

The Ministry Of Reconciliation

They look alike – and they are; – bus drivers, accountants, newly married brides, plumbers, checkout assistants, retired nurses, university professors, unemployed motor mechanics, telephone operators, teachers and doctors. Who are they? They are the kind of people who call upon the Family Tracing Service for help to find missing family members. Generally speaking, they don't look like people with a problem. It is not a need that can be seen in their looks; rather, it is a need to have someone to relate to – someone from whom separation has occurred. The break might have occurred a few months ago, or in the distant past. These people, more than a 1,000 a year, need to restore a broken family relationship – they need someone to love and to love them. People in need don't always look needy – often they look just like us.

One of the statements most frequently heard by the staff of the Family Tracing Service is '*We didn't know that The Salvation Army did this type of work*' and this is not only from the general public but also from members of The Salvation Army and Salvation Army Officers. The questions then asked are:

- How long has this work been going?
- Where did it start?
- What motivated The Salvation Army to start this work?

In fact, the work of tracing family members goes back to the beginning of The Salvation Army's Social Programme and actually started in 1885 as a result of need seen by our Founder, William Booth.

In the 1870's and 1880's there was severe poverty in the rural areas of the United Kingdom and in the larger provincial cities such as Leeds, Birmingham, and Manchester etc. At that time people began making their way to London, looking for fame, fortune and streets paved with gold. Instead they found problems – financial problems, unemployment problems and problems of homelessness. Many of these folk approached The Salvation Army for assistance and more were found by Salvation Army Officers in pathetic situation and helped to re-establish themselves. Meanwhile, in the provinces, their families were also approaching the local Salvation Army; 'My husband, son, daughter, brother went to London and we haven't heard a word for months. Can The Salvation Army help?' William Booth recognized that there was a problem, which probably required not only material but also moral and spiritual support.

William Booth put the matter in the hands of his daughter-in-law Florence, and with his usual approach to challenges, told her to "Do something". So it was that in 1885 there came into being 'Mrs Booth's Enquiry Bureau.' As The Salvation Army expanded and became international so did the work of Mrs Booth's enquiry resource endeavouring to trace people in order to reunite them with their families. Today the Army operates in more than 100 countries.

In New South Wales the work commenced operation on 12 August 1920 and, today approximately 15% of the work handled has an international dimension.

The Family Tracing Service operates as a Community Service offered to the public within the framework of the Social Services Department of the Salvation Army.

It is impossible to estimate how many missing people have been traced since the Enquiry Bureau commenced operations and it would be harder still to measure the heartache and sorrow presented in the lives of both the missing persons and their families. Often it is a loss of inner peace that leads people to suddenly leave home and their loved ones and disappear without any explanation.

It is hard, at times to comprehend that so many families have a member missing but wives, husbands, sons, daughters mothers and fathers are continually leaving without any trace.

Some disappearances may interest the Police sufficiently to cause them to make enquiries. Some people may be able to afford large amounts of money to hire a private detective who will undertake searches both here at home, and overseas, but what about those in humble circumstances who cannot afford a private detective?. Some people don't like to ask the Police for help and so they come to The Salvation Army for assistance. Indeed, we have been called 'God's Detectives', but the difference with our work is, we have a spiritual mission to the family.

Requests come to our office from:-

- ❖ *Ordinary people of diverse backgrounds and cultures*
- ❖ *Government departments*
- ❖ *Other Church denominations*
- ❖ *Salvation Army (International)*
- ❖ *Prison Welfare Officers and chaplains*
- ❖ *Social Workers; Hospice, Nursing Homes and Hostels*
- ❖ *Welfare centres and other community organisation*

From our offices in each state of Australia, our Family Tracing Service uses all available resources to reunite families.

The operations of the Family Tracing Service are active in the following areas:-

- Missing relatives – reuniting and reconciliation of family members
- Crisis contacts – reaching relatives at times of special need or medical emergency
- International service – The Salvation Army is an international organisation and can help restore relationships around the world.

Unfortunately, we cannot accept all cases that come our way.

We do not have the resources to search for young people under the age of 18 years, however, **OASIS** and **SALVO CARE LINE** work in the Kings Cross area of Sydney. This means that there is a positive outreach to homeless young people and those at risk. Other states have similar youth outreach programs.

We do have the right to accept or reject any request for service depending on the reason or motive or the amount of suitable information provided.

We do not handle cases where legal matters exist, e.g. *people searching to serve subpoenas, obtaining a divorce or claiming bad debts.*

In society today we hear a lot about 'reconciliation' and more often than not it is only a word - not an action. In our own small way we put words into action and offer the Ministry of Reconciliation to the Community. Religion, race or creed does not matter. We do what we can to assist and it is essential throughout the whole programme that the privacy and rights of each individual is respected.

A constant check is kept on figures and trends by means of Statistical Reports and these keep us aware of the trends in the work we are doing.

The Family Tracing Service does not receive any Government assistance for this work. The operation of the Family Tracing Service is totally funded by the Red shield Appeal and donations from grateful clients. All we ask of our enquirers is a donation of \$40.00 or \$20.00 if they are on any Government benefit. However, no person will be refused assistance if they are unable to pay.

We hear the cry "Where is my Mum, my Dad, my family? Will you help me find them? The cry of a child in distress? No, but the cry of an adult searching for that special family member who they have not seen for quite some time".

In the majority of enquiries received, there is no question mark over the disappearance of the family member for whom a search has been requested, but rather the breakdown of the family unit. A Mum or Dad who felt that the best thing they could do, once they and their partner lost the love they once had for each other, was to go away and not disturb the family any more. In a situation such as this it is not always the cry for help from an adult child to find their missing parent, but a Mum or Dad searching for their adult child. In some cases we find that grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins are also affected. Our work in the area of the family breakdown has increased from 48% of our work five years ago to approximately 80% of our work today and is a reflection of our society.

A young man can turn his back on his family because the goals that he set for himself were too high and he was unable to achieve them and rather than face what he feels is humiliation from his family, he turns his back on them and walks away. It is he feels, better not to make contact. Then there is the daughter who does not agree with the guidelines set by her parents and she chooses to go her own way. After all, she knows better than Mum and Dad. Eventually she marries, then has children of her own and one day her children come home from school saying, "Mummy, we were talking about Grandmas and Grandpas at school today. Where are mine?" The daughter who left home, then starts her search for the parents she turned her back on.

The task of trying to trace people takes time and time means counseling and offering encouragement.

However, no pressure is brought to bear on those we do find to return home. For some, the past has been very hurtful and full of trauma and at times there is little hope of reuniting them with their families. We respect the privacy of all our clients and the right of the “missing person” to keep their identity and location confidential, if that is their choice.

If people wish to correspond, the Family Tracing service can be used as a “Post Office” for those who do not want their location revealed.

There are many avenues of search open to the Family Tracing service but one of the most successful is through Media exposure. Usually, when a case is broadcast on air or printed in the press there is an immediate response – especially when a photograph is used.

We do have miracles happening in our work in the Family Tracing Service. The work is hard, constant and unending. Patience, empathy and discretion are a necessity and an essential part of our daily work.

To us this is not a nine to five job. Many hours are put into conducting this ministry of The Salvation Army, and because we are Christians, our own faith in God is the driving force of all that we do. We can truly claim to have a Ministry of Reconciliation.

Ours is a privileged ministry and we will continue to do all that we can to ease the heartache of those who come to seek our assistance.