

Supporting Christians at Work

by

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Diocese of Hereford

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Supporting Christians at Work

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Background:

Too often we give the impression that work is part of the 'secular' world and that the 'real work', God's work, only gets done in church or through the church in our neighbourhoods. We believe that work is not a side issue for a special interest group; it is an issue for the whole church. It is a basic assumption of the project that life should not be separated into the 'sacred' and the 'secular'; we believe that all of life is sacred to God and consequently to ourselves. The 'Christians at Work' project aims to enable people to be more effective in their place of work and encourage churches to support them, through prayer, teaching and action.

The workplace is where many of us spend much of our time and it is often where people who don't know Jesus can be found, it is an ideal place for 'appropriate' mission, ministry and witness. Thus our Christians at work need our support, encouragement and prayers; this is the purpose of this unit.

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SESSION 1: THE QUESTION WHY?

Notes:

Introduction

We spend, on average, somewhere between 9-13 years of our life in the workplace (Source: *'God's Little Devotional Book for the Workplace (2001)*). That, my friends is a lot of time, second only to sleeping!

What do we do, as a church, to support Christians in the workplace? Perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps it needs to be based around the words 'not do'. We now need to explore this a little more deeply.

Activity 1

'I spend an hour a week teaching Sunday school and they haul me up in front of the church to pray for me. The rest of the week I'm a full time teacher and the church has never prayed for me. That says it all'

*after Christians at Work www.christiansatwork.org.uk (2004)
and Greene (2001)*

Spend a few minutes reflecting upon the 'why' of this statement. You might want to ask the question 'How often do we acknowledge those in the workplace within:

- *our regular worship;*
- *prayer groups;*
- *house groups?'*

Identifying a problem

Our Sunday school teacher probably expresses the way a number of us feel. We are all busy people. We are faced with an ever changing workplace, more so than ever before. Technology has never moved so fast, faster than it ever did during the industrial revolution. As a result we have fewer people doing longer hours. Many are cramming 60 hours into a 5-day working week.

Activity 2

Why then, does our teacher feel the way she does? Why do the comments above reflect a lack of support? You might like to examine each of these statements:

- *It's not my role....it is the role of those who lead us;*
- *Where are the clergy in all of this? Are they too closed in their thinking?*
- *We are limited in our view and understanding of mission, we knock on a few doors.....hand out leaflets.....*

How would you answer these comments?

Some thoughts for after the activity

- Christ, in John's Gospel, tells us that it is the role of all of us, as God's people, to spread the good news;
- We need to go beyond the safe insularity of church and our definition of the word 'church' itself.
- We need to discard the notion of buildings and meetings, whether we are 1662 or charismatic.....ministers, both ordained and lay, should equip and guide;
- Our limited view of mission and evangelism, can be very comfortable and safe.
- We need to remember that what other people believe is not our business....now there's a follow up discussion point!

Another view?

What about the person who looks upon Sunday as the 'day off'. This is the day when work can be put away. This is the day for church and rest. What has God got to do with brewing or fixing tyres to car wheels?

This is understandable, but it could reflect an attitude that suggests God is only for Sundays!

Activity 3

Are the needs of this person different to that of our teacher, or are they the same? You might want to draw up a couple of lists of perceived needs and compare them.

Work itself

Generally speaking, work is taken for granted, especially when there is relatively full employment. It could be argued (see Dow 1994) that at such times, Christian concern is taken up with life in the church.

Now, in your imagination, move to a time of recession. It is the social needs of unemployment that concern the church. There is no thought about the meaning of work.

Activity 4

Have we identified problems? Have we solved them? Spend a few moments to summarise the story so far.

Why do you think it is important to give close thought to the issue?

Notes:

Some thoughts for after the activity

Dow (1994) clearly identifies a need for addressing the issues of Christians at work. He divides his thoughts into three broad areas:

1. The Place of Work in the Purposes Of God.
2. Daily Working Life and Sunday Worship.
3. The Gospel As A Challenge to the Prevailing Values of Society.

*From: Dow, D. (1996)'A Christian Understanding of Daily Work'
Grove: Cambridge*

1. The Place of Work in the Purposes of God

If faith and daily life are to be properly integrated, Christian people must have a good understanding of how their occupation fits with God's purposes. They will then be ready to see themselves as servants of God in that occupation just as much as in 'church' work.

Christian people who see that their occupation is important to God in his purposes for a healthy world are helped to have a positive outlook on their daily work routine.

(Pause here....have a look at Genesis 1.26-2.2....the man is being told to take care of the garden...to tend...to work...this links together creation and work. We will return to this in Session 2)

With a good understanding of the direction of God's purposes through work, Christian people can make a more constructive contribution to the work patterns in their place of work.

2. Daily Working Life and Sunday Worship

We need to give greater prominence to the realities of daily working life in the context of our Sunday services. We are seriously open to the charge that our worship is irrelevant when it relates so little to the daily working week of most of the church members or to those outside the church.

3. The Gospel as a Challenge to the Prevailing Values of Society

The gospel presents a challenge to the prevailing values on which our society and its institutions are based. Moreover, this challenge needs to be presented publicly.

With over two million people unemployed we have a serious social problem. To be without paid employment not only reduces income for most people to little more than subsistence level, but it also sets them in a position of sharp contrast in status and income from those who are in employment. Those without employment suffer serious loss of self-esteem and meaning in their lives, a loss placed upon them by force of circumstances.

Notes:

SUPPORTING CHRISTIANS AT WORK

Secondly, serious stress is developing in our nation. Many of those who are in work are being worked harder and harder for longer and longer hours. A recent survey (in Greene (2001)) showed that in Britain the percentage of men working over 46 hours a week is 42%, the highest in Western Europe, whereas in Germany it is 14%. This is having an effect in our churches: attendance at midweek church meetings has declined because of these pressures.

Thirdly, most of our institutions are in crisis as one change follows another with great rapidity. Here again is great potential for stress of which the government seems unaware.

Dow, it seems, is asking the same questions of both the teacher and the 'Sunday day off' example. He is also laying down a number of challenges for you/us.

Perhaps we have temporarily finished with the question 'why?'. Dow is now guiding us to the next step of 'how?'. How can we support ourselves and our fellow Christians in work?

So what about you? Can you identify with the teacher or the 'Sunday day off' example? It might be time for you to take stock.

Activity 5

Use the headings below to kick-start thinking about yourself. In unit 2 we will begin to explore the issues of the workplace. NB. This could be a 'partner' exercise or a written response.

My role....don't forget retired or unemployed are all valid answers;

What sort of person does my job require me to be?....decisive, able to work with others, a robot?;

- *Pressures?....time, tiring, need to be ruthless;*
- *Who controls what happens in my situation?*
- *What values are used to justify that power?*
- *How is that role justified from a Christian point of view?*
- *If God were to make work perfect, what would I need him to do?*



Notes:

SESSION 2: THE ISSUES OF WORK 1

Notes:

Introduction

So far we have examined the question 'why?'. Hopefully this has started you to think about this important and often neglected area of ministry. Jesus tells us, in John's Gospel, that we are all required to go out and spread the word, so how do we equip ourselves and how do we facilitate others?

Activity 1

Firstly we need to revisit the passage in John. You will find it in chapter 17 vv 20-26. Here Jesus prays for all believers. His prayer is not just for the few, but for all who believe in Him.

'...may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.....'

Jesus is telling us to let the world know about Him. This is, if you like, our mandate, the underpinning of what we are trying to achieve in supporting our friends and colleagues as they seek to become active Christians in the workplace.

Now we have established the 'why?', let's move on.

Activity 2

Last time you were set the task of answering a set of questions yourself.

Look at your responses. Spend time discussing them and try to identify common responses, especially to the last few questions.

You might like to use a heading such as 'What are the problems facing Christians in the workplace today?'

Identifying a problem

British workers work longer than anyone else in the EU (Source: Worrall, L. and Cooper C. (1999) *The Quality of Working Life, 1999 Survey of Management* Institute of Management). Stress, anxiety, depression are recognised as becoming too common. The same source reflects that concern over long hours and the lack of balance between work and the rest of life has reduced dramatically. Lifestyle measures were used to measure impact over a two-year period.

- 87% thought they had no time for other interests;
- 71% thought work damaged their health;
- 86% said their relationship with their children was affected;
- 79% said their relationship with their partner was affected;
- 68% said long hours eventually reduced productivity.

Notes:

The pressing question is how to encourage Christians at work to maintain a balanced lifestyle.

Activity 3

Who does this apply to? The professions? White collar workers? The factory floor? Your questionnaire might help.

Greene (2001) suggests that the general need for longer hours is not materialism or ambition but a genuine fear that if they don't work hard, their employers will replace them.

Values in the workplace (Greene (2001))

Greene identifies some companies as having 'promising' value statements:

'.....many corporate value statements make encouraging reading. Here is Barclays':

- We approach every aspect of our work with the highest standards of integrity.
- We value our customers.
- We approach our work as a professional team.
- We treat each other as we wish to be treated ourselves.'

Activity 4

Do statements like this make a difference? I would encourage you to use the phrase 'only if....' In your thinking!!

Anxiety, distrust, and exhaustion, symptoms it would seem all too familiar in the modern workplace. How then can we begin to help create work/life balance?

Reflection

Consider that many businesses were established upon Christian principles – Barclays, Cadbury, Lloyds Bank. *Can you list local businesses established upon the same principles?*

Many existed to promote social justice. Now what has God got to do with work? Modern views are based around cause and effect. B happens because A happened first. God has no part in this. He is left at the door. Greene (2001) calls this 'Practical Atheism'.

People today meet more people in a day than other generations met in a lifetime. Speed of communication has increased a million times over the last few years. People change jobs regularly. Relationships are transient. People are becoming 'functional machines' Machine can equal indifference!

Work encourages the individual. There is competition in teams.

Then of course there is consumerism, materialism...the bigger car...the trappings of success. We want more money.

Greene (2001) suggests that:

'The fundamental decision that British society has made is to value money before time'

Work becomes identified with worth.

Beginning to move forward

How can we begin to turn this on its head? How can we create time for ourselves and for God? Indeed, why should we?

Activity 5

Have a look at this extract from Genesis 1:

'Let us make humankind in our image.. .let them rule all the creatures.. .male and female he created them...' 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and it. Rule over.. .every living creature.' 'I give you every plant.. .for food.' 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.' 'By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.'

(Genesis 1.26-2.2)

Later, in Genesis 2, man is well placed in a garden which he is told to work in and look after (2.15).

What does this tell us?

Reflection upon the reading

'Important connections are indicated here between work and creativity, work and leisure/work and satisfaction, work and human community, work and livelihood, work and the product, work and worship. The Genesis accounts see God's intended pattern for people everywhere as partnership with him. It is as if he says: I have made the world and I have made you; now rule over the world for me and with me. The answer given in Genesis 1 to the question, 'Why did God create me?' is 'To manage his world.' Our daily occupation, or daily work, is an expression of this partnership'.

Dow (1994)

Activity 6

Now we come to the 'How?' question.

By now you should have discussed the issues surrounding why there is a need to support Christians at work and, following this session should have an idea of the issues of work.

In preparation for next time it would be useful to reflect on the following.....

How can we, as a church, church group, house group etc. help Christians within our own church in their workplace?

These headings might help:

- i) Mission*
- ii) Bringing faith, work and life together*
- iii) Being conscious of faith in the workplace*
- iv) Listening....individuals....groups*
- v) Facilitating*
- vi) Being Salt and Light?*

Again, this could be a written response or a 'partner/group' exercise.

Notes:



SESSION 3: THE ISSUES OF WORK 2

Notes:

Introduction

We haven't got the time! Support in the workplace does not necessarily need time. Rather it requires a commitment to use the time we have to adjust our thinking.

'A year ago I preached four sermons on work. I have never had such positive feedback on anything we have done. People's excitement at the relevance of the Bible to their daily life was exhilarating.'

Revd David Morris

Is there, perhaps, a way of integrating the workplace into our regular worship?

Activity 1

Take a blank sheet of paper. *Can you begin to make a list of how the workplace is integrated into your place of worship?*

This might be an activity that can run throughout the session.

Greene (2001) identifies four key areas where support for those in the workplace is needed. There is a need to:

- 1) help people to integrate faith and work
- 2) create and maintain that faith in the workplace
- 3) listen to the needs of those in the workplace
- 4) facilitate support.

Let's take in a little more detail.

Activity 2

The Biblical framework can be constructed around the need of the worker to understand that their work matters, not just to themselves and those they work with, but to God. For many of us our work (paid or unpaid) can be seen as part of God's plan for us.

A major part of who we are as individuals is defined by our relationship with God and with each other and not just by how much money we have or by what we do. Should there, therefore, be an expectation of support from those in Christian fellowship with us?

Discussion point – How do we help people to move away from the notion that work is perhaps an idol in their life?

Greene goes on to remark that the key to support in the workplace is not about massive sermons year in year out, but rather churches providing an active framework of support and then 'topping it up' with encouraging sermons and prayers as time goes on.

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We need to help people to challenge the moral choices they face on a day to day basis. These could be in the micro environment of working 1:1 or in small groups, or on an organisation basis or even the larger political stage.

We, as a Church, are often regarded as an emergency service....there for the crisis! We know these crisis events will happen and we should be ready to offer support as appropriate.

How are we (*please note the word here....we*) going to deal with these events?

However, the key is to devise appropriate structures for us that will enable individuals to build up trust among each other and within their church.

Activity 3

*Do you regard your church as a listening church?
Again I have chosen my words carefully...**church**, not minister or prayer group.*

'Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable'

David Ausburger

OK...so how do you listen....is there more than one way? Are there dangers and pitfalls? Ethics to consider?

Does your church visit the workplace? Do you know the range of employment in your churchnot just 'she's a teacher'?. What kind? Has anyone ever asked? Go back to our teacher in Session 1.

The power of the questionnaire

This carries a government health warning. The great research tomes of Robson and the like tell us that questionnaires alone can't tell us everything. But there is nothing better than a single side of A4 to get the discussion going!

Activity 4

Another blank piece of paper. You can ask up to four questions. What would you ask your congregation about their workplace needs?

Can you use a 'one size fits all' questionnaire?

Does anyone in the congregation take a professional journal or magazine....you know 'Nail Pointers Monthly' or some such riveting read? What about cutting out articles and creating a prayer board?

Notes:

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'So how was work today dear?' This is probably it. The home is not usually the place for deep discussion about work. How can we provide the opportunities for such discussion.

The 'opt out' group.

This is an opportunity for a person to opt out of a regular house group for a fixed period and 'opt in' to a workplace group to receive a listening ear and a chance to be prayed with and for. This could be extended to:

The interest group.

What is the collective noun for a collection of teachers, office workers....etc.? Could your church run such a set of groups perhaps on a similar 'option' plan?

Activity 5

Now do you see my reasoning for suggesting Activity 1 continues for the session length? What was the question?

Can you begin to make a list of how the workplace is integrated into your place of worship?

After considering the points above:

- *Share your list*
- *Begin thinking about how this might be amended to what **could** be done.*

Bring your amended list next time as we turn to the practical ideas that we have hinted about here. We will also need to look closely at practical ethics.

Notes:

SESSION 4: THE PRACTICAL BIT ...

Notes:

Introduction

Those students who work with me in one of our great palaces of learning know that I have a favourite phrase from a work by a researcher called Judith Bell.....'*procrastination is not an excuse*' Bell (1998). This is one of the reasons why I designed this as a '3 plus 1' exercise, 3 to ponder and 1 to begin the 'doing'.

One of the biggest causes of procrastination is fear. Fear of all the 'what ifs' and 'ah buts'. Jesus tells us that spreading the good news in general is not easy (*Luke 21*). Even more difficult, then, if we are working in a materialistic environment. So what can we do?

Here are a number of practical issues for you to address. You will need to be in small groups, each tackling one activity.

GROUP A

How would you set about designing a 'work service'?

Do we need to begin with a blank sheet of paper? Could existing liturgy help?

This is something more than just a nod in the intercessions. It could revolve around:

- An interview with a church member (what about our teacher who feels excluded?).
- How does an occupation help serve God's purpose?
- Intercessions based around a specific occupation?

How would you choose hymns, readings, collects?

One service or a series?

GROUP B

How would you plan an exhibition....display....mobile resource, around the theme of Christians at Work for your place of worship to enhance a service about work?

Some pointers:

- Start by talking to the group about what they do.
- How would the exhibition fit in with the planning of the major service above.

GROUP C

You have been asked to provide a daily prayer leaflet to give out at the end of the service on work or use in house groups. What might it look like?

Remember: Prayer leaflets can be a 'turn off' if they are too long. Four or five simple prayers can have a greater effect than a whole book!

WHOLE GROUP ACTIVITY

Now you need to bring this all together. You might need to have a discussion and then go away and think about the consequences of your deliberation.

You will notice that I have offered little content. If I did I would be going against the whole ethos of this package. Your place(s) of worship are exactly that.

Make sure that you plan your act of worship – **don't walk away from it**. Form it up and use it.

Ask yourself this question, 'How would our young teacher from Session 1 react to your proposals?'

Now repeat the activities above inserting the words 'house group'.

Some illustrations for all groups:

General prayer is a way in to raising the issues of work....in confession pray about relationships at home, work, school, etc.

Starting a new job....if someone is starting a new job, pray for them. Pray for people in general beginning new work each month.

Dismissal.....face the door...the blessing helps you out of the door and into the world.

The offering.....money from the fruits of our labours....bread and wine from the farmer, the baker, the vineyard

Adapted from Greene (2001)

Finally

How effective have we been? You have to ask. Try using the questions from the earlier units after you have used your service and remember. Examine your feedback and plan on the basis of all you have learned.

God bless.

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All references are noted and acknowledged where known.

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