I always think of this one church I went to when I was like 19 and this guy rolls up and he was wearing overalls. And so that caught my eye because not everyone wears overalls-

**Christin Thieme:** You wanted them, don't lie.

**Jim Sparks:** ... and he had two straps, so they were on, so it wasn't like it was for trends. And he goes, "Oh, hello, you're Josh's friend." I'm like, "Yeah." This guy, Josh had been invited me. I'm like, "Yeah." And he goes, "Oh, well... ". I go, "Can I just ask you five questions?" I was like, "Okay." I was like, "Okay." To me, it was a little bit weird. They were really cool questions, really thought through, and clearly, this guy does this all the time. And then I would answer, and then he goes, "Well, I have another question." So he would dig just a little bit deeper, but it wasn't like it wasn't crazy. I felt welcomed by it and he was caring because he was taking in that information.

And then when I ended up going to a midweek bible study and he walked right up to me and he was reciting some of the things that I said, and I go, "Man, that guy cares." And he was like that with everyone, and that's what you want when you walk in. You want to feel like you're part of a family. And that's what this guy did, and it didn't take much. He just asked five questions.

**Christin Thieme:** One, the things journalism school taught me is the fastest way to put somebody at ease is just ask them about themselves. It seems so simple.

**Jim Sparks:** Oh, everyone wants to talk about themselves for sure.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, exactly. We feel like we don't want to be intrusive, but it actually helps to make people feel more comfortable. So with this relational focus in mind, how or does technology come into play? Because it seems or can seem like that would lose some of that relational aspect. So how do we embrace technology without losing that side?

**Jim Sparks:** Yeah, I mean, I think you use technology to deepen your relationships. Some people aren't going to speak to you personally, but they'll speak to you through text. They'll speak to you through a chat channel of some sort. They're much more comfortable that way. And so it's about meeting people where they're at. And with young people, Discord is their central hub for a lot of things. So just going on a Discord and being part of that, and you could set up groups inside that. In

one of the Barna state of the church things, it talked about how a lot of people aren't going to church as often. They're not going all four weeks out of the month, and a lot of them are just going two times. Well, that's because there's other things that have kind of come in. It could be youth sports, it could be a lot of things. And there's just a lot more competing factors for your attention on Sunday morning.

Also, with the online streaming, people are attending online and they could listen to whoever speaker they want. So there is benefits for them to have that there. But we could either be like, "No, you got to get in the church", which that's going to be very difficult to do because they're building this lifestyle. Or we could use technology to meet them where they're at right there. I have a small group, accountability group that we have our own message group, and it's five days a week probably there's conversation in that, and it's just far more convenient. We don't live anywhere near each other, anywhere near each other. So being able to leverage that and just checking in more, it takes from us being Sunday focus to every day has an opportunity for ministry.

Simply sending a message to someone saying, "Hey, I'm praying for you. I've been praying for your family." And being able to interact like that, that's building social capital throughout the week. Now with everyone so familiar with streaming videos and that kind of stuff, you could do small groups. You don't have to... Doing small groups, I was thinking as a young family, I've been trying to figure out how to start a small group at my corps with young dads. But then I'm like, "I remember it's like I'm exhausted. I don't want to drive anywhere."

**Christin Thieme:** It's the hardest part of the night too, right?

**Jim Sparks:** It's the hardest part of the night. So I was talking to these guys, I go, "Well, would you just meet with me on Zoom after all of that?" And they're like, "Oh, yeah." Because then you're taking away driving time, you're taking away some of that, and everyone's so familiar and comfortable being on Zoom, so we could leverage tech and building our relationships in that way.

**Christin Thieme:** So if we are reaching some of these people who might not show up every Sunday, how do we then "measure success"?

**Jim Sparks:** That I don't know. And I know that Barna and other groups, they're measuring more. They're shifting. So Gloo Network is partnered with Barna and they're trying to figure out ways to measure the health of the congregation. And it's funny because this pendulum swings quite a bit. I remember when I first started working, that was like everything in the church is measuring the health. And then it went to numbers and it kind of goes back and forth. It's going away from numbers more towards the health of the congregation.

There's various groups that do it, and we're looking into how we could do that ourselves and what is the most effective way of doing it. We have our own set of challenges that don't always line up with some of these more traditional churches. And so we're looking at ways to do that of measuring the health. And when I mean that health, it's not obviously the physical health, but the spiritual health. Where are they at spiritually. And we have new believers that are on fire, and we have old believers that are on fire. We have new believers that are like, "Yeah, I might be leaving here soon." And we

have old believers that haven't done a lot of deeper level relationship with Jesus in a long time. And so we want to try to figure out, and that's what we're going to be working on the next year or two of how do we measure this health and how do we grow disciples who could grow other disciples.

**Christin Thieme:** Along those lines. Let's say I'm listening and you've piqued my interest. I want to be involved in this. I want to tap into this whatever is happening out there and help deepen the relationships with people at my corps, my church. What are a couple concrete things that you would say start doing this month?

**Jim Sparks:** Saying hi to people is a start. I know it sounds weird, but genuinely saying hello to people is, it's interesting, now that you have it in your head when you go to church, see how many people will proactively say hello and then ask you something after instead of, "How are you doing?" And then we're like, "Good, how are you doing?"

**Christin Thieme:** And just keep walking.

**Jim Sparks:** And you just keep walking, right? But engage in more than that. That's a really big deal.

**Christin Thieme:** What's your favorite follow up question?

**Jim Sparks:** Well, it depends on the age group. For kids, I go, "What made you laugh this week?"

**Christin Thieme:** Okay.

**Jim Sparks:** What made you laugh this week is a great question for kids because they immediately have to think, and generally it's a joyful story. Unless it's teenage boys, then it usually involves-

**Christin Thieme:** Then don't ask.

**Jim Sparks:** ... traditional things. For adults, sometimes it's along the same lines. A lot of times I ask them what they do and then ask them questions about what they do. And so just going back to the woodworking, I had just talked about it. So I met this guy about two months ago at our corps, and I'd seen him around a little bit, and I go, "Hey, how's it going? I'm Jim." And then I said, "So what do you do for a living?" And he goes, "Oh, I'm a woodworker. I'm a carpentry finish." I go, Ooh, cool. Now what does that specifically mean?" And so I asked him, what does that specifically mean? That's a follow-up question I always ask because then they will, because that's their expertise, and then they'll share that. Which generally generates other questions.

And I'll often be admiring what they do. In this case, I'm a hobbyist woodworker, so I was like, "Oh, I kind of know what you're talking about, but I wish I could get to that." And he goes, "Oh, well, I could teach you." And that's building... When he said, "Oh, I could teach you." Well, that's now an invitation that we could discuss and get further in. And calling people by their names too is very important to me. And we did a survey at our corps, and there was two comments in the survey where people said, "I don't think people know my name." And that kind of bothered me because I try to memorize everyone's names. And so now I am out in the hunt going, "Hey... "-

**Christin Thieme:** Was it you?

**Jim Sparks:** Because I want them to feel seen and heard, but simply calling people by names. And then what I do with people... So that's kind of when I first get to know people is I'll ask them about what they do, and I don't even ask them where they work. I go, "What do you do? What do you enjoy doing in life?" Most often it's work that they'll say, because they misunderstand a question. But yeah, calling them by name. And then that guy did to me, the overalls guy is I will keep some of that social capital in my brain and then I could follow up with that.

And so the one guy who goes, "Oh man, oh, I wanted to quit smoking." This was an interesting one. He said, "I really wanted to quit smoking." In a conversation several months ago. And so I walked up to him and he keeps to himself, and he's not proactive and stuff, he just keeps to himself. And I go, "Hey, how's it going?" And I go, "Hey, I've been thinking about it." I go, "How's your smoking going? How's that?" And he goes, "Whoa?" He was super surprised that I remembered. And then he was telling me about his journey and how he's gotten a lot better. He still has room to get better. He is not fully done smoking. But then that brought that social capital back in, said, "I care about you. What you said to me matters." And so I think just trying to be a little bit more intentional about that.

I only have so much capacity, so it's not like I'm doing that to everyone in our congregation, but picking and choosing strategically is really important. And traditionally, I am looking for people who aren't talking to as many people as well.

**Christin Thieme:** Yeah, I love it. I found "what do you love about what you do" gets you a good story more than just their title or whatever. But it's a good way to get-

**Jim Sparks:** I know, but then sometimes I run into people who love so much of what they do, that I feel guilty that I don't love that much. And I'm like, "Am I supposed to love my job that much because in love with what she does."

**Christin Thieme:** Okay. That's one thing you love about what-

**Jim Sparks:** I mean, I'm proud of you, but now I feel a little self-conscious.

**Christin Thieme:** You recently presented a lot of your findings on the state of the corps to leadership of The Salvation Army here in the West, and I know you ended that presentation with a quote from Catherine Booth, one of the co-founders of The Salvation Army who said, "The waters are rising, but so am I. I am not going under but over." And I thought that was an interesting way to end it. What does going over look like for Salvation Army Ministry in this moment?

**Jim Sparks:** Well, I mean, that's a heavy, deep question. I think what I liked about that quote is it's very easy for me at times to see so much and just decide, "I'm just going to duck. I'm just going to duck, and I'm get away from it and get out." And if you've read a lot about Catherine Booth, she was particularly strong. And the idea of, "I'm going to rise with the seas. I'm not going to let it swallow me and I'm just going to go over it." And that could be taken aggressively. I'm just going to smash it in the face. Or it's like I'm the old rise above, right?

Because we believe that God has a plan for The Salvation Army. And so it might feel there's enemies around and people trying to get at you and slow you down, but if I believe that God has a plan for me, I'm going to go over anything because that's his plan for me, and I'm not going to let other things deter me. And I think part of it too is when I see a quote like that, I could get caught up in fix-it mentality or just get negative altogether and say this and that about particular issues around the organization, which everybody has that in any organization, everywhere, right?

**Christin Thieme:** Anywhere there's people.

**Jim Sparks:** Yep. There's nothing perfect. But the idea of not letting that bother me, not let those waves crash over me and sink me and just rise above it and be like, "No, but it's okay, but it's okay." It's like when I took my kid on, reluctantly, he went on Thunder Mountain at Disneyland. And there's a story my mom likes to share that I hated roller coasters. And my mom forced me on to Thunder Mountain. I'm still convinced to this day that there's scratch marks in the wood and that little narrow hallway to get there. And those were for my nails. I was just not doing it. And she forced me on it. It turned out I liked it.

**Christin Thieme:** This does not sound like her.

**Jim Sparks:** Yeah, no. And it turned out I liked it. And one of my sons was really nervous, and I just remember being on the ride and I was like, what I wanted when I was nervous go through that, I just wanted someone to talk me through it. And so I was talking, I'm like, "It's okay. We're going to be turning right right here and it's going to be okay. We're going to turn left right here and it's going to be okay. We're going to be fine. They're going to go uphill, and then it's going to be a steep downhill, and guess what? It's going to be okay."

And I just remember saying that and without realizing that I was really speaking to myself in a lot of ways of when I'm dealing with going through some of the tough stuff or reading through some of the tough stuff or some of the negative things, "We're going to be okay." We're going to be okay. It might not feel right right now, but we're going to be okay because I believe that God has got a plan for our organization, got a plan for me and what we're doing. And if we look back in times where we've been in those positions, a lot of times we could look back and say, "We are okay. And look what happened. Look at the amazing things that happened."

And I mean, I remember 15 years ago, I go, "Camp Ministries is gone. This place is terrible." I was in a very negative space. And I look back and thousands of kids give their life to Christ every year, and it's okay. It's going to be okay. So I like that because I think initially my tendencies to kind of duck, but I'm also a little bit of a fighter and I want to go over those times and rise and try to see the positive and see the bigger picture out of all of it.

**Christin Thieme:** So with that in mind then, what gives you the most hope for The Salvation Army?

**Jim Sparks:** I think the uniqueness of people in The Salvation Army is what gives me the most hope because it reaches every demographic, every kind of person. There is a person for everyone. I say

that even about camp, there's a person for everyone there and that to connect with. And that's what I feel about in The Salvation Army. There is a person for everyone. In my congregation, I could sit next to a homeless person. I could sit next to someone who's in charge of neurology at a hospital. I mean, the spectrum is so incredibly wide within The Salvation Army, and there's something for everyone there. And I think that's what excites me. That's what the draw is, is that no matter who you are, where you come from, there is a place for you and you're going to be treated probably the same. And that's kind of exciting.

And it doesn't matter how wealthy you are or how poor you are. Ideally, everyone is treated the same when they come into our congregation. And I realize that doesn't happen all the time, but I think it happens most of the time. And those times when it doesn't overshadows how often it does happen, because I mean, I've seen it for years and kids that wouldn't have an opportunity in other places because they may have some sort of weirdness or I don't know, are loved and welcomed. Right? And same with adults, no matter your background. I mean, some of the people that come into our congregation have had incredible lives. There's a guy at my corps gave me his testimony, and I couldn't believe that he's alive. And so there's something for everyone.

And a lot of times you hear Salvation Army stories, it's these radical transformations. Those aren't all of our people, those are some of the people. There's people that live very boring lives and stuff like that, that are good people as well. And so there's good people. No matter who you are, you're going to run into good people and good people for you as well. And I think that's what gives me hope and might be unique in the church. And so I think that's what's really cool about The Salvation Army.

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