

5th August 2026

Armies

"Put on the whole armour of God."

Bible, Ephesians 6:11

Following my reference to the Salvation Army in a recent piece about my granny, I've been corresponding with a friend, and we've been sharing some memories of the Salvation Army in our lives through the years: from the regular visits to the local pub by two Salvation Army women (from the "Sally Ann") selling *The War Cry*, to the tracing of a missing teenager in the streets of London; from a continued commitment to the welfare of "rough sleepers", to journeying alongside people with addictions. How could we not continue to be impressed by the Salvation Army's work?

The Salvation Army was founded in the east end of London in 1865 by one-time Methodist minister William Booth and his wife Catherine, as the "East London Christian Mission". The name "The Salvation Army" developed from an incident in May 1878. William Booth was dictating a letter to his secretary, George Railton, and said, "We are a volunteer army." Bramwell Booth, Catherine and William's son, heard his father and said, "Volunteer? I'm no volunteer, I'm a regular!" Railton was instructed to cross out the word "volunteer" and substitute the word "salvation".

Modelled on the military, with its own flag (or colours) and its own hymns (often with words set to popular tunes sung in the pubs), Booth and the members of the "Salvation Army" would wear the Army's own uniform for meetings and ministry work. He became "The General". Other ministers had "officer" ranks. And other members became "soldiers".

We've grown uneasy with military metaphors in relation to Christian ministry and congregational life. Hymns such as "Stand up, stand up for Jesus", "Fight the Good Fight" and "Onward Christian Soldiers" have largely fallen out of favour. And yet are "army" metaphors not still useful? What is in *our* "armour of God" which St Paul speaks of? What colours do we wear that identify our belonging and purpose? What battles are we waging with injustices and evil? What is our code of behaviour, and to whom do we owe allegiance? Was it not these fundamentals that drew my granny to her regular Tuesday "wee meeting" with the Salvation Army, to strengthen the living faith that had such a big influence on her grandson?

A prayer for today

My army – to protect the poor, to fight for justice, to owe allegiance to a higher cause.

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