

On the Corner

A failure to thrive

by Robert Docter –

The syndrome “a failure to thrive” is a term given a pattern of symptoms, often in infants or young children, characterized by a breakdown in any of a number of the body’s systems resulting in an absence of vigorous growth in all dimensions of life. There is low energy, a tendency to languish, weakness, low appetite, little display of joy or pleasure, and a failure to gain weight as expected.

It’s very sad to see.

It may be caused by a number of problems.

Sometimes the syndrome is evident due to physical reasons as parts of the body or brain fail in some aspect of their functions. There might be liver disease—reflux—chronic diarrhea—or allergic reactions to various types of food. Sometimes it’s caused by poor nutrition—food provided that fails to contain essential nutrients. Sometimes it’s neglect, and neglect is evident in a whole range of caregiver behaviors. It might be simple incompetence or ignorance. It might be self-centered immaturity in which the caregiver simply fails to care.

Infants and young children need stimulation. They need to hear language—to be touched and rocked—to be cleaned and fed—to feel connected and protected – to experience all the emotional pull of genuine love. Without it they waste away and seem almost to choose to die. They’ve even got a name for it—morasmus.

Some Salvation Army corps experience “a failure to thrive.”

Many of us who were around in the late 70s or early 80s observed this phenomenon in what I call the death of the Congress Hall corps as I knew it as a young man. It was the largest corps in the Territory—at one time having a roll of 450 soldiers—a band of over 50— a large songster brigade, dynamic open-air evangelism—a new building built according to their own specifications. It was the major downtown corps—the headquarters corps—the corps every visitor wanted to visit.



It failed to thrive. It didn't grow. It wasted away. The bottom of the glass had a small hole in it, and it gradually disappeared. There might be innumerable reasons because a failure to thrive may be caused by any one or several reasons acting at the same time. It's not a disease—it's a "condition."

The problem in relation to Congress Hall that disturbs me the most was an absence of any effort to undertake a case study of the event that might have provided sufficient data to draw conclusions as to cause. We don't know why it happened. But it sure happened. And because we don't know what events, or failures in planning, or personalities, or leadership problems there were, we can't analyze the system that deteriorated within a decade to a point of morasmus.

Let's look at the other side of the coin. What factors need to be present in a corps to guarantee continued thriving?

I can think of several.

First—a given (I hope) is a focus of God in Christ. That's where the emphasis must lie. But it needs to be a color picture—many aspects of God need to be portrayed that present a single image. The Army chooses to do it through holistic ministry.

Second—there needs to be observable evidence of multiple forms of achievement by the corps as a body. This is not necessarily measured in numbers. Maybe it in the quality of the music—or the dimensions of involvement in holistic ministry—or the creation of new programs for youth. I believe there must be an aspect of risk-taking in this drive to achieve.

Third, I'm convinced there must be a universal commitment by the membership to the mission, the vision, the plan, and the action.

Fourth, there must be evidence of strong cohesiveness. The development of group cohesiveness is the responsibility of the leader. Because officers move every three to five years—the critical leadership must be among the laity. Additionally, the cohesiveness must be evident within small groups within the general congregation. These might be musical groups, ge groups, Bible study groups. They might vary in size or purpose. The relationship is key.

Fifth, there must be shared leadership. The CO is not the commanding officer—the CO is the corps officer. There must be democratic leadership evident with open communication. This reduces anxiety among the membership and stimulates a desire to stick together.

Last, I think there must be practical flexibility. We must not be afraid to try something new and abandon something old if it is no longer useful.

So—let's figure out the indicators of a failure to thrive and then find ways to confront them.