

Excerpt from: *The Sacred Meaning of Everyday Work*

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Appendix D

The Opportunity for Churches

Churches Could Serve and Engage Many More People By Meeting Their Work-Related Spiritual Needs

Many people want to experience a deeper sense of purpose and fulfillment in their work; a work life ministry can help them achieve this. This ministry can help them develop a deeper awareness of God as they go through their work week. It can help them develop the strength and wisdom to overcome obstacles, understand how their work contributes to the well-being of others, and build community. And it can introduce them to spiritual practices that connect them with their deeper purpose.

This is not just a church growth issue. It is an opportunity for the church to fulfill its mission in a way that can significantly affect the lives of a substantial number of people.

There are exclusively secular programs that cater to some of our professional needs; these are often based on lessons learned from actual work experience and research in various social science fields. These programs can be of considerable value, but their predominantly secular approach ignores the natural human desire to connect with something deeper than ourselves and to reflect this sense of connection in our daily lives. Without a theological or spiritual grounding, purely secular programs are less helpful than they might otherwise be.

Therefore, a church-based approach that combines practical work-related knowledge and experience with theological and spiritual reflection could meet a very large need among adults for whom work is important. A church could meet this need through a combination of sermons,

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specialized small groups, speaking events that address work-related issues, fellowship opportunities, pastoral and lay counseling, and other offerings.

An effective church-based ministry needs to understand the work-related spiritual needs of the people it hopes to serve. It should also reflect a reasonable understanding of the contemporary environments within which they work.

Spiritual Needs in the Workplace

People and their work vary greatly; it is critical to avoid over-generalizing. Nevertheless, here are some of the more common spiritual needs.

1. People seek a deeper sense of purpose in their work. Most people want to experience a sense of connection with something deeper or larger than themselves—for most, this means a greater awareness of God as they work. And many have a corresponding desire to contribute to the greater good and the well-being of other people. Understanding how they can express these through their work can form the basis for a deeper sense of purpose.
2. People face serious challenges in their work lives that get in the way of shalom. These come in the form of various sins, misfortunes, and adversities. Spiritual strength and insights can help them overcome these.
3. Many people are interested in prayer and other spiritual practices; a large percentage of people pray frequently. We can help them find practices that fit into the rhythm of their work and help them quickly turn their attention toward God. These practices can help them stay calm amidst stress and conflict, refocus their attention, and reconnect with their deeper purpose.
4. The virtues taught by most churches, like integrity, kindness, hope, humility, and courage, help people overcome obstacles more effectively. They also help us live better and open us to lives of spiritual depth.

5. Most of us desire professional growth; this is increasingly important in the modern workplace. While this is often seen in secular terms, professional growth can also have a spiritual dimension.
6. People form friendships and community in their work lives, but for most of us, there also comes a time when we need a community of peers apart from our work. Such a community can become a sounding board for reflection and a source of support during times of stress.

Program Options

One might start by considering the following options:

1. **Sermon Series on Faith and Work Issues:** This is a good place to start the conversation. A good sermon series will affirm the importance of work and its connection with faith and will put the discussion into the proper theological perspective. By starting the conversation publicly, the series might also bring forward people interested in discussing the topic further and who might also be willing to participate on a ministry organizing team. People should be invited from the pulpit to express their interest and to volunteer.
2. **Speaker Series on Work-Related Issues:** An effective series could include expert speakers on work-related hot button issues (stress, burnout, interpersonal conflict, work/life balance, etc.). The right expert speaking at a public event can provide very helpful insights and, if properly promoted, can attract and engage people from outside the church. For example, at the Work Life Forum events organized by the Center for Faith and Enterprise and hosted by La Cañada Presbyterian Church in California, of the 100 to 200 people in attendance at each event, roughly half have come from outside the church. Such events can also provide an opportunity

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for people with similar interests to talk informally before and after the event.

3. **Work-Related Small Groups:** These provide an opportunity to build community, share common issues, and reflect on the connection between the participants' faith and work. Time can be provided for prayer, reading and engaging scripture, reflecting on the connections between scripture and work, and thinking about how to integrate our faith into our work week. Study guides can be made available.
4. **Spiritual Practices:** Spiritual practices such as prayer can play an important role, especially if they can be integrated into the rhythm of the work week in a way that honors both work and spirituality. For most people, this means practices that can be done quickly and frequently and that can become a habit. I have been involved with retreats (*Spiritual Practices for the Active Work Life*) and classes (*Spirituality for Busy People*) that explore examples of such practices. Examples of such practices are included in Chapter Six.

There are other initiatives that can also bear fruit, depending on the circumstances. Among them are:

Workplace Visitations: Matt Rusten, executive director of the Made to Flourish network, recommends that a church that is serious about faith and work integration have a pastor who visits congregants in their workplace. This helps the pastor understand workplace issues and also signals the interest of the church. When this is not practical, or against company policy, online video calls could be a substitute, though physical presence in the workplace would certainly provide the pastor with a better feel for the nature of the business.

Made to Flourish's mission is to empower "pastors and their churches to integrate faith, work, and economic wisdom for the flourishing of their communities."¹⁰⁷

Industry Groups: I have not been personally involved in these, but I know of a program conducted by Caleb Monroe at Reality Church of Los Angeles. Monroe has several different industry-specific groups, some with as many as 150 people. Because of its location, Reality LA has a strong representation from the entertainment industry in its congregation and has large, active groups for writers, actors, and musicians. Young adults are heavily represented in this mix. When it is time to develop a new industry group, Monroe begins by setting up informal dinners with people in that industry to learn what the unique needs and struggles are for Christians in that field. From the dinners, he also identifies the people he believes would be the strongest leaders for the new group and invites them to help plan and organize the new offering.

Fellows Programs: These are six- to twelve-month programs that bring together a small group of highly committed Christians to study scripture and theological writings. The programs are promoted by Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York and by The Fellows Initiative and can be found in multiple locations. The groups typically meet once per week with an occasional retreat or monthly special event. On paper, the curriculum often looks quite seminary oriented, with readings of serious theologians such as Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Lesslie Newbigin. I think the assumption is that the texts provide classical theology, and the group discussions bring out the work life implications.

Steve Lindsey of the Center for Faith and Work/LA runs similar programs in Los Angeles. His Framework Fellows Program “equips leaders with a reimagined vision of their work’s purpose and its strong relationship to the gospel’s renewing power for cultural transformation of Los Angeles.”¹⁰⁸

Small Business Anti-Poverty Ministry: People in business are quite often attracted by the idea of helping poor, struggling entrepreneurs start and build their businesses. This can suggest

an important area of church ministry that can both help the less fortunate and make clear the connection between faith and work.

Business development can be important for helping people climb out of poverty; this is true in both developed and less developed countries. The right program can provide an opportunity for people with business and other skills to meet this need and use their talents in important new ways. The right program can also highlight the importance of work in commercial enterprises as a way to contribute to shalom. For these reasons, participating in a program that helps small entrepreneurs can be an important part of a church-based faith and work program.

There are several organizations with which churches can work. The one with which I have been most involved is Partners Worldwide, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan (disclosure: I was the Chairman of the Board several years ago). Partners Worldwide not only accepts donations but also seeks volunteers who can use their work-related expertise to help small entrepreneurs. The opportunity to give not just money but also work-related talents adds an important dimension to the ministry.¹⁰⁹

There are other organizations that provide loans and training to micro-entrepreneurs and to small and medium enterprises and that will accept donations from church members.

Daily Email Devotions: Several organizations publish daily email devotions. Mark Roberts of Fuller Seminary's Max De Pree Center for Leadership offers a popular one designed for leaders; he sends subscribers a Life for Leaders email each day with a Bible passage, brief reflection, and prayer. He provides the message himself on weekdays and has a team of volunteers who take turns writing for the weekends. His email devotions have a very broad reach and can be utilized by churches.¹¹⁰

Special Situations: Some circumstances suggest more specialized opportunities. Downtown churches might offer noon prayer services or music events for people who work in the area. More liturgical churches could offer special liturgies for workers, for

particular occupations, or for when people face a change in their work status. Less formal churches might interview individuals about their work lives as part of the sermon.

Factors That Contribute to a Strong Ministry

Select Leaders With Workplace Experience

Theological and spiritual grounding is vital for leaders of faith and work programs, but so is significant work experience outside of church and charity environments. The ideal leader of such a program would combine both. If a leader with both qualifications is not available, then the church could pair a leader with significant outside experience with a pastor who is interested in bridging the different perspectives. A church could also set up a council to manage this process and facilitate the conversation.

One trap to avoid: in some cases, business people can be too deferential to religious professionals when it comes to matters of theology. It is important that unordained leaders be encouraged to see themselves as full participants in theological discussions and to feel free to bring their workplace perspective into the conversation.

The church should also identify one or more contact people who are available to discuss work-related issues and receive feedback from members of the congregation. This person or persons should be clearly identified, perhaps in the weekly bulletin and on the church website. This signals the church's interest and provides an easy contact point for conversations and expressions of interest, and should foster more frequent informal discussions. The contact person does not have to be a pastor or staff person; moreover, a layperson with considerable non-church work experience might be in a good position to discuss work-related issues that emerge in business settings.

Address Serious Work-Related Issues

While a church-based program should not be expected to help with technical decisions such as whether or not to buy a particular piece of equipment, many of our most painful work-related issues involve, at least

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indirectly, our relationships with other people, our self-identity, and our larger purpose. Specific issues can include stress, burnout, challenges to our integrity, interpersonal conflict, the role of compassion, developing purpose, building community, spiritual practices, dealing with failure, and the pursuit of opportunity. These are issues for which a church-based ministry could be quite helpful.

Discussion should go beyond theological or philosophical ideas and incorporate the work issues that participants might actually be facing. Programs that limit themselves to theological and philosophical issues are likely to be of sustainable interest only to people with high involvement in religion or the church; they are unlikely to engage people outside the church or even a majority of people within the church.

It depends on the issue, of course, but I believe that the most effective programs combine resources from both secular and religious or spiritual sources. In the case of work-related burnout, for example, I have been involved with discussions that incorporate insights from psychological research but also encourage reflection on the story of Elijah in the wilderness and the role of spiritual renewal.

Affirm the Value and Importance of Work

It is crucial to affirm the value of most of the types of work in which participants are engaged. Not all work is good, of course, but most of it is, and probably more than is generally acknowledged. Some congregants have never heard an affirmation of their work from their church even if they have been regular attendees. Such an affirmation could mean a lot to many of them.

This is especially true as it pertains to the goods and services their work provides to others. People generally understand that their church teaches them to treat other people well and to behave with integrity, but they often have trouble understanding the religious connection or value in the product of their work. By not seeing this connection, the integration they seek between their work and their faith remains elusive, and their faith or spirituality risks being confined to limited areas of their lives.

There can be several different reasons for this. Perhaps their church has discussed work-related issues in sermons but the individual does not

attend services often enough to hear them. Or perhaps they attend a church that ignores their work life or have encountered hostility to business or to their particular occupation.

Churches sometimes inadvertently give the impression that the primary opportunity for contributing to others' well-being is through church or charity projects rather than through the daily work of the congregants. This can give the impression that their daily work is not as important as church work. Even in churches where vocational skills are valued, there can be a tendency to point to exemplars who have either left their occupation to use their vocational skills for charity or church work, or have added to their business a social justice activity (such as funding a homeless employment project) that has no direct bearing on their main work. These activities can have considerable value, but if all our examples of people using their skills for good involve individuals who have stepped outside their ordinary jobs to do something else, what does that say to those of us who work hard at more ordinary jobs?

The Bible has resources that can help us affirm the value of daily work. As mentioned, I particularly like the concept of shalom as a way to identify the contribution our work should, and often does, make to the flourishing of society. Shalom can also provide a criterion with which to make trade-offs between different values and goals.

Connect With the Faith or Spirituality of the Participants

I do not believe that a faith and work program is the proper venue for evangelism. Our goal should be to help people see how their own faith or spirituality can inform and support them in their work, help them experience a deeper sense of divine purpose, and see how their work can contribute to the well-being of other people.

Most people have a deep, intuitive religiosity that is usually kept hidden but nevertheless has a potentially profound effect on their approach to life. This deep religiosity (some might call it spirituality) might or might not correspond to the religious beliefs they acknowledge publicly. It is often subconscious but seems to emerge into conscious awareness from time to time. When it does emerge, it can be a powerful source of insight, strength, and resilience in our work lives.

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We need to be careful, however; if we are serious about engaging people from outside the church, we must avoid inadvertently sending signals that the program is only designed for people whose beliefs fit a particular theological template. Many people outside the church are quite sensitive about this issue and might think they see signs of this even when that is not the organizers' intention. This is one reason why people are sometimes reluctant to attend church-based programs (this is less of a problem with online offerings where people can be anonymous and easily exit).

This does not mean that we can never discuss religious or spiritual topics with people who come from outside the church. Many of these people pray frequently and occasionally ponder the great mysteries of existence. They might also enjoy talking about spiritual or religious matters, as long as they do not feel the purpose of the discussion is to change their views or to remake them in some way. They often also appreciate learning about and engaging in Christian spiritual practices.

Business school professor Laura Nash and pastor Scotty McLennan offer an intriguing framework for understanding this issue as it pertains to the workplace.¹¹¹ They suggest that religion operates on three levels of engagement. The first level, which they call espoused religion, is concerned with people having the correct beliefs and religious allegiances. Espoused religion taken too far is often frowned upon in the workplace and in many social settings outside the church and is usually counterproductive.

Nash and McLennan call the second level catalytic religion. This includes experiential and transformational spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation) that people find helpful in their day-to-day work. It is at this level that so-called secular spirituality programs have been the most effective.

The third level is what they call foundational religion. This involves tapping into the wisdom and foundational stories of religion in ways that help us think about the sacred. It is at this level that Christianity might have the greatest underutilized value for people in the workplace, especially if it can be combined with the catalytic level while avoiding the traps of espoused religion.

In any case, a faith and work program will be far more effective if it can engage the participant's own intuitive faith or spirituality without coming across as a program of evangelism.

Use Language That Connects With the Workplace

Different spheres of life use different terminology. The logical rules and structural relationships between the words can be quite different as well. This can create a problem when we are trying to connect our faith and our work—two domains that use different languages—especially when we are not conscious of the differences. Developing the ability to use language that crosses the domains can be very useful.

Compare the expression of values in business and in the “typical” church. There is overlap; for example, altruistic concerns for others can be found in both, as can a desire for integrity. But there are also differences. A typical church might highlight the relationship of concepts such as sin, forgiveness, and divine grace. A business might reflect more concern with producing value in the form of goods and services, exchanging products with others through the market, and serving customers. When confronted with the problem of hunger, churches might highlight volunteer projects and donations, while business logic might look for ways to produce and distribute more food. Both are necessary but sound quite different even though there is considerable conceptual overlap.

It makes sense to use different terminology in different spheres. The problem comes about when the language of one crowds out the language of the other, especially if we are trying to encourage integration. We need to combine the language of the two spheres and talk of the religious and spiritual significance of creating goods and services, building healthy job-creating businesses, encouraging productive collaborative relationships, and weathering the storms of the marketplace.

The transcendent, all-pervasive, fully immanent God is not confined to one sphere of life. Spirituality should not be limited either and our language needs to reflect this.

Take Advantage of Online Opportunities

Many people have become accustomed to online events and activities, including those of a religious nature; this presents additional opportunities for faith and work ministry. We might think of people carrying part of their church with them on their smartphones.

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We should first acknowledge that in-person environments have obvious advantages over online. Most people enjoy being physically present during events and might be more engaged when they are. In-person interactions can be more conducive to forming relationships. And people are less easily distracted when the speaker is standing in front of them in the same room.

But the online environment has advantages as well. Online options are, in some cases, easier for working people with long commutes to attend. Programs can be customized to meet smaller niches but with greater geographical coverage. Relationships and discussions can be maintained despite travel schedules.

One of the important considerations when designing online programs or components of programs is to think through the capabilities and opportunities that are native to the online environment. We need to do more than transfer in-person activities to an online channel; people engage with online media differently than they do in-person offerings. This presents both challenges and opportunities.

Final Thoughts

Churches have an opportunity to help people both inside and outside the church in an important area of their lives. A church that does this in a helpful, constructive manner can engage with and help a much broader segment of the population than it currently reaches.

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