

Disciples' Register

by ~~Colin Needham~~ ~~Philip Needham~~ ~~Colin Needham~~
the Corps Seekers' Register. It has been tried and found wanting. For decades we have been listing seekers and using that list as one measure of our evangelical success. Please note (we say at corps and divisional reviews) seekers are UP ... or DOWN. In the first case we rejoice, in the second we become concerned.

I remember one divisional commander who engaged the services of a family evangelistic team for three months in his division. Every corps had to use them for campaigns. That year the number of seekers in the division more than doubled. I remember a field officer saying that his seeker count was down for the year so he was bringing in a revivalist. He saw the increase in seekers as an important indicator of mission effectiveness.

It is not to come to believe it is not. Certainly it is one component of an adequate measurement of effectiveness, but one which cannot stand alone. It cannot stand alone because of one simple fact: Jesus did not come to this world primarily to save us; he came to make us his disciples. If you read the Gospels with an open mind you will see that this is true. The experience of salvation, or the conversion experience, is the door by which we enter the school of his disciples, the household of his family, the precincts of his Kingdom. The point of getting saved is to learn and practice discipleship, participate as a son or daughter in the family of the redeemed, live the joyous life of a Kingdom-of-God dweller. To bring someone through the door of conversion and leave them without further guidance and ongoing mentoring is to miss the point.

Do you object? Perhaps you wish to remind me that our Army started off as an evangelistic agency with the objective of getting people saved and then turning them over to the churches for nurturing and discipling. This fact only proves my point. The nurturing/discipling was clearly seen as the essential next step, and when the churches in general were unable or unwilling to accept our converts for discipling, Booth saw the necessity of our becoming a church home for them, a fellowship in which they could be disciplined. Like Wesley, Booth took that ministry very seriously. Converts were taken under someone's wing, made recruits, and engaged in a disciplined learning process.

But you may still object. Many of the people we encounter and share the Gospel with are individuals we may see only once. Many of our services are one-stop affairs and we often have only the one chance to present the Gospel and seek a verdict. Am I suggesting that these conversions have little or no meaning because we are unable to disciple? Not at all. A reading of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry reveals a number of times when Jesus encountered a person in a life-changing way with no record of follow-up. Of course, the absence of a record does not mean it didn't happen, and furthermore a discipling church was yet to come into existence (Pentecost). What we do know from the record of the New Testament Church (Acts, the Letters) is that from the very beginning great care was taken to disciple new Christians (Acts 2:42, 46).

We cannot deny, however, the authenticity of a conversion, even though we may never see the person again. Nor, on the other hand, can we excuse our lack of stewardship for failing to disciple those converts with whom there is the possibility of an



ongoing relationship. I must say, however, that I don't hold out much hope for the establishment, growth and even survival! of any convert to Christ without the ongoing support and guidance of a Christian fellowship. We pray for those converts we ourselves can't follow up, and we do our best to link them with a body of believers. Hopefully, they will take the next steps in their spiritual journey and find a congregation to help them do it.

But what about the converts closer to home the seeker in our corps meeting, the member of our community center, the person we serve in our social services ministry, our neighbor, our fellow worker or business associate all with whom we can develop an ongoing relationship? What is our discipling plan for them? And if we have one, how well are we implementing it?

My own view is that we worry too much over the number of our converts. Of course, it is important to HAVE some converts; some corps have practically none. But if we have a small number of converts in a given year and disciple them well, that is, I believe, far better than having a larger number and not discipling. In fact, I wonder about the damage caused by raising expectations (with converts) and then setting them up for failure (by failing to disciple them). I wonder if we often allow our belief in the possibility of backsliding to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In his challenging book, *Divine Conspiracy* (Harper San Francisco, 1998), Dallas Willard suggests that a church's focus needs to be more on discipling than on making converts. He thinks that if we're doing the former, the latter will fall into place. He says, "We would intend to make disciples and let converts 'happen,' rather than intending to make converts and letting disciples 'happen'." (p.334) His premise seems to be that if we are effectively discipling people, they will attract others to Christ, and others will be attracted to our corps because people will see that we are dead serious about being authentic Christians.

Whether or not you agree completely with Willard, I hope you do agree that we Salvationists need to get as serious about making disciples as we are about counting converts. Personally, I would go as far as to say that by far the best way to evangelize is through existing and newly created relationships. Who, then, can successfully evangelize through such relationships? The answer, of course, is well-trained disciples of Jesus.

Therefore, I have a proposal: replace the Corps Seekers' Register with the Corps Disciples' Register. Assume that when someone comes to Christ he or she is beginning a pilgrimage as a *disciple* of Christ. Design the register to be a planning and shepherding guide to track converts through a discipling process. Use it as a means of accountability. Put it in the hands of a discipling overseer. (Remember the recruiting sergeants of old?) Follow through with a strategy of effectively discipling converts—and even existing Salvationists who were never disciplined in the first place.

Conversion to Christ is not a mere insurance policy. It is the doorway to a radically new future. Let's help those at the doorway to find the fulfillment and the mission for which they have been graciously allowed in.