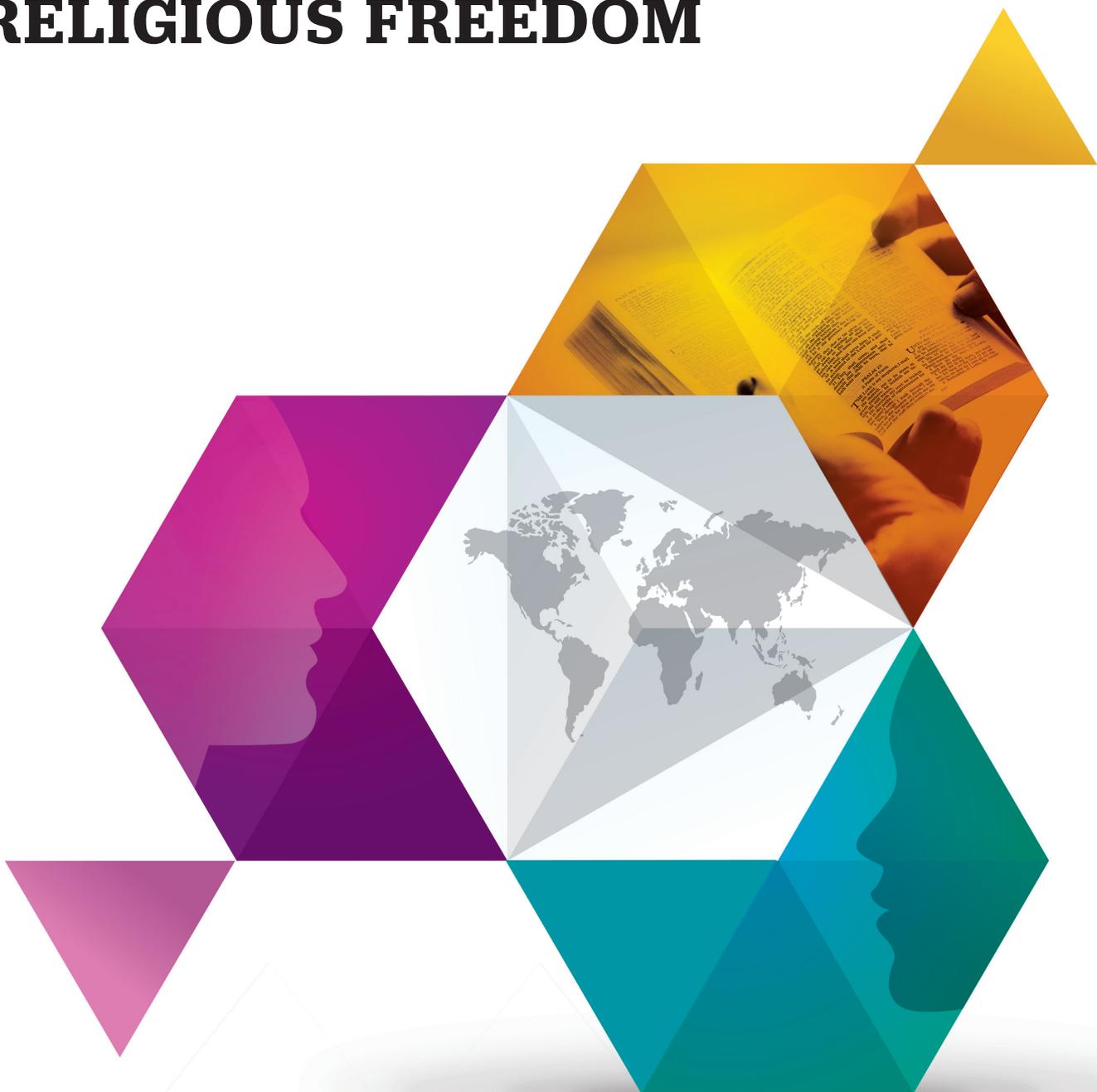




THE SALVATION ARMY
INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army believes that religious freedom is essential to the flourishing of communities and a cornerstone of a healthy, inclusive society. This freedom and the choice it brings has been foundational to The Salvation Army's ability to fulfil its mission: to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human need in his name without discrimination. Therefore, The Salvation Army advocates for religious freedom for people of all faiths and affirms the right of all people to change their religious beliefs.

People should be able to practise, teach and advocate for their religion free from pressures, interference or hostility from governments, other groups or individuals. Such freedom fosters acceptance and tolerance, which are much needed in a troubled world, and contributes

significantly to social cohesion and living in harmony. The Salvation Army believes that the right to choose or practise a religion is an important part of life for all people around the world, and continues to promote a world where people of all faiths can live and grow together in peace and harmony.

With a global footprint in more than 130 countries, The Salvation Army serves within a wide range of cultural and religious contexts, holding the hope that everyone will have the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. In pursuing its mission worldwide, The Salvation Army remains committed to acting with wisdom, love and cultural sensitivity, recognising the diversity of beliefs, listening with humility, and building relationships marked by compassion, understanding and a deep respect for all people.



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Religious freedom is the right to choose what religion to follow and to worship without undue interference.¹ Religious freedom is a fundamental human right that is recognised and protected by international law, including the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UNUDHR), which contains a guarantee of religious freedom alongside freedom of conscience and thought (Articles 18 and 19).² It emphasises ‘freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest [their] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance’.³ Therefore, religious freedom is a fundamental human right to which many countries have committed themselves and acknowledge people’s right to live, speak and act according to their beliefs peacefully, publicly and free from fear, persecution or harm.

Religious freedom has come to be understood as something much more than just the guarantee of religious practice, but recognises faith is often at the heart of people’s individual and cultural identity and daily life. Therefore, supporting people to live their lives peacefully according to their beliefs is critical. However, religious freedom does have some limitations, particularly when it infringes on the rights, safety and dignity of others. The principles of religious freedom have often prevented the religious or cultural majority from the misusing numerical power or indeed the power of state to impose their beliefs on others, providing protection and safety to minority and marginalised groups.

The interpretation and application of religious freedom may vary across countries and legal systems. Some countries have robust legal processes that promote and protect religious freedom. Other countries may legally embrace religious freedom in principle, but in practice some faith communities still experience religious persecution, unnecessary restrictions or discriminatory practices despite these legal processes. This limits or restricts the rights and freedom of certain religious groups, and sadly can lead to violence and persecution of individuals and faith communities.

It is estimated that the majority of the world’s population identify with a religion.⁴ Therefore, valuing, adhering to and upholding the principles of religious freedom promotes a positive environment, and encourages social cohesion and unity in many communities. Religious freedom enables people of diverse faiths to not only live together peacefully but also to come together to carry out acts of kindness, care for the poor and address areas of common concerns at local, national and international levels.

It must be acknowledged that the actions of the Christian Church and community have not always aligned with the peaceful and loving principles of the Christian faith that value religious freedom. However, many churches, including The Salvation Army, are intentionally demonstrating a commitment to respecting and upholding religious freedom by positively engaging with a range of other religious communities.

¹ Freedom of Religion | Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: www.ohchr.org/en/topic/freedom-religion

² The United Nations commitment to the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief was embodied in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This document has been ratified by most countries around the world, which have committed to abide by the terms of the treaty. It addresses the full scope of freedom of religion and the carefully notes the limitations

³ *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 18. The Salvation Army is a signatory to the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*, December 1948

⁴ ‘World’s Population by Religion’: www.populationeducation.org and www.pewresearch.org

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army believes all people are created in the image of God and therefore possess intrinsic and equal value (Genesis 1:26-27). This provides the foundational understanding of human dignity for The Salvation Army that all people should be treated with respect and their dignity upheld without any conditions attached, such as religious beliefs.

While there are limited direct scriptural references to religious freedom, the Bible does clearly speak to the importance of religious choice (Joshua 24:14-15) and urges people to make a clear choice about who they worship and serve (1 Kings 18:21), underlining the basic principles of free will and religious choice. Old Testament prophets highlighted and made clear that God desires people to be in relationship with him and that there are consequences to remaining outside of relationship with him, but they never compelled or forced people to choose God's way (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

The New Testament provides clearer principles and positive examples in its approach to religious freedom. At no point in any of Jesus' teachings or practice did he coerce or manipulate anyone into following him. 'Whoever wants to be my disciple' (Matthew 16:24) highlights the pattern of how Jesus always invited people to follow him, suggesting that faith is only meaningful and authentic when it is freely chosen. Some accepted the invitation to follow Jesus, including Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and the person next to Jesus on the Cross (Luke 23:40-43). Others, like the rich, young man, rejected the invitation (Matthew 19:16-22).

Jesus clearly declares that he is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), and his encounters show that this message must be both proclaimed and lived. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus also demonstrated kindness and compassion in his interactions with those of different beliefs, as seen in his conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-22). These passages affirm that religious freedom creates the space for individuals to hear, wrestle with and respond to the gospel and its promise of eternal life, without fear of punishment, exclusion, coercion or oppression from others in society.

Consequently, followers of Jesus are called to honour individual choice and religious freedom, following Jesus' example of compassion (Luke 10), while holding a deep desire for all to know and be in relationship with him (Romans 5:8). In response to the question 'Who is my neighbour?', Jesus is very clear in his teaching about the importance of loving and respecting one another, irrespective of differing religious beliefs. For the expert in this parable, loving one's neighbour was immediately understood to only loving a fellow Jew, but Jesus expands the message, stressing that a neighbour could be anyone, including those who have a different religious belief to one's own. The characteristics of the Kingdom of God are inclusion, provision of care and hospitality, and, through this parable, Jesus encourages his followers to show love, compassion and respect to others, no matter who they are, in all aspects of their lives.

The Early Church faced many instances of threats to religious freedom as well as religious ►►

▶ persecution, as outlined in the New Testament (Matthew 5:10-11; John 15:18-25; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:14). Similar to New Testament times, the call for followers of Jesus today is to pursue peace and live in harmony despite any differences, however significant they might be (Romans 12:18). In pursuing peaceful means together in a spirit of cooperation, people with differences can thrive in community. This challenge remains a reality in many parts of the world today, where there is religious persecution or where religious freedom is restricted.



PRACTICAL RESPONSES

1. Salvationists are encouraged to learn about religious freedom around the world – what it is, how it works and issues that threaten it.
2. Salvationists should respect others, always demonstrating a loving and compassionate attitude towards those with different beliefs.
3. Salvationists should pray for people who are persecuted for their religious beliefs (Hebrews 3:3).
4. Salvationists are encouraged to share their faith authentically and sensitively, while also honouring and valuing the freedom, choices and rights of others.
5. The Salvation Army can participate in interfaith and ecumenical initiatives and partnerships which seek common areas for cooperation at international, national and local levels.
6. Salvationists are encouraged to welcome into their communities people who have had to flee their homes or countries for their religious beliefs or their country's lack of religious freedom (*IPS on Refugees and Asylum Seekers*).
7. The Salvation Army will promote equality for all employees and value the strengths of all who are from other religious backgrounds working in roles that support Army mission and ministry.
8. The Salvation Army will continue to make its corps and centres places of social cohesion, serving individuals regardless of religious belief, and working together to help communities to flourish and live peacefully with one another.
9. The Salvation Army will advocate for religious freedom at international, national and local levels.
10. Salvation Army corps and centres are encouraged to recognise global days, such as the United Nations International Religious Freedom Day and Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religious Belief Day.



RESOURCES

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Schirmacher, Thomas, 'Defending Religious Freedom of Christians Benefits All', *Journal of the International Institute for Religious Freedom* 2008, Volume 1, Issue 1, pp13–25

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The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters.

