

## Compassionate empathy

*Except I am moved with compassion,*

*How dwellest thy Spirit in me?*

Albert Orsborn asked that question for Salvationists a few decades ago, and it's one we need to ask ourselves every day.

Empathy, the process of “understanding a person’s subjective experience while vicariously sharing that experience” is a prerequisite to compassion. We share their feelings, their problems, their needs, and then, spontaneously, we are moved to help.

Someone completely unable to achieve this empathic stance borders on psychopathic behavior, anti-social, amoral, unable to love.

In the Army, the places that provide the most crucial opportunity to experience empathy are at the mercy seat and in social service programs.

This Army is committed to spiritual salvation *and* social salvation. We are attempting to free humanity from sin and despair as well as first satisfying a myriad of social needs. We are called to fight, as Dr. Roger Green says, a “War on Two Fronts.” It often seems to me, however, that many corps programs focus on the spiritual salvation front with considerable planning and involvement of many corps members, while making a much smaller effort—one employee and maybe one volunteer helper—in trying to satisfy only physical needs of those seeking social salvation. This is not as it should be. If we believe that the second front doesn’t need important action then we’re not doing our job. Booth believed poverty was a major contributor to sin.

We must be both significant and empathic in our relationship with those having either spiritual or social need. To be committed to humanity requires a commitment to being empathic. Empathy links people. It allows us to focus fully on others. It connects with others through a gateway of feeling as one senses the feeling of the other converge with one’s own feeling.

Empathy occurs when our bodies sense and match the feelings of another. It’s automatic—even in infants. Unfortunately, we tend to ignore these feelings so much we lose sensitivity to them. When in a



helping relationship, it's essential that we empathize and sense our own feeling, interpret it cognitively, name it, and communicate it to the sender. Then, that person will know that we are fully present with them, understand their issue and work with them to resolution.

Unless we engage with the person empathically, we ignore our mission and ethic. The one in need feels only partially helped because the real need has been neither discovered nor addressed.

If no empathic relationship develops we've satisfied a very temporary problem. Those groceries don't go far. What's the "whole" problem behind the need for the groceries? We need to follow up each case and begin the process of establishing an empathic helping relationship.

As one person genuinely feels with the emotional experience triggered by another, empathy occurs.