Toolkit for Ethical Decision-Making

2-333 Vaughan Street • Winnipeg, Manitoba • CANADA R3B 3J9 • Phone: (204) 957-2412
www.SalvationArmyEthics.org

INTRODUCTION

The Toolkit for Ethical Decision-Making is an aid to officers, officers-in-training, lay leaders, employees, volunteers, and others who wish to engage in critical ethical thinking as they confront ethical problems in Salvation Army ministry.

Ethical problems usually involve values, rights, responsibilities or interests held by groups or individuals. When first approached, an ethical problem can seem complex. Sometimes, the deeper you look into the problem, the more unmanageable it becomes. This Toolkit will help you and your team wade through the murkiness of an ethical problem and discern a resolution to the case.

Using the Toolkit is not a guarantee you will achieve the most ethical results. There is no device that can ensure you reach the best or the right decision. Instead, the Toolkit is offered as a way to start up and steer difficult conversations about ethical problems.

The Toolkit for Ethical Decision-Making has four parts.

I. FRAMEWORK

The Framework is a step by step process for making an ethical decision. It provides the basic scaffolding or bare bones for the ethical discussion. The remaining parts of the Toolkit are built around it.

II. ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

The Additional Guidelines animate the step by step process outlined in the Framework. They put flesh on those bare bones. They indicate why various questions are posed and reveal more about how the conversation ought to progress.

III. CASE STUDIES

Two ethical Case Studies are included. Case Study A takes place in a social services context. Case Study B takes place in a corps ministries setting. Not every ministry unit will face cases like these, but the ethical issues they bring up are familiar to all of us. Applying the Framework to either case study can illustrate how the ethical decision-making process is brought to life.

IV. WORKSHEETS

The two Worksheets provide a hands-on opportunity to move through the ethical decision-making process. They can be used for practice examples, such the provided Case Studies, and also for “real world” ethical cases. Worksheet 1 allows individuals to provide written answers to each of the Framework questions. Worksheet 2 is dedicated to evaluating possible courses of action.

FRAMEWORK

Set the Scene

What is the problem?
What is at stake? What drives the problem?
Who is/should be involved in the decision-making process?

Gather and Assess Information

What is going on? What are the facts? Which are relevant? Which are in dispute? Is there missing information?
Who are the stakeholders?
Would someone outside our group describe the problem differently?

Examine Mission, Values, Principles, Policies and Procedures

Take a look at:

- the Mission and Values of The Salvation Army in Canada & Bermuda; additional ethical values and principles upheld by your ministry unit; your profession
- the organizational policies and procedures upheld by The Salvation Army; your ministry unit; your profession

Are any at stake or in conflict?
Are any in conflict with personally held values or principles?
Are any in conflict with other practical constraints?

Outline Feasible Alternatives

Broadly speaking, what courses of action are available?
Evaluate each course of action against the following measures:

- What are the foreseeable outcomes (harms and benefits)?
- Are any rights or responsibilities being breached?
- Would it be appropriate for others under similar circumstances to make this decision?
- What values is this course of action based on?
- Is this the way someone you admire, someone with integrity would act?

Make the Decision and Act on It

Reflect on the Decision

Monitor the effects of the decision.
Are there things you would do differently next time?
Does anyone (including you) feel their integrity has been compromised by the decision?
Should steps be taken in order that such a decision need not be made again?

ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES

Team Decisions

Ethical decisions have an impact on officers, soldiers, adherents, employees, volunteers, clients, and others with whom you come into contact in your ministry setting. Even if an ethical problem seems personal and not organizational, it is unlikely that it concerns only one individual.

Involving others in your ministry unit more fully in the decision-making process can be very advantageous. Notice that the one-page Framework is a series of questions. It is possible for you to ask and answer these questions on your own. However, in many instances the process can be significantly enriched by the perspectives of other members of your ministry unit or your colleagues. This can hold true even when one person is ultimately responsible for making the decision. Working as a cohesive team can engender trust and transparency between different leaders, staff and volunteers while also maintaining confidentiality and/or discretion as needed.

This Toolkit provides you and your team with a common decision-making process. It is often in the best interest of a ministry unit or team to undertake conversations about ethical issues on a regular basis. Ethics conversations tend to bring values to the fore and reinforce them. These conversations can also shape and refine values over time. Sharing in a common process and constructing an "ethical language" suitable for your ministry unit can improve communication between team members, provide clarity about the matter at hand, and generate critical ethical thinking.

Using this Toolkit to engage in some practice conversations, even about fairly straightforward problems, can prepare a team for more complex problems that present themselves in the "real world." Routine ethical conversations can also engender a sense of "team," refine the process of ethical decision-making, and make team members comfortable with open and honest dialogue about sensitive ethical issues. Keep in mind that the Toolkit is not meant to be unduly restrictive of your decision-making process. In fact, it is meant to generate creative problem-solving.

Although the Toolkit is not meant to be limited to what might be considered "major" decisions, it does require that you dedicate some time to the process. Indeed, finding time and setting it apart can sometimes be the most challenging part of ethical decision-making!

You will need to devote time to:

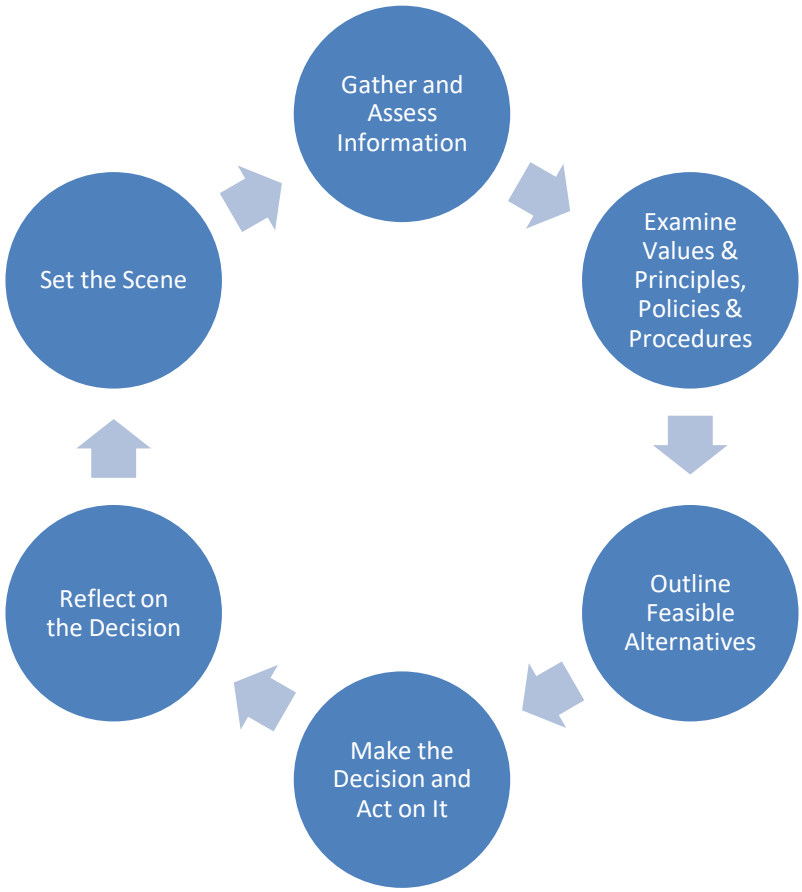
- assembling a decision-making team,
- moving through the decision-making Framework, and
- debriefing and/or evaluating the decision

A note on transition: Ministry in The Salvation Army presents an evolving context, one in which leadership can change with changes of officer appointment. Sometimes a change in leadership occurs in the midst of a significant ethical problem. Good leaders ensure that their team is well prepared to handle such a change.

Working through the Framework

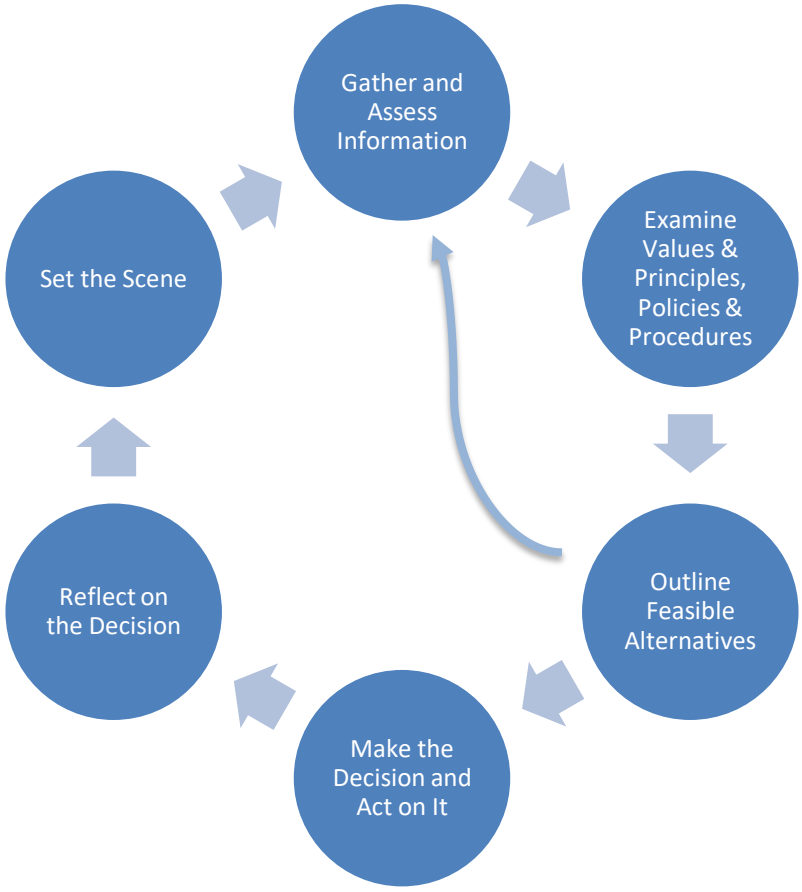
The Framework is the basic scaffolding. It provides a sequential process for ethical decision-making. The process begins with the first recognition of an ethical problem (Set the Scene), and guides the team through a collection of facts (Gather and Assess the Information). From here the Framework moves on to the perception of the problem in light of the values and practical considerations relevant to your situation (Examine Mission, Values, Principles, Policies and Procedures). What follows is a managed but creative method of considering possible courses of action and then determining which one is the most appropriate response (Outline Feasible Alternatives). After making and acting on a decision, the team is encouraged to debrief (Reflect on the Decision). This step is here for an important reason: Without critical reflection, you and your ministry team will not be as well-prepared to deal with a similar problem in future.

The Framework renders these steps sequentially, a process that might look like this:



The arrows between the steps show that one step leads to another. There is also an arrow between the final step (Reflect on the Decision) and the first step (Set the Scene). The more you and your team use the Framework, the more skillful you become in applying it to ethical problems. Working through an ethical problem today can equip you for making additional, perhaps more complex decision later on.

The Framework is not meant to be a restrictive structure. For instance, while working through the feasible alternatives for action, your team might become aware of a gap in factual knowledge. Ethical decisions are only as good as the information in which they are grounded. Clearly, this gap would require your team to "loop back" to reassess the facts. It might look something like this:



Once the facts are satisfactorily addressed, your team may be able to move to the next step. This "looping back" can occur at any step. Remember, the Framework is meant as an aid, not a hindrance.

Glancing over the Framework, you will find that not all the questions are suitable for every ethical situation. Some may be applicable in your ministry unit only occasionally. Others may resonate deeply with you and your team. The more you work with the Framework, the greater facility you will have with applying it in your ministry setting.

Critical to the ethical decision-making process is reading scripture and praying for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. How will working through the problem at hand contribute to the building of the kingdom of God? Prayer should happen dynamically throughout the process, rather than be limited to a specific step.

Set the Scene

What is the problem?

If you're reading over a toolkit for ethical decision-making, you are probably seeking some direction. Before beginning any methodical analysis, the first step is simply to give voice to your gut reaction. How would you describe the problem to a close friend, spouse or colleague?

What is at stake? What drives the problem?

These questions might help you expand on your answer to the previous question. What's at the heart of it? What is the real-world risk you associate with this problem?

Ethical problems are usually brought to our attention with the impression that someone's integrity (or organizational integrity) is hanging in the balance. Perhaps someone feels undue pressure from an authority to render a particular decision. Perhaps someone is being made party to a decision they don't agree with. Perhaps there is a conflict of interest. Perhaps this is a problem that has failed to be recognized in the past. For instance, routine procedures often go unquestioned. Have you ever found yourself saying, "It's just part of the job"?

Who is/should be involved in the decision-making process?

Within a ministry unit, it is usually the case that particular leaders have designated authority to make decisions affecting the unit, including ethical decisions. Even so, consultation with a team of colleagues or other members of the unit can be illuminating. The leader or conversation facilitator must ensure a safe environment. A team may need to maintain confidentiality or a level of discretion to protect those whose interests are at stake.

It is relevant to ask, "Are we the people who ought to be making the decision?" Sometimes a decision needs to be made by a different level of authority. But just as it's inappropriate to take control of a decision-making process that belongs to someone else, it's also inappropriate to shirk your own responsibilities.

It may be that no one is "taking the lead" on a particular ethical problem that needs to be addressed. How should this kind of ethical conversation be facilitated?

Who else deserves a seat at the table? What if the ethical problem is being raised by someone who does not have decision-making power? Should they be consulted in the process? Also consider whether any others affected by the problem should be more involved in the conversation. (See the discussion of "stakeholders" below.)

Gather and Assess the Information

At this point, you might be tempted to move on to the question, "What should we do?" Although gut reactions should not be overlooked in the decision-making process, a decision based *only* on gut reactions would be deficient. Human beings have additional tools at our disposal.

What is going on? What are the facts? Which are relevant? Which are in dispute? Is there missing information?

Before determining how you will respond to the problem, you must ask the question, "What is going on?" Answering this question involves outlining the facts carefully and interpreting them accurately. Ethical discernment requires a disciplined look into the circumstances. This is not as cut-and-dried as it might seem. Interpretation is a highly nuanced activity. Two bilingual Canadians can read the same paragraph in the French language and offer two slightly different English interpretations—and both may be faithful to the original text! Further, a sentence or paragraph taken out of context can yield serious misinterpretation. That's why it's essential to view information with a careful eye. Avoid isolating a problem from its larger context. Instead, work at enlarging your perspective.

This can be done, for instance, by paying attention to your organizational environment, the structures and climate of your ministry unit, and the relationships in play. Has this situation come up in the past? Have other ministry units like yours come up against this problem before? If so, how was it handled? Does everyone involved in the team agree with all the details? Do some people describe the matter very differently? Is this an isolated situation or is it part of a larger or more systemic problem, such as a lack of accountability or communication? An ethical decision must be based on a thorough reading of what is happening and how it affects people.

The ethical decision-making process begins by carefully identifying the problem. To be clear, not every difficult problem is an *ethical* problem. There is a difference between deciding, on the one hand, whether your sweater works better with brown slacks or blue slacks and, on the other, whether you are obliged to inform an authority about a disturbing disclosure of personal information. Many problems that face a ministry unit represent issues that are not ethical in nature. Some involve interpersonal conflict that can be addressed through a conflict resolution process. Others are primarily procedural or legal in nature. Although such problems may have ancillary ethical aspects, a problem is an ethical problem when it is driven by good and bad, right and wrong, duties, rights or interests.

You are responsible to determine which pieces of information are relevant to the decision-making process. Be aware that complexity can arise in interpersonal dynamics (for instance, between colleagues, officer and lay leadership, supervisor and employee, etc.,) as you work to distinguish what is ethically relevant from what is not. Some facts may be dominant in the discussion because a particular party emphasizes them; but they may not be relevant to the case as an *ethical* case. In contrast, it may become clear as information is gathered that some facts are missing. You may need to involve additional people who can fill out your knowledge base.

Who are the stakeholders?

Who "owns" the problem? In other words, who is affected by the problem or a decision you make? Whose rights are in danger? What values or interests arise in this situation for the stakeholder(s)?

There may be one stakeholder. There may be a number of stakeholders. A stakeholder might be a ministry unit, department, or the broader organization. Stakeholders might also include groups and persons outside of The Salvation Army.

Would someone outside our group describe the problem differently?

Sometimes a ministry unit or a decision-making team circumscribes its way of looking at the world. This is unhelpful when trying to interpret a problem. How might someone who has no vested interest in this situation view your assessment of the facts? Or of what is at stake? Would an outside assessment change the way you see the problem? You will never see the situation completely objectively or from a "God's-eye view." But attempting to interpret what is going on by inviting other perspectives to the table can help make a problem more intelligible. For instance, how has each of the stakeholders described what is at risk? What outcome is each one looking for?

Examine Mission, Values, Principles, Policies and Procedures

Now you are in a position to offer an informed description of the problem or "what is going on." Consider closely the resources for ethical decision-making that come out of your ministry context.

Take a look at:

- *the Mission and Values of The Salvation Army in Canada & Bermuda; additional ethical values and principles upheld by your ministry unit; your profession*
- *the organizational policies and procedures upheld by The Salvation Army; your ministry unit; your profession*

A variety of sources speak to the mission, ethical values and principles active in your ministry. First, there is the Mission and Values Statement for The Salvation Army Canada & Bermuda Territory. There may also be values or principles associated with your individual unit and the professions represented in its leadership. Because these can seem simple (e.g., "Everyone knows that accountability is important") they are often overlooked. Take time to explore these values and principles, making space for different interpretations of those most relevant to the problem. Investigate the "given" or unspoken values and principles held by your ministry unit and by the stakeholders.

Organizational policies and procedures will typically be specialized according to the kind of ministry you and your team are involved in. For instance, you might turn to the Territorial Social Services Code of Ethics, Operating Policies, Abuse Policy, as well as other professional codes of ethics or codes of conduct.

Are any at stake or in conflict?
Are any in conflict with personally held values or principles?
Are any in conflict with other practical constraints?

Asking these questions can help you get a better grasp of what is really at the heart of the problem. Is a standard procedure at odds with what one stakeholder personally believes is the right thing to do? Does a stakeholder feel like they are committing an ethical breach in observing a particular organizational policy? This feeling might be time-bound to the situation under deliberation. It might also be something that has persisted over a long period of time. Keep in mind that it is easy to overlook flaws in longstanding unit operations or customs.

Outline Feasible Alternatives

Broadly speaking, what courses of action are available?

Brainstorm all courses of action. Be creative. Entertain each one. Even those that are not feasible or even ethical may help clarify the problem. They may also raise an important issue or value that has been overlooked. Are there other ways to address this issue or value? Some options for action may be more compelling than others. Take time to reflect on why this might be.

Evaluate each course of action against the following measures:

You may find some of these assessment measures more appropriate than others in the case at hand.

As you work through the evaluation process, consider making use of Worksheet 2. This simple chart asks you to input answers to the evaluation questions for each possible course of action, allowing you to compare them.

Following the evaluation process, you may find you have no satisfactory course of action. In such a case give thought to going through the process again. Look for information missed the first time around. Consider brainstorming other courses of action. You may also need to expand the decision-making circle to include individuals who can offer different perspectives.

- *What are the foreseeable outcomes (harms and benefits)?*

Outline all the consequences, good and bad. Which course of action fulfills the most interests at stake? Which meets the most needs? Does any course of action put someone in a worse position? Or raise any new ethical issues? Don't forget to pay attention to how this course of action will affect identified stakeholders who have not been invited into the decision-making team.

- *Are any rights or responsibilities being breached?*

Again, pay attention to how this course of action will affect identified stakeholders who are not part of the team. Does this option constitute an abuse of power? Will it sever a bond of trust between stakeholders? Are any duties or obligations for action neglected by this course of action? Ask yourself, "Would I appreciate this decision if I were on the receiving end of it?"

- *Would it be appropriate for others under similar circumstances to make this decision?*

Put differently, are you setting a good example? What if everyone acted this way? Is this a solution you would commend to a similar ministry unit? Hypothetically, would you or members of your team be comfortable explaining and defending your decision if it was broadcast on the evening news? Or featured in *Salvationist* magazine?

- *What values is this course of action based on?*

Are they consistent with the organizational, unit-based, and professional values you've already discussed? This question may bring to light some conflicting opinions within your team. How will you negotiate this?

- *Is this the way someone you admire, someone with integrity would act?*

This can be a helpful question. We all have our "ethical heroes," people who seem to be able to tackle complex ethical problems with great competence. Imagine how a mentor or coach would respond. (You might even ask them!) Will you feel proud of yourself and your team if you take this course of action? Why or why not?

Make the Decision and Act on It

Depending on who is responsible for making the decision, determining a course of action will involve different procedures. Your ministry unit may already have procedures in place. Often one person is responsible for the decision. That individual must have personal conviction that the preferred course of action is the most ethical. A team may require consensus or a majority opinion to make a decision. Ensure that you communicate the decision to stakeholders in ways appropriate to the context.

Reflect on the Decision

Each of the questions in this section offers a way to debrief with your team.

Monitor the effects of your decision.

If you have arrived at a decision that you think offers a commendable way of ethical problem-solving, you might want to share it with others who face similar problems.

It's important to understand that ethical decision-making does not necessarily mean you will arrive at a perfect decision. It may mean you arrive at a decision that is satisfactory or "good enough." This is the sort of decision that meets most of the ethical goals without infringing upon stakeholder rights or causing serious harms. While it may not please everyone involved, it maintains ethical integrity all around.

Whatever the outcome, don't underestimate the potential for learning from past decisions and actions. Whether your course of action has turned out to be excellent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, reflection will help your team come to a better understanding of why you've made that particular decision. Such reflection, both in the wake of a real-world decision and as a regular team activity, can lead to greater proficiency in the decision-making process.

Are there things you would do differently next time?

Even when a decision meets all ethical concerns there is room for growth, creativity and improvement.

Does anyone (including you) feel their integrity has been compromised by the decision?

If your decision is unsatisfactory it may be that you are facing what is known as an "ethical dilemma." An ethical dilemma occurs when no course of action offers a solution that is entirely right or good.

It's helpful to know that, ethically speaking, *making* a compromise is different from *being* compromised. The former does not necessarily indicate that anything unethical is going on. In fact, we often find ourselves making compromises in order to protect the rights or interests of others. In contrast, *being* compromised applies when someone is forced to act against their basic values or in a way that threatens their character or that of the organization they serve.

This can be profoundly distressing both in the immediate situation and over the long term. It can be experienced as betrayal. A compromise of character is something to be avoided if at all possible.

Should steps be taken in order that such a decision need not be made again?

Can you prevent this problem from reoccurring by changing a procedure or structure in a way that won't conflict with Salvation Army mission, values or policy? Does the culture of your ministry unit provide opportunity for others to voice dissent? (It's important to understand that voicing dissent is different from insubordination.) What other work can be done to improve ethical decision-making within your unit?

CASE STUDY A

Karen is a twenty-year-old single mother of two young boys, ages three months and two years, who have been living in a homeless shelter for three months. She is a good candidate for a transitional housing program because she has completed high school and one year of college. She presents herself as a competent young woman: alert, communicative, able to maintain eye contact when speaking, and generally has a high level of interpersonal social functioning—all valuable skills for future employment.

There is a history of alcoholism and abuse in her family of origin. The father of her boys was known to have gone to jail for auto theft and assault before the birth of Karen's baby. She has not heard from him for about six months and was not living with him prior to her homelessness. She expresses sadness that he has not seen his baby. She also said he "had a bad temper and hit me a few times."

Angie is a social worker at the homeless shelter and has been working with Karen. A two-bedroom apartment is about to become available through the Transitional Housing Program, an affiliated program of the shelter, and Angie wants to advocate for Karen and her family. A treatment team meeting is scheduled to discuss her case. The day before the meeting, Angie has an appointment with Karen.

During the meeting, Karen confides in the worker that she has met with the father of her children "just so he could see his kids. I know we can't be together." When Angie tells her this could harm her chances for transitional housing due to his history, Karen asks her to please keep it a secret. Without answering this directly, Angie says, "l will do what I can to help get you into transitional housing."

Angie knows that during the treatment team meeting, there will be questions about whether Karen has had any contact with the father of her children. In order to be placed in transitional housing, a client must be likely to achieve self-sufficiency, according to agency policy. The staff member in charge of the Transitional Housing Program has interpreted this to mean the client should not be involved in undesirable interpersonal relationships, even with the father of her children. She believes that such relationships compromise the client's ability to become successfully self-sufficient. She also believes that expediency and maximal utilization of resources supports the exclusion of such clients from the program. If Angie reveals Karen's brief contact with the father, the program director will immediately exclude her from consideration.

Adapted from *From the Front Lines: Student Cases in Social Work*, Juliet Cassuto Rothman (Allyn & Bacon: Boston, 1998), pp. 112-113

CASE STUDY B

Sophia is a young Salvationist in her first year of university. She grew up worshipping in her local corps, was enrolled as a junior soldier, and then as a senior soldier at age 14. She plays in the band, sings in the songsters, and volunteers at the local Salvation Army soup kitchen. She attends the youth Bible study at her corps as well as a weekly Christian fellowship group at her university. She still lives at home with her parents, who are also soldiers. Sophia considers herself saved and has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Most of Sophia's friends have already started dating, but Sophia has not. The opportunities are there. But Sophia remains stand-offish. Her parents tell their friends that "she just hasn't met the right guy yet." They're in no hurry to marry off their daughter anyway, and they are proud that she focuses her energies on education and serving the less fortunate. But Sophia is now feeling subtle pressure from her friends. The unspoken question is, "Why aren't you seeing anyone?"

Following a Sunday morning worship service, Sophia approaches her corps officer, Major Favoni, and asks to make an appointment with her. Later that week, in the privacy of the Major's office, Sophia bursts into tears and confesses that she is gay.

She goes on to express a number of things. She has only ever felt sexual attraction toward girls—sometimes celebrities but sometimes girls she knows from church and school. She's struggled with it for years. One summer, as a young adolescent, she had worked at camp as a counselor-in-training and felt attracted to one of the female counselors. Not sure what to make of it, Sophia mentioned it in confidence to the head counselor, who gently told her that those feelings were sinful and she should pray about it.

Since then, Sophia's attractions to other girls and women have taken up a lot of her prayer life. And her attractions have only become more firmly rooted. Sophia can't come out because she knows her friends at the corps—the girls and the guys—would also view it as sinful. She's heard some of them, as well as some of the senior corps leadership, make casual jokes about gay people and effeminate men. But Sophia is beginning to think that same-sex relationships are not necessarily sinful.

Sophia is lonely and doesn't know how much longer she can wait before she begins to look for a girlfriend. It would only be, she hastens to say, dating. No premarital sex.

Sophia has also found out from some people in her university fellowship group that there is another church in her community that accepts homosexuals as they are and supports same-sex marriage. She wonders if that might be her way out of the closet. Still, she doesn't want to leave her roots and the corps she's grown up in. Most importantly, she doesn't know how her parents will respond.

The reason Sophia has finally opened up to someone is because of an incident that took place last week. It's become obvious to Sophia that some of her friends at the corps now presume she is gay. Whether or not she begins a romantic relationship, Sophia fears she will soon be alienated from her spiritual and biological families.

WORKSHEET 1

Set the Scene
What is the problem?
What is at stake? What drives the problem?
Who is/should be involved in the decision-making process?
Gather and Assess the Information
What is going on? What are the facts? Which are relevant? Which are in dispute? Is there missing information?

Who are the stakeholders?

Would someone outside our group describe the problem differently?

Examine Mission, Values, Principles, Policies and Procedures

Take a look at:

- *the Mission and Values of The Salvation Army in Canada & Bermuda; additional ethical values and principles upheld by your ministry unit; your profession*
- *the organizational policies and procedures upheld by The Salvation Army; your ministry unit; your profession*

Are any at stake or in conflict?

Are any in conflict with personally held values or principles?

Are any in conflict with other practical constraints?

Outline Feasible Alternatives and Make a Decision

Broadly speaking, what courses of action are available?

Evaluate each course of action against the following measures:

- *What are the foreseeable outcomes (harms and benefits)?*

- *Are any rights or responsibilities being breached?*

- *Would it be appropriate for others under similar circumstances to make this decision?*

- *What values is this course of action based on?*

- *Is this the way someone you admire, someone with integrity would act?*

Make a Decision and Act on It

Write down your decision.

Reflect on the Decision

Are there things you would do differently next time?

Does anyone (including you) feel their integrity has been compromised by the decision?

Should steps be taken in order that such a decision need not be made again?

WORKSHEET 2

Evaluate Possible Courses of Action

Standards of Measurement	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
What are the foreseeable outcomes (harms and benefits)?				
Are any rights or responsibilities being breached?				
Would it be appropriate for others under similar circumstances to make this decision?				

What values is this course of action based on?				
Is this the way someone you admire, someone with integrity would act?				