Skid-Row Rescue Missions: A Religious Approach to Alcoholism

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ABSTRACT: The focus of this study is on the religious service at which many skid-row rescue missions require attendance to receive benefits. Data were obtained from an observation study of thirty-seven skid-row rescue missions in Los Angeles and Seattle, interviews with ten mission directors, and mission newsletters. The missions use material benefits to attract potential converts. The theme of spiritual conversion is predominant in the mission service (sermons, songs, testimonies). Mission personnel feel they have been called by God, often have backgrounds similar to the people they serve, and view the skid rowers' problems as primarily personal and spiritual. Skid rowers resent the use of religion as bait, view their problems as primarily structural, and use the missions only as a last resort. The missions need to be compared to other alcoholism rehabilitation and religious institutions. A key component to their continued existence is outside Christian supporters.

Introduction

Rescue missions have been almost synonymous with skid row for over 100 years. The earliest missions focused their services toward impoverished and homeless women and children, especially seamen's families. Rooney identifies The Five Points House of Industry in New York, established in 1852, as the first organized relief effort of this kind. Most authors identify Jerry McAuley's Water Street Mission, established in 1872, as the first religious institution opened specifically for homeless (primarily male) individuals.

Wallace, relying on the work of Anderson, found that skid-row men identify three types of skid-row rescue missions. The most professional and bureaucratic of the missions he called the "conservative institutional missions." These missions, usually affiliated with a major denomination or association, traditionally have provided the full range of services: "soap, sleep, soup, and salvation." Wallace also identifies what he calls the "ballyhoo institutional mission" and the "wildcat mission." These two types are distinguished by the fact that they are typically smaller than the "conservative institutional mission" (with the "wildcat mission" being the smallest). These missions are generally private, independent institutions with little or no denominational or or-
ganizational support. They tend to offer more limited services. They typically are founded and directed by individuals who were “twice-born”; that is, ex-alcoholics who were converted to Christianity at a mission. Some of these missions were started by individuals who desired to do pastoral or mission work, but because of personal problems or lack of training they were not able to pursue more conventional religious vocations. Other missions were started by people who felt the larger, more professional missions had strayed from the fundamental focus of conversion first, and physical or material reform second. Still others objected to some missions’ reliance on county, state, and federal funds, feeling that these funding sources compromised their control and religious orientation.

There are also other types of rescue missions that need to be differentiated. First, there are the programs that use “work therapy” as an integral part of their rehabilitation process. Usually this involves the use of program participants to repair salvageable furniture, appliances, and clothing. The best example of this type of program is the Salvation Army’s Harbor Light and Men’s Social Service programs. Additional types of missions are those that are religious in their orientation but do not require attendance at a religious service or instruction to receive benefits (especially many of the Catholic- and Episcopal-run programs) and some of the rescue missions that choose not to emphasize the religious element. The majority of missions do require attendance at religious services or instruction to receive benefits.

Missions are being forced to change some of their methods and programs in response to the changing nature of skid row. Specifically, the skid-row population has begun to change from a viable employment pool and source of political power in the 1920s and early 1930s to an old-age rest home and an open asylum for multiple-problem persons (especially the mentally ill released on the streets as a result of the deinstitutionalization trend within the mental health profession). One mission director stated the changes in this way:

Several years ago the responsibility of the mission was to provide religious services, food, clothing, and shelter to the typical . . . alcoholic, wino and drifter. Today, the mission must be able to change from this single purpose role to a versatile facility caring for . . . displaced families, the drifting or throwaway teen, the unemployed, the handicapped, . . . the discarded old and sick . . . [and] women.

We are also seeing a general dispersal of the traditional skid-row population in many cities. Skid-row types of individuals are forced to look for affordable housing and services in other neighborhoods as the traditional skid-row areas are being redeveloped as a result of negative public attitudes and increased economic competition for urban land. In addition, many missions are making accommodations to a secular world as they compete for health and welfare funds. Some missions are stressing programs that are more amenable to secular funding sources (United Way funds, for example) and playing down their overtly religious orientation. Other programs are increasingly being staffed by mental health professionals who do not necessarily share their religious commitment. Missions are adding new programs, including programs for families,