

FOCUS

Aligning International Best Practices for Higher Accountability & Relevancy

Interview with Lieut-Colonel Ian Swan, Officer Commanding of The Salvation Army Hong Kong and Macau Command

Lieut-Colonel Ian Swan was commissioned as an officer of The Salvation Army (the Army) in 1987 and has been serving this international church and NGO ever since. He first came to Hong Kong in 1996 and was later appointed as the Officer Commanding for the Army's Hong Kong and Macau Command in 2013.

The Army was found in 1865 and reached Hong Kong in 1930. With the International Headquarters in London, UK governing Territories and Commands at work in over 130 countries and areas, the Army is obliged to create international governance standards to carry out its mission as "an evangelical part of the universal Christian Church". Governance practices with stringent documentations have been established very early on. "I can show you over 30 years of our strategic plans. It has always been a requirement," Lieut-Colonel Ian said. "Every three years, we are audited internationally. Annually, we have to report on the goals set for the year, and explain the challenges and achievements." There are also international "non-negotiable principles" on board composition including compliance to local legislations, gender equity, and generational distribution. The Army has a Command Governance Council Charter for each Command to ensure newly appointed leaders understand these requirements and are able to maintain an international and localized governance structure with smooth succession.

The unique structure of the Army is based upon a military model. Traditionally, the leadership of the Army are either appointed or elected within its hierarchy. In the then Command Finance Council of Hong Kong, the Officer Commanding was the highest level of policy maker with the support of other senior members of the Command, reporting directly to the headquarters. This model was effective for quick decision making, but focused mainly on financial concerns.

Being back to Hong Kong the second time as the Officer Commanding, Lieut-Colonel Ian felt that there were voices calling for higher standard of NGOs' accountability. "The public want NGOs to do better in due diligence and compliance. The bottom line is a trust issue. For us, because The Salvation Army has been working for 150 years, we are not prepared to sacrifice our reputation. Procedures and policies must be in place to protect the Army and individuals serving within the organization or on the board."

To celebrate its 150th anniversary, the Army started the "Accountability Movement" internationally in 2016 to improve its overall efficiency and relevancy. The Hong Kong and Macau Command then went through a rigorous review of its governance structure. A new "Command Governance Council" was formed in January 2018 to increase diversity and accountability with representation of external stakeholders. "My mantra in the last two years' journey of renewal was not compliance but best practice," Lieut-Colonel Ian shared his beliefs.

In the process of uplifting international governance standards and promoting accountability, Lieut-Colonel Ian said that there was some resistance encountered. "Some of the traditionalists would say we have adopted a corporate model and given up some of the church values," he stated. "And I would say, no, that is why we have this document. Principles of good stewardship, mutual accountability and wise decision making are all key governance standards written in 'A Salvation Army Theology of Governance' with specific references to the Bible, explaining how good governance is consistent with gospel values of integrity, servanthood and transparency."

Lieut-Colonel Ian admitted that leading spiritual and mission renewal is challenging. "There are times that we have to make difficult decisions, but we still want to demonstrate that we recognize God." He reminded leaders to exercise good stewardship in using resources to make a difference, keep in mind that all the strategic plans and budgets will help street sleepers, young people, elderly and other people in need.



Lieut-Colonel Ian (the fifth from right) and the department heads and managers of the Hong Kong and Macau Command



Lieut-Colonel Ian's visit to Bradbury Home of Loving Kindness