

Wholeness at Work

A Conference at Ridley Hall

by Richard Higginson



We live in a world which feels very fragmented. Many people experience a sharp segmentation between different parts of their lives, such as work, family and involvement in the local community. Work often appears as a series of thinly connected events, lacking a cohesive thread to pull them together. The notion of teamwork is often used negatively – ‘don’t let the side down’ – rather than to foster, nurture and encourage. Attacks on religion in the public realm are adding to the already existing pressures for a sharp divide between the sacred and the secular. All this makes for a sense of *disintegration*, adding to people’s stress and contributing to a breakdown of their physical and mental health

At the same time, there is a widespread longing for wholeness, a desire to live and work in a way which is integrated, where all the different parts interconnect consistently and meaningfully. This is felt both individually and corporately. More and more people want to work for organisations that treat them as if they really are ‘the company’s most valuable asset’ and which make a product or service of which they can feel proud. They want to work for organisations that respect them

as individuals, which utilise their decision-making abilities and recognise the fact they have a life which extends beyond work. Companies often encourage them by talking this sort of language but then belie it by the actual policies they implement.

So what can be done? How can we become more holistic – as individuals and through our work in society? How can we discover wholeness for ourselves and create wholeness in the organisations which we influence? And what have Christians to say or offer about all this?

This was the theme of the week-end conference which took place at Ridley Hall from 11 to 13 April 2008. 45 people attended, and I believe it is fair to say that a good time was had by all. Those present included about a third who are regular participants in Ridley events, a third who had attended one such event before, and a third who were attending for the first time. I think that is a healthy mix!

The articles that follow are written up versions of the talks that were given at the conference. They therefore have a more ‘spoken’ feel than is typically the case with articles in FiBQ. You need to read them with a sense of being in the audience that is being

addressed. But the talks have been edited: in some cases condensed and in other cases the authors have seen fit to add an insight or two in the light of subsequent discussion. We hope you enjoy them.

On the opening evening, we looked at personal integration and integrity. Wholeness has both a moral dimension and a spiritual dimension. I explored the concept of integrity, a quality that is much mentioned in business but often understood rather superficially. Of all the virtues, it is perhaps the most demanding because by definition it demands a wholeness of character. The call to integrity can leave us feeling hopelessly inadequate, but that has the benefit of highlighting our need for God’s help and making us examine the quality of our relationship with God. My colleague Jane Keiller proceeded to show us some resources for use in becoming ‘more whole’, drawing on the time-honoured techniques of reflecting, praying and confessing. Several participants subsequently followed up her suggestions with times of individual spiritual direction.

On Saturday morning we looked at two distinct areas where the current world of work may or

may not be making for wholeness. First, Brian Draper considered the significance of age – the generational factor.

Organisations are increasingly dominated by young people in their 20s and 30s. What are their beliefs, values and expectations? How are they influencing the world of work? Adopting a highly interactive style (which explains why his paper is shorter than the others), Brian helped us feel for the heartbeat of contemporary culture, identifying the features that divide the generations and those that unite them.

The world is changing in another way. Globalisation is producing a new list of winners and losers. The IT revolution has transformed the way we do business. Emerging countries like China and India are pushing their way to economic prominence. Multi-national companies find the need to be sensitive to local cultures and conditions. Jyoti Banerjee asked whether globalisation is a force which 'makes for wholeness' and what sort of constructive role Christians can play in the global economy.

During Saturday afternoon and evening we moved on to the subject of *making companies whole*. Some organisations are sick. They are spiralling downhill and exhibit vicious cycles of behaviour. Yet sometimes with the right treatment they can be turned around. The Christian faith speaks hopefully of

redemption and transformation. Tim Harle and Alastair Mitchell-Baker took two contrasting – though to their minds complementary – approaches to making companies whole.

Tim's remedy was to look to organic solutions, to exert less control rather than more, to trust the wisdom of employees and to acknowledge the importance of the many small things that contribute to a corporate culture.

Individual change

Spending time on relationship with God
Being alert, firm and loving (1 Cor.16:13)
Encouraging others to think about these issues
Making creative connections
Listening to stories across generations/
cultures/countries
Relaxing into chaos
Distilling the essence of wisdom
Mentoring and being mentored
Observing the rhythm of the Sabbath
Regularly reviewing the day
Getting involved in enterprise in the
developing world through investment of
money, skills and advice

The conference was punctuated by periods of group discussion during which there was the opportunity to unpack these ideas and apply them to our own experience in more detail. We then had a plenary session on Sunday morning when individuals identified the key points of learning which they/we intended to take away, reflect upon and put into practice. These were as follows:

Organisational change

Not organising in linear fashion
Looking for points of transformation
Becoming more overt as Christians
Identifying the heart/spirit of an
organisation
Creating communities of support
Sharing with colleagues
Engaging with the next generation
Checking staff motivation
Multiplying small behaviours to
achieve critical mass
Setting apart a place for reflection
Expanding Faith in Business to
Belgium and Sweden

Through all this he stressed the divine quality of *hesed*, loving kindness. Alastair took a more systematic approach, based on a Trinitarian pattern which his company, Tricord, sees as deeply rooted in the whole of reality. He analyses organisations in terms of the three overlapping domains of strategy, systems and culture, with a core identity at the organisation's heart. Whole work is based on an undivided unity of doing, planning and reviewing, rooted in the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Both approaches provided plenty of food for thought.

A final thought – one we considered during our closing Eucharist - is that the notion of wholeness is closely linked to that of maturity. The mark of Christian maturity is having the mind of Christ (1 Cor.2:16); the measure of Christian maturity is the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph.4:13). But there is a paradox which goes right to the heart of a Christian understanding of maturity. We are called to be mature, but we must always retain that humility, that openness to receive, that simple dependence on God's grace for which Jesus commended little children. A paradox indeed. ■