

Supporting Christians in the Marketplace 1993-2001: results of research and survey work

by Alistair Mackenzie

1. INTRODUCTION

I want to talk about the journey I have been on since 1993. So let me begin with some words from Canadian Mennonite Calvin Redekop that have haunted me ever since I first read them almost 15 years ago now.

“Most of us spend almost 40% of our waking time at work. In contrast the average Christian spends less than 2% at church during their working years. Yet the church puts most of its energy into that 2%; almost nothing into the world of work”. (Calvin Redekop)

What Redekop said hit me at a time when I was trying untangle a number of threads of experience. So let me refer to at least three major contributing factors that I am aware of:

Pastoral Experience: As a pastor I had gradually, but also increasingly become self-conscious about the way my gaze became more and more narrowly focussed on creating an event on Sunday that might keep on attracting more and more people. But in a way that was no longer so concerned with how this was connected with Monday to Saturday realities for most people. Yet at the same time I could see Christians struggling to know how to respond in a world of rapidly changing work patterns and changing values in an increasingly aggressive and competitive and pluralistic marketplace.

However, I was beginning to see that church growth, in terms of growing my local congregation, had replaced my vision for growing the kingdom of God. And as I woke up to that fact I started to feel disturbed.

Theology of Mission: At the same time I had been involved in heading up a mission agency and teaching the theology of mission. And I became increasingly concerned that that we were failing to address the mission challenges at home because we were failing to apply the same mission principles and practice to the way we go about being church here. Church here is in come mode. But in other contexts you know you have to go and connect with people where they are in their language and largely on their terms. You can't wait for them to come and connect with you on your territory. And I also became more and more self-conscious about the fact that my teaching was concentrating on equipping and supporting the few people who would become career ministers or missionaries while God's largest mission force was already mobilised everyday of the week and interfacing with the world in the workplace. But we were not intentionally resourcing the grass roots of the church for this missionary encounter. In fact it seemed to me that very few people even saw it as such. Nor how much what happens there will decide the face of the future for the church in our land. And I certainly hadn't really

developed or promoted a theology of mission and ministry which was connected to a theology of the laity, or a theology work and everyday life. Nor had that been a significant part of my theological education. And so I decided to do some post-graduate study to try catch myself up on this.

TSCF: While doing my post-grad work I also worked on the staff of TSCF. And once again I found myself disturbed, but this time by the fact that although we were trying to equip students to live as Christian students we did not really operate out of a longer term view equipping young people to live as Christians for life. And particularly life in the world of work. Nor did we give them much help to think creatively and Christianly about career choices, or business ethics and other things in order to help them better integrate their faith and working lives.

So these are some of the factors that caused Redekop's statement to resonate with me.

2. THESIS OBSERVATIONS

And so I started doing research for a Masters Thesis through Otago primarily as a basis for my own education. I traced historical developments in the theology of work and the Christian understanding of vocation, and also explored practical ways churches can work to see their members better equipped and supported for their daily work in the world

And along the way I noticed a number of things including the following:

1. Sacred/Secular Divide: I noticed how early in the history of the Christian church the sacred secular divide that runs like a fault line through our Western way of seeing things impacted on Christian thinking. The idea that the contemplative life is superior to the active life and the spiritual realm is something superior to and completely separate from the physical realm and consequently a truly spiritual life is related to church activities and ministry separate from everyday life.

And this is very plainly expressed by Eusebius for example in his doctrine of the two lives developed around 300AD:

“Two ways of life were thus given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the possession of wealth, but wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone ... such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, more humble, more human, permits man to join in pure nuptials, and to produce children ... it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion ... a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them.”

2. Encouraging Signs in Christian History: Clearly the influence particularly of Greek dualism impacts very early on Christian theologising in the West in a way that we are still not free from. Although this is not to say that there haven't been numerous attempts to deal with this even in the West in church history. Particularly

as you follow developments in the history of Luther and Calvin and others in the Protestant Reformation and the Puritans and the Wesleyan movement and the Clapham Group and Quaker and Moravian approaches to business as mission and the World Council of Churches in the post-WWII era.

3. The Challenge: However at the same time one of the sobering realisations is that, although a lot of people have started down this trail, still the concern to see the church more active in the world usually gets overtaken by internal church concerns. And so the concern to see a greater emphasis on resourcing the people of God for their ministry in daily life tends to move toward a concentration on providing a few with resources for roles within the church. Clearly those of us who embark on the faith and work journey need to recognise the institutional forces that we are up against.

And there are a variety of other concerns that my study highlighted:

Creation: Concern to see Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians reclaiming a creation theology to operate alongside our redemption theology.

Providence: Concern for a more developed doctrine of providence so that God's sustaining and maintenance work is valued. God at work in the midst of the mundane as well as the miraculous. Then we might be able to see more clearly how our mundane maintenance work is connected to God's work.

Eschatology: The inadequacy of popular eschatology. So few Christians seem to have any sense of everything being caught up in God's saving purposes. And of the big story that the Bible tells, that we find ourselves in, and that everything we do is caught up in. And certainly not of the place of our work in God's big story.

God as Worker: Our God is a worker. And we are made workers in the image of God. This is how the image of God is defined in Genesis, although it's not often written up that way in commentaries or theology texts.

Co-workers with God: God is a worker who invites us to find significance in working as partners with him in his creating and sustaining and transforming work. God's work continues to unfold all the time in every aspect of life and we are encouraged to pray as Jesus taught us to "your kingdom come your will be done on earth even as it is in heaven".

The Work of Father, Son and Spirit: Most of us are part of churches that tend to build on the work of one member of the Trinity more than the others. The Father our creator, or the Son our redeemer, or the Spirit who leads us into the new creation. In fact we are called to work in partnership with all three who work together all the time. Recognising this would help to balance our theology considerably.

Danger! There are some dangers inherent in what I am talking about. When you start to elevate the significance of our work from God's perspective it can easily seem to suggest that this is how we earn or confirm our salvation. Nor do I want to suggest that this work is primarily about our paid employment. Our Western culture has already done a good job of idolizing employment and careers in a way that encourages us to find our identity, status, significance and security in a job.

Centred on Jesus: As Christians we need to find our identity and status in our relationship with God first. This is our primary calling. Called to belong and to be in relationship with God through Jesus first and then to called to do in a way that is also defined by Jesus as we learn to follow him in all of life. So it is a vocation that is centred on Jesus and not the work that we do. And we must get that right. But neither is this discipleship divorced from the work that we do. Because this vocation as followers of Jesus is worked out through our daily activities, all of which are of significance to God. Domestic work, voluntary work and church work as well as employment. And so it is about our whole life's work.

Two Messages: And so the Bible is full of these twin messages about work. It is not how we earn our salvation. But it is the primary way we live out our discipleship. But I believe that the second part of this is not a message that most Christians have understood yet as my survey work has shown which I will talk some more about in just a few minutes.

Anyway there are also many other issues that my research got me thinking about.

Theology way past Practice: For example, while there have been significant advances in our theologies of ministry and mission and the laity, that recognise the many ways that daily work in the world does count from God's perspective, this is seldom reflected in the way we do church. Our theology has run way past our practice.

Non-Christians Taking Lead: Many academic conversations about spirituality in the workplace are now being initiated by non-Christians, especially Western Buddhists and New-Agers. We need to be better prepared to understand what is happening and to address the issues that are being raised

Experience of Women and Blue Collar Workers: The experience of women in the workforce has been different to that of men and their voices have raised some challenging questions for us. I have described some of these challenges from New Zealand women outside the church in my thesis. How much are we listening to the experiences and questions of women at Laidlaw College? But also, where in academic discussions in Christian circles are the voices of blue-collar workers to be heard these days? And also voices from other cultural backgrounds?

So this is some of the stuff that my thesis got me thinking about.

But, as you know, theses are by their nature pretty academic documents and it wasn't long before some friends of mine who were mostly business people started to say to me, "Hey Alistair are you ever going to bring some of these highflown ideas down to earth?"

Naturally, I responded a bit defensively saying "But I thought that was your job".

But they said "We need some help."

To which I said "Well I'd like to help but really I'm not an expert and I don't have the time, nor the money."

To which their response was, "Well if we put up the money will you make the time?"

3. FAITH AT WORK SURVEY

I began with a 6 month intensive survey questioning Christians about ways they saw their faith connected to their approach to work and asking, "Are there any ways in which you might appreciate more help from us or the church?" (This involved 100 in-depth individual interviews, plus a number of discussion groups and seminars and numerous less formal encounters).

And so I want to tell you about the results of this survey because this is the raw material that has shaped most of my teaching and research and writing since then. And mostly I have found that these results still hold true now. And I think they represent a number of issues that we still need to address in our classrooms.

3.1 The Results:

1. Work is for Evangelism: Most people began by assuming that I wanted to talk with them about how they were getting on evangelising their workmates. Most said (many self-consciously in a way that made both of us feel uncomfortable) that they weren't very good at that. Many wondered if I should really be talking to them for this reason. This does seem to be the main way that most people think that God (or at least the church) values so called "secular" employment, a term often used by people in these conversations, although personally I think it betrays a sub-Christian understanding of the fact that for Christians no sphere is secular but every activity takes place in sacred space where God is involved.

2. Work is for Evangelism and Money: For most Christians the church is seen to value employment primarily for what it means in terms of evangelism first and money second. Work expands our circle of contact with non-Christians and it provides money for the support of our families and the church and parachurch ministries. I believe this is a woefully inadequate understanding, whether we intend to convey it or not. What is clear is that most Christians do not feel that what they do most of the time really matters to God.

3. Helping Professions and Others: At the same time it is also important to note that Christians do clearly fall into two distinct groups when it comes to talking about how they feel God views their work. And here I distinguish between people involved in what might be broadly identified as the helping professions and those involved in other jobs.

Those in the helping professions, which include doctors, nurses, social workers, counsellors and teachers were generally happy to use the word ‘ministry’ in connection with their work. They see their work itself as ministry in some sense. It is plain that people who are involved in more direct, person-to-person, service kinds of jobs feel that their work counts from God's perspective and that somehow the church affirms that this work is ministry. To some extent this is also true for parents who are working at home and who devote large chunks of their time to their families. The church seems to affirm that this kind of work also has a ministry or service component to it, although some mothers I talked to felt that this view of their work was diminishing.

The flip side of the church's affirmation of those in service jobs is that those whose work lacks this sense of direct person-to-person service feel that their work is not in itself of value to God or the church and is not ministry. People who struggle to connect their work to their faith include factory workers, manufacturers, accountants, desk-bound office workers, many business people and those involved in commercial or industrial work; those who feel somewhat removed from meeting people at their particular point of need. These people seldom talk about their work in itself as ministry. Rather they look for ministry opportunities in the relationships that their work opens up for them. People who are involved in primarily technical jobs, where they are utilising practical skills rather than being in direct contact with other people eg. engineers, computer programmers often feel disconnected from God while they're performing these kinds of functions and struggle to find specific ways to nurture their faith and sense of God in their work.

4. And then there were a number of other more specifically faith-related responses that surfaced frequently including:

- (a) **All Christians equal, but some more equal.** Regularly I heard comments that amounted to something about all Christians being equal, but those involved in “full-time Christian service” being somehow more equal. Most people feel that there is still a hierarchy of significance in terms of ministry, with missionaries and pastors at the top, then other “full-time” Christian workers, then part-time pastoral staff, then elders, then deacons, then other volunteer workers in church activities, then those who are solely involved in full-time “secular” work. This “full-time Christian service” and “secular work” talk is still very common. And although a lot of people didn't think that it should be like this in theory, most thought that it is still this way in practice. Even in their own minds.
- (b) **No sermons about work:** Most people could not remember ever hearing a sermon on work
- (c) **No teaching about work:** Most had never heard any teaching about where work fits into God's purposes.
- (d) **No songs about work:** Only a couple of people could identify any church songs that refer to work. How important are the songs we sing in shaping our theology? Certainly it would seem that a good argument could be made

suggesting that it is often more words of the songs that we sing that we keep on rehearsing in our heads during the week than the words of the sermons we hear.

- (e) **No prayers about work:** Most could not remember any prayers being prayed specifically about work, except with reference to evangelism. Some Anglicans and Catholics thought there might be some reference to daily work in the intercessory portion of their liturgy, but couldn't remember the details.
- (f) **No small group discussions about work:** Only rarely did work come up as a topic in small group discussions, Pastors generally think that small groups are where people talk about faith and work concerns. But people told me this is not so. My conclusion is that whatever is put on the agenda in the congregational setting also shapes the agenda in other settings associated with church, unless this discussion is deliberately driven by group leaders with a different perspective.
- (g) **Church leaders not interested:** Church leaders seldom express much interest in people's work and most people have never been visited by church leaders at work. Most business people think that church leaders have a negative view of business because they only use negative examples of business ethics and exploitation in their preaching.
- (h) **No marketplace models:** Most people couldn't think of any particular Christian marketplace models except some sportspeople (Michael Jones) and popstars (Cliff Richard) and one or two politicians (mostly William Wilberforce).
- (i) **Resignation:** Most people have now grown accustomed (or "resigned", some used this word) to the fact that church is not likely to address their work realities. Although most said they would appreciate it if it happened. (Although to be honest a few others also said that they came to church to get away from the world of work and didn't want these issues intruding into church. And some others said that, although they were still believers, they had given up on church now because it failed to address real-life issues for them.)
- (j) **No books or courses:** Most had never read a book or attended any course that talked about faith and work issues.
- (k) **Work Pressures:** Most felt that work pressures were impacting on their involvement at home and in church.
- (l) **The problem other Christians present:** In response to the question, "What is the most difficult thing that you experience as Christian at work?", I was surprised how many times I was told "The other Christians I work with." This included both the super-spiritual behaviour and utterances of excessively zealous believers who take their faith very seriously, but not their work, and the sub-Christian behaviour of those who have publicly identified themselves as

believers. The poor ethics of some so-called “Christian” firms was cited as a major source of embarrassment in some industries.

Overall, I concluded that many Christians do feel disappointed that the church does not often address issues that relate to the events that most of their lives are invested in. But mostly this is a vague discomfort that has never been clearly articulated by them, nor for them by others yet in a way that they have been able to say a clear “Yes” to. Mostly they are still looking for help to name the nature of that discomfort and identify the issues that it stems from. But I did notice how many people started to get hooked into our conversation as it progressed and became more animated as they realised I was serious about exploring the wider implications of faith for their work. And mostly they were keen to go further exploring the issues than just my interview allowed.

3.2 The Issues:

What did I conclude about the faith issues that needed to be addressed?

1. Christian witness seems to have become too narrowly associated just with talking about Jesus and the road to salvation and to underestimate the significance of our attitudes and actions and other words at work as part of our witness.
2. We need to clarify some realistic expectations and approaches to evangelism. It seems that we need to find a way of discovering a more everyday faith that we can wear more naturally and comfortably in the marketplace
3. Most Christians (especially those outside the helping professions, although I think they also need help to expand their view) need help to see how our work and God’s work are connected much more than we’ve usually thought by expanding our view of God and of God’s work
4. Can we help bridge the sacred/secular divide? Can church on Sunday become better connected with work on Monday? Or our classroom teaching be approached in ways that help to overcome the serious divide that many people feel exists between our spiritual activities and what people talk about happening in the “real world”.
5. When will the church start regularly singing songs and praying prayers and celebrating festivals that pick up on daily work and other important parts of our lives?
6. People need more help to understand how we experience God’s guidance and how Christians should approach career and life planning. In the Press newspaper in February last year there was some research quoted that said young people can now expect to have 29 different jobs during their life times and to go through 5 major career changes. This both makes it very important that people don’t stake identity and security in their jobs, but also that they learn to make good choices and Christian choices in circumstances that are constantly in flux. Surely a Christian understanding of vocation would help. It is time to rediscover the church’s ministry of vocational guidance.

7. We seldom ever recognise the roles that people play outside the church in formal ways, or specifically work to equip them for these, or commission or ordain people to them, or intentionally support them in them. We could, couldn't we?
8. How do we balance competing time demands when most people are operating under more pressure than they want to? Will the church help by supplying the glue that helps people integrate pressured lives, or does church just represent another set of expectations and pressures heaped on already very demanding lives? Do churches need to revise expectations and structural demands?
9. How do we help people personally nurture faith in this sort of pressured and chaotic environment? What does prayer look like in the fast lane?. Can we practise the presence of God in the modern marketplace, or is this just an impossible dream? What does an everyday spirituality look like? Can it be practiced in ways that don't demand week long retreats and physical escape? Because certainly most of our models for prayer and spirituality are retreating ones that demand space and silence and time apart from normal working life.
10. What about Christian ethics in the modern marketplace? How can we live out Christian values in this new pluralistic setting and in an increasingly aggressive and competitive environment where there are all sorts of temptations to give truth new twists and to take ethically dubious shortcuts to make quicker progress? What are the core values a Christian ought to concentrate on nurturing? How do we use the Bible when even Christians can't agree about so many issues? Can we promote a more helpful discussion about faith and economics in the church?

3.3 How do we gain and retain a sense of vocation in practice?

As a result of my research I have identified the following components that I think are required for people to grow and retain a clear sense of vocation for themselves.

I. Connection: a theological framework and spirituality that connects faith and everyday life.

Theology: To understand what God is doing and gain a sense that we are participating in something of ultimate significance. A theological understanding of vocation and daily work which imparts purpose to our lives.

Spirituality: An active spirituality which nurtures a sense of continuing connectedness to God and God's work.

II. Fit: feeling that the person we are fits the work we are doing.

Gift Fit: To understand the gifts, abilities, passion and personality that make us unique and help to define the work we are best fitted to do.

Ethical Fit: that connects our values to the work we are doing.

III. Service:

To be of service to others, so that our search for significance also makes a worthwhile investment in God's wider purposes and the lives of other people.

IV. Balance:

To establish a balance in our lives that enables us to express our vocation through a mixture of domestic and voluntary work and leisure, as well as employment. To find meaning in the whole of life by understanding the functions that different parts play and how they are harmonised.

V. Encouragement:

To gain support and encouragement from a community of committed companions. This may include family, friends, mentors and faith community.

For a healthy sense of vocation to grow and be sustained a combination of these elements needs to be present.

SoulPurpose is found where God's purposes, your gifts and gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

It is sustained by balance and the encouragement of committed companions.

Many problems related to finding meaning and purpose in our work are the result of the lack of, or confusion about, one or more of the elements above. These often correspond with times of transition and change either forced on people by circumstances or as a natural result of maturing. People in transition often need help to understand what is happening to them and to reformulate their understanding and to readjust their lives. At such times, something like the list above may be useful to help us discern the areas in which a person is most needing assistance.