

Glimpse from the Past – Excellence

Excellence, the quest to be the best we can be and a model for others to emulate, has been a mark of The Salvation Army since its inception.

In its earliest days, The Salvation Army was often seen as a collection of renegades, unconcerned with social niceties. It was during those formative times that the call to provide a voice for the unheard, to shine a light into some of the world's darkest places became deeply embedded in the ethos of our organization. And this imperative has birthed excellence through innovation in some of the most unlikely places.

Back in the late 1800s, match factories were renowned, but for all the wrong reasons. Most of the workers were women and children. To produce the matches, wooden sticks were dipped into yellow phosphorus. Inhaling this toxic substance caused a condition known as “phossy jaw” – rotting of the bones of the face which caused horrid disfigurement. And on top of this unsafe environment, the employees in these highly-profitable factories were paid extremely low wages.

Appalled at the physical and economic travesties suffered by the match factory workers, William Booth knew there had to be a better way. So in May 1891, The Salvation Army opened up a factory in London. The “Darkest England” safety matches were made with non-toxic red phosphorus. The factory was clean and well-lit. There was a tea room and staff were paid one-third higher wages than elsewhere. And Booth's response did not end in the factory. The Salvation Army ran campaigns urging grocers to stock only safety matches, providing further pressure on the industry to change its practices.

Booth's innovative response to match factory conditions raised the bar for the industry in England. It forced other factories to follow his lead. They stopped using the toxic yellow phosphorus and wages and working conditions improved. So having achieved their purpose – to boost pay and change match factory standards – The Salvation Army closed its factory in 1901.

Industry maverick is not part of a standard job description for a Salvation Army leader. But Booth, along with many others in his footsteps, was not content to simply wait for others to find a solution to an untenable situation. He knew that better could be done, so he made it happen. And others followed.

“We strive to be the best at what we do and a model for others to emulate.” Those could have been Booth's words. From the match factory to today's Salvos Legal initiative in Australia, the call to excellence through innovation is ongoing.

