

Thanks Given to God for the Life of General John Gowans



Retired General John Larsson addresses the congregation
(Photo: Julie D. Tostevin)

THE Thanksgiving Service for the life and ministry of General John Gowans (Retired) was held at the William Booth College, Denmark Hill, London, on Friday 14 December 2012. Retired General John Larsson presided over a gathering of more than 450 people who came to praise God and celebrate the life of an extraordinarily gifted Salvationist leader.

General Gowans's wife, Commissioner Gisèle Gowans, and their two sons, John-Marc and Christophe Gowans, were supported by many family and friends during a powerful, poignant and challenging meeting. The congregation included General Linda Bond, Retired General Shaw Clifton, Chief of the Staff Commissioner Barry C. Swanson and World President of Women's Ministries Commissioner Sue Swanson, the territorial leaders of the United Kingdom Territory with the Republic of Ireland (Commissioners André and Silvia Cox), International Commissioners from International Headquarters and other territorial leaders. Major Brian Slinn, corps officer at Bromley Temple, opened

the meeting in prayer.

General Bond gave a warm, personal tribute, identifying a number of areas where John Gowans had significantly influenced the life of The Salvation Army. First, the mission statement crafted by General Gowans – that The Salvation Army exists to ‘save souls, grow saints and serve suffering humanity’ – is ‘woven into the fabric of every territory I visit,’ said the General. Recalling his sermon at the International Congress in Atlanta in 2000 which used the image of a three-legged stool to illustrate the mission statement, General Bond said: ‘John Gowans did not give a new direction to The Salvation Army but he captured our purpose, our essence. We are not only an Army with a balanced mission; we have an integrated mission.’

‘The General highlighted the influence of General Gowans as a leader. ‘John Gowans was not a typical divisional commander, nor a typical territorial commander and not a typical General,’ she said. ‘He taught us to trust God to be ourselves. When we take the risks that John Gowans took, we are better for it.’

‘General Bond also noted the influence of General Gowans as a theologian. ‘Like Charles Wesley, John Gowans expressed deep thoughts in a way we could understand, but also in a way we could sing,’ she said. ‘Gowans’s theology was based on sound Salvation Army theology. He understood the human condition,’ she added, quoting the Gowans verse: ‘Ours is not a distant God, remote, unfeeling.’ General Bond said: ‘The Salvation Army will be forever marked by the gifts and skills that John Gowans dedicated to God and used to his glory. I join the thousands who today thank God that he has crossed our paths.’

(The full text of the General’s tribute is available on her website:

www.salvationarmy.org/thegeneral/tributejohngowans)

Music was provided by the International Staff Band (ISB) and International Staff Songsters (ISS). To celebrate the extraordinary gift that God gave to General John Gowans as a poet and songwriter, all but one of the songs in the thanksgiving service were from his pen. The one exception was ‘My All for Thee’ by Brindley Boon – the dedication song of the Soulwinners Session of cadets – which was sung by the ISS. General John Gowans and Commissioner Gisèle Gowans were members of this officer training session from 1954 to 1955.

Family tributes were given by John-Marc and Christophe Gowans. Both men referred to their father’s long and debilitating illness. Christophe movingly said: ‘For the past few years I have gradually lost my father. Now I feel I have got him back.’ John-Marc thanked the nursing staff and the many people who had visited his father during his years of declining health. Reflecting on his father’s inimitable preaching style, he said: ‘My father always wanted something real to happen when he preached. Arriving at a point where self-reflection is unavoidable is the definition of something real happening.’ He then asked: ‘What might he want to say to us today? He would say: “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to reach out to each other”.’

Commissioner Norman Howe shared a number of General Gowans's poems, reminding the congregation of his brilliant simplicity, humour and perceptive understanding of the challenges and joys of the Christian life. One of the poems, 'Prospects', was particularly poignant:

I'm not afraid to die,

Why should I be?

This body's not immortal,

Not like me!

The fabric must wear out

For sure some day.

Without regret

I'll throw the thing away.

There'll come a time

This 'house' beyond repair,

You'll find me better

Lodgings, Lord, elsewhere.

I might wish I

Had fuller information

About the coming life's

Accommodation!

But death's my friend,

Why greet him with a frown?

He's only Life

Dressed in another gown!

from *O Lord!* SP&S, 1981)



The coffin passes the sessional flags (Photo: Julie D. Tostevin)

Commissioner Howe paid tribute to the leadership of General Gowans: 'As I travelled the world defending his policies, I heard officers say again and again, "General Gowans gave me permission to be myself". That,' said the commissioner, 'is true leadership'. However, there was a cost for such leadership and Commissioner Howe noted: 'John Gowans gave himself until there was nothing left to give. Underneath the exterior was a man with deep needs – for reassurance, understanding and affirmation.

'A video of General Gowans reciting Vachel Lindsay's poem *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* was played on the large screen, and as his energetic and vibrant performance once again filled the hall many people were moved to tears. Even at his own funeral John Gowans challenged people with the question: 'Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?'

Commissioner Freda Larsson read the Scriptures from Revelation 7:9-17 before Retired General John Larsson gave his address, based on verses 13-14: 'Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?"'. When the author of Revelation said that he didn't know, the elder answered his own question: 'These are they,' he said 'who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (*New International Version*).

General Larsson addressed his thoughts directly to John Gowans – his friend and former songwriting partner. He said: 'You have come out of great tribulation, John. Gisèle and John-Marc and Christophe and others of us here this afternoon have watched as you have gone through tribulation in recent years. The whole Salvation Army family has been saddened – and thousands have been praying for you, John.

'General Larsson highlighted some of the reasons why General Gowans will be missed:

- *laughter* – 'It symbolises that cheerfulness and positive attitude that characterised you.'
- *creativity* – 'Your songs are sung around the world – and are blessing people, lifting their spirits, and helping them to know God better. And they will be for years and years to come.'
- *courage* – 'You had the courage to be yourself, John. The Army never took you over. You are going to be missed for your courage.'

General Larsson summarised many other characteristics of John Gowans that will be missed: 'You are going to be missed for your preaching– that marvellous gift you had for lifting us to the heights, with humour and pathos and drama, and then reaching right into our hearts with your challenge. And you're going to be missed for your vision for the Army and your passion for mission– you knew where we as an Army should be heading and what as an Army we should be doing ... You are going to be missed most of all for your warmth, for your caring, and for your gift for friendship – for your humanity, John.'

The meeting concluded with the congregation singing, 'They shall come from the east, they shall come from the west, and sit down in the Kingdom of God.' The flag-draped coffin, embossed with a Salvation Army crest, was then carried out of the hall as the ISB played 'When the Roll is Called up Yonder, I'll be There'. The congregation stood, many saluting the coffin of General Gowans, as his body left the Assembly Hall for the final time.

A committal service at Hither Green Crematorium was again led by Retired General John Larsson. Major Danièle César, a niece of the Gowanses, prayed. Major Adrian Allman, private secretary to General Gowans during his time in office, read the Scripture (John 11:25-26 and 14:1-4). The service included songs by Catherine Baird ('O Love, Revealed on Earth in Christ'), Albert Orsborn ('My Life Must be Christ's Broken Bread') and concluded with a rousing rendition of 'Thine is the Glory, Risen, Conquering Son'.

Report by Major Dean Pallant