

## May they follow the Master

### Reflections on young adult ministry, and whether our youth will stay or go.

*By Keith Maynor, Captain –*

Young adult ministry. It's become one of those "hot topics" buzzing around every territory, connected to phrases like, "We have got to empower them," "We can't afford to lose any more of them," and the all too familiar, "Why are they leaving The Salvation Army for that other ministry?"



These various dialogues may reveal an underlying assumption that The Salvation Army has great cause to be alarmed and should be worried about our collective young adult ministry. After all, each one of us might personally know of one young adult who has left our barracks. A goodbye from a loved one leaves a lasting impression, but the sum of a generation's farewell is something entirely different; it's an exodus of the worst kind. So here we are. Many are leaving, we are worried and wondering what on earth can we do to keep them.

Rather than summarizing this state of anxiety with statistical research, perhaps there is a metaphorical way to understand our predicament. Though this story has been locked away in the vault of archaic history, I believe that in a small way, it prophetically tells a small part of our predicament right now.

In the ancient Greek world, one mythological story that caused great fear and interest was that of the Sirens. According to their legend, using the power of their enchanted voices, the Sirens would call out and sing to passing sailors. No matter how stalwart the ships set to their course, once the sailors heard a Siren's song, they would follow it. Sadly, the sweet song was nothing more than a deceptive temptation. When the sailors were most vulnerable, the hypnotic songs would lead them to inevitable doom by being dashed to the rocks.

How could anyone get past the wiles of the Sirens? According to Homer's epic myth, Odysseus found a safe way through. Taking the advice from a friend, Odysseus filled his crew's ears with beeswax and clothes. With the sticky earplugs, the sailors would finally have a defense against the Sirens' calling. Yet for Odysseus, he had another idea. Having longed to hear their calls, he ordered the crew to bind him to the ship's mast. As the ship sailed past the Sirens, Odysseus cried from the top of his voice for the crew to free him so that he may join and follow the song. But thankfully for his sake, the ship's mast served as an anchor keeping him from leaving his friends; it held him back from the temptation

of leaving.

In a small and peculiar way, Odysseus and the Sirens speak to our situation. As many of us know, the world is noisy; filled with all sorts of sounds and callings. When a person becomes a young adult, that is usually the first time they have opportunity to hear all the word's sounds, and decide what they are going to follow. Will it be the sounds they like, the calling of a close friend, or a Siren?

For us Salvationists, we want to keep our young adults close. We have great expectations for them. We hope some will be officers, some soldiers, and that all of them will make a transformational difference in our world. How will we keep them from falling astray? The truth is we desperately need them. We are depending on them to be our future leaders.

Have you considered shackling them to the mast?

If that thought crossed your mind, I would like to applaud your commitment, but I think it would be wiser to redirect our methods. When we are confronted with worry and fear, we may also be tempted to control what we worry about and fear most. When it comes to young adult ministry, if we attempt to tie them to the "mast" of The Salvation Army, we are not going to keep them from the Sirens. If a young adult feels we are trying to control them, they will also feel disrespected. And, if they feel disrespected, we are not showing them the ship's mast but rather the fastest way to get off the boat—the plank.

Rather, there is a mast that is tried and true. When we first bind ourselves to it, we find the mysterious freedom and liberty to help others get connected to this anchor. That anchor is none other than the cornerstone of our faith—Jesus Christ.

Many are wondering and praying about the future of our young adult ministry. As the new national young adult initiative coordinator at National Headquarters, my personal hope is that as we all journey forward in life's wild and loud waters, our young adults would be securely tied and affirmed in Jesus. For I know with God's help, many will remain and perhaps many more will join our Army. Likewise, many will leave us—but may they leave being anchored to the Master, and not by following the Sirens.