

Faith, Work and Economic Life

by Philip Giddings

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The General Synod of the Church of England at York this year debated a motion from St. Alban's Diocese as follows:

“That this Synod:

- a) affirms daily work as essentially a spiritual activity;*
- b) recognises the importance of Christian values within economic life;*
- c) requests the Mission and Public Affairs Council to examine the engagement of the Church of England with the economic sector in this country and to present its findings to Synod”*

Philip Giddings, as Chair of the Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England, presented this background paper to the Synod in advance of the debate.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Mission and Public Affairs Council welcomes this motion from the St Albans Diocesan Synod which highlights an important area of work within the Council's remit. If passed, it offers the MPA Council an opportunity to evaluate its own engagement with the economic sector; to consider the impact of economic issues and working life on the Church's mission; to work with colleagues in Christian adult education to consider how people can be equipped for discipleship at work, and to map the numerous

activities in the wider Church which address the economic sector and people's working lives.

1.2 Because economic issues touch so many aspects of life and society, many recent Synod debates on public affairs have had an economic dimension. There have also been important debates on equipping the laity for mission and ministry which are relevant to this motion.

1.3 Synod last addressed the Church's structures for mission in the economy in July 1989 when it debated a report from the

Board for Social Responsibility entitled, *Church and Economy: Effective Industrial Mission for the 1990s* – itself a follow-up to the BSR document, *Industrial Mission: An Appraisal* which was the report of a working party chaired by Bishop Peter Selby when he was Bishop of Kingston.

1.4 In 1997, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, with significant Church of England input, published the major report *Unemployment and the Future of Work* which included a substantial amount of material on the nature and theology of

work. The General Synod debated this report in July 1997. The report was produced by an ecumenical working party to which Mr Andrew Britton acted as Secretary, and it was followed up by a collection of essays developing further the theological implications.¹

In the debate on *Unemployment and the Future of Work*, the motion before Synod included the clause: *That this Synod . . .*

(b) *re-affirm the Christian understanding of work as a sharing in God's creativity, and a means to human flourishing and service to others.*



■ University of York, where the Synod was held ■

1.5 However, since those debates, the context has changed considerably. Whilst a paper of this nature cannot hope to do justice to all the factors which are changing the experience of work in society, below is a list of ten developments which represent both a deepening of long-standing trends and a number of new phenomena :

- a) Increasing inequality of reward between the top and bottom of the workforce, and the changes in the equation between risk and reward;
- b) Increased global migration, including the free movement of labour within the EU and the

impact of East European migration to Britain;

- c) Continuing decline in manufacturing, mining and agricultural jobs and the rise of the service sector;
- d) The impact of regeneration programmes on the shape of local labour markets and jobs;
- e) Falling levels of unemployment from the mid-1990s to 2008 – and the unknown impact of the current economic downturn;
- f) The impact of the Minimum Wage, and the continuing numbers of vulnerable workers;
- g) The shift towards more entrepreneurial models and methods in the public and voluntary sectors;
- h) The impact of Information and Communications Technology on patterns of work and the shape of workplaces;
- i) Differing interpretations of “labour market flexibility”, ranging from casualisation and insecurity to family-friendly work practices and many other aspects of flexibility;
- j) “portfolio working” taking the place of “jobs for life”, or even “one job at a time”.

2. What is “Work”?

2.1 Studies of “work” often struggle with definitions in order to express the differing social roles of, for example, entrepreneurship, paid employment, structured volunteering, home-making and childcare. Any definition of work which does not, in some way,

embrace all these activities is likely to be inadequate, yet the considerable differences between them militate against straightforward generalisations. All these activities are highly significant in the economy and all contribute profoundly to human well being.

2.2 The location where work takes place is no more useful as a way of defining what is meant by “work”, since homeworking (paid employment carried out in a person’s home) is a major feature of the workforce in both the upper and lower remuneration brackets. A definition of “work” and “the workplace” is, perhaps, best approached in relational terms – times and places where people enter into relationships of obligation to each other in order to achieve shared goals which contribute to economic activity. But it needs to be recognised that definitions in this field are, at best, of limited usefulness.

2.3 The Christian tradition has never been satisfied with understandings of work which are limited to economic activity in any narrow sense. Prayer and worship have often been understood as part of humanity’s proper work, just as work can be understood as part of humanity’s worship of God. This is important as it affirms the nature of prayer and worship as acts of giving as well as receiving. In contemporary culture, this is an important corrective to the consumeristic view that religion is merely about benefits for the participants. This places Christian views of work at odds with the predominant materialist, cultural understandings.

3. Work as a Spiritual Activity

3.1 One has only to look at the dis-spiriting aspects of unfulfilling or badly organised work to recognise the profoundly spiritual dimensions of the ways in which people work today. Good work – work which is good both in its ends and in its methods – not only contributes to the spiritual well-being of individuals but affects the relational and community dimensions of spiritual living.

3.2 All economic activity, and all work, is relational. From the entrepreneur whose activity creates work for others, to the worker in manufacturing or the public sector, to the mother with children, the volunteer or the solitary who prays alone – all their work is, or can be, at an important level, directed to the good of others. The ends to which work is directed are therefore a reflection of the many ways, seen and unseen, in which the Spirit's life finds expression in people's relationships with one another.

3.3 Christians will also find in their work an opportunity for discipleship. In the Bible we find work presented as both blessing and curse. Whilst there is no space here to offer a comprehensive theological approach to work, there are several important points we can briefly note.

3.4 First, in Genesis, we see both that human labour for survival is one effect of the Fall, and that God's work in the creation of the world is

celebrated (and differentiated from rest on the seventh day). Second, in the gospels we see that God became incarnate in Jesus who was brought up in the home of a carpenter, and that He called His disciples from among the



■ *Christ in the Carpenter's Shop* ■
Georges de la Tour (1645)

fishermen. We also see that the work of others, such as tax collectors and publicans, which was regarded as a source of shame, can nonetheless be redeemed. In the Gospels, many of Jesus' parables are framed around the working lives of ordinary people.

3.5 In these and other ways, the Biblical account tells us that human work both has the potential for enabling us to participate in the creative activity of God and, at the same time, that work is tainted by sin and can lead us away from God. This shows us that there is nothing inherently salvific – or damning – about human work: it is the purposes to which we direct it that give it ethical and spiritual value.

3.6 The idea of vocation is often used to indicate an attitude to work which embraces the whole person and expresses, for Christians, the belief that one's

work is an expression of discipleship and enacting God's will for the world. Whilst the term may be used specifically of vocations to ordained ministry or the religious life, 'vocation' is often used much more broadly of a calling to particular jobs or professions such as teaching or medicine. As a church we need to do more exploration of the uses of the word "vocation". We also need to think through the implications for Christians and others who find their working lives to be at odds with their discipleship or impossible to square with a sense of God's call.

3.7 If human work has so much spiritual potential, it follows that badly ordered work can be profoundly spiritually destructive. In our own culture and worldwide there is a great deal of "bad work" which is either directed to unworthy ends or so poorly managed and regulated that people are harmed by it. This is not just a factor affecting the poor and vulnerable: the spiritual consequences of how work is ordered can be felt for good and for ill among all strata of the workforce.²

3.8 Living Christian values at work is not always a straightforward enterprise. To begin with, there are important questions to explore about the 'morality of the market' – the tension between the frequently asserted 'value-neutral' nature of the free-market economy and the way in which, to function effectively, the market nonetheless requires "players" to exhibit moral qualities – particularly those of truth telling and keeping one's word.

3.9 Second, as Christians we seek to live lives in which all that we do is brought together under God's dominion. We therefore face the continuing challenge of how to integrate our work with the rest of our lives, particularly given that the way much work is ordered today actually encourages people to compartmentalise their lives and become, almost literally, different people at work and in the home. However different the things we do in different compartments of life, Christians will strive for the greatest level of moral and spiritual integrity. We need more – and more specific – resources to support us in this aspect of discipleship.

4. The Church and Economic Life

“Nine-tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks which in themselves are not part of the official system of the Church at all ...” Archbishop William Temple in *Christianity and Social Order*, 1942.

4.1 Ever since the Industrial Revolution, and the processes of urbanisation, the Church of England, and other denominations in Britain, have recognised working life as both an arena for mission and also as a problem for which established models of church life have not always been adequate. Just as the parish system came under immense strain from the growth of cities, the later tendency for work and domestic life to be geographically separated has brought new

challenges to parochial understandings of church life.

4.2 The parish system has, however, proved highly adaptable, and has, for over 150 years, been creatively supplemented by a series of mission initiatives directed to working life and economic structures. For example, in the 19th century the Navy Missions broke the ground, along with the Missions to Seafarers.

4.3 Later, in the mid-20th Century, the Industrial Mission movement as created by Bishop Leslie Hunter and the Rev Ted Wickham in Sheffield, sought to reconnect with the working classes alienated from a Church which seemed to have mistaken middle class values for Christian virtues. The movement still continues, largely in chaplaincy and issue-based modes. In the



■ Archbishop William Temple ■

1960s a number of clergy consciously adopted the Worker Priest model, pioneered in France, often persisting in a lonely but prophetic ministry for the rest of their lives.³

4.4 Today, in the first decade of the 21st century the missiology of Hunter and Wickham may perhaps be most clearly seen in those Fresh Expressions of Church which are consciously seeking to engage with sub cultures in which people feel the Church is “not for them”.

4.5 Those mission initiatives do not stand alone. Many other church-related groups engage with work and economic life, both theologically and practically. Examples include the work of the William Temple Foundation in Manchester, the Ridley Hall Foundation in Cambridge, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and work at Douai Abbey. Within the CofE's own structures the Mission and Public Affairs Division in the Archbishops' Council maintains a strong interest in economic affairs and the ways in which they touch upon almost every aspect of the Division's work, at home and abroad, in public life and in the church's own mission priorities.

4.6 The all-enveloping nature of economic affairs means that much church activity in this field takes place at all levels, under a variety of organisational “labels” – social responsibility teams, diocesan missionaries, rural and urban affairs advisers, those working with local regeneration projects. All of these are dealing with the economy and its impact upon people and communities. So do innumerable parish clergy and lay ministers whose ministry takes them “under the skin” of the local community to understand and influence the

economic factors which help shape the identity of a place and its people.

4.7 We can thus see that ‘economic life’ is not the preserve of any one organisation or movement within the church but is part of the fabric of mission and ministry for us all. This variety is captured in a recent book drawing together a broad picture of the churches’ involvement in economic affairs through the 20th Century and especially since the Second World War.⁴

4.8 William Temple’s famous comment from *Christianity and Social Order* is as true today as ever. The work of the church on earth is indeed being taken forward, for the most part, through the faithful lives of its members seeking to live with integrity, including in their working lives. The social context has changed greatly since 1942, but that principle remains the same. Not that this is a reason for complacency. Nearly seventy years on from Temple’s comment, there is now an even greater need for the church to find ways to resource lay men and women to live faithfully in all the communities they inhabit – including economic communities and those of the workplace.

5. Taking the Work Forward

5.1 The St Albans motion calls upon the Mission and Public Affairs Division to examine the engagement of the Church of England with the economic sector in this country. To attempt to

produce a comprehensive survey of every economic dimension to the Church’s mission and ministry would be a huge undertaking and, since economic issues touch on every aspect of the Church’s life in some way, of limited value. Moreover, an exhaustive survey of the changing economic context would not only involve an immense amount of work but would risk being out of date as soon as it was published. Even an evaluation of the points we have listed in 3.1 above would produce enough material for a long run of Synod debates.

5.2 Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey, therefore, the Mission and Public Affairs Council believes that there are two specific and achievable pieces of work which would take up the concerns of the motion and be of real value to the Church’s mission and ministry. Moreover, these pieces of work can be done within existing budgetary provision.

5.3 The first is to give further consideration to a theological understanding of work *for today*. The literature on theology and work is surprisingly thin and little of it relates clearly to contemporary patterns of work and all the diverse activities which fall under the definition of “work”.

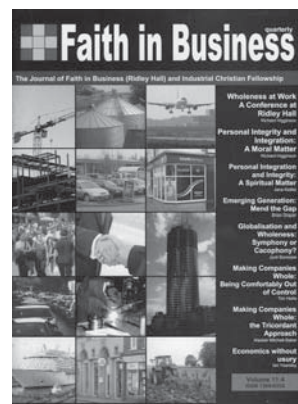
5.4 The Council therefore proposes to convene a symposium to take this forward.

It would bring together theologians, economists, labour market analysts and people with differing work experiences, and draw on perspectives from different areas of church life. Its objective would be to produce a collection of writings which would add to the resources available for the Church in thinking about economic life. There have been a number of recent publications addressing theology and economics, but not with an explicit focus on work today.⁵ There is a gap here which an MPA-led project can profitably fill.

5.5 The second piece of work MPA proposes is to examine, in conjunction with adult education and other specialists, the resources available for parishes and congregations to enable their members to be better supported in dealing faithfully with the questions and dilemmas which arise in their working lives.

5.6 A number of studies have shown that many Christians feel unable to raise the moral issues of their work in the context of their church and that ministers and that

lay people often feel ill-equipped to help people struggling with ethical matters from the workplace.⁶ We believe that this second piece of work we propose has the potential to offer some degree of remedy for that



A rare example of literature on theology and work!

situation, both by drawing attention to resources that already exist and also by encouraging the creation of new materials to help make our churches “safe places” where the questions from work and economic life can be openly addressed and offered to God.

5.7 Economic questions and issues from working life will not go away – indeed, it could be that a time of impending recession will give them a much higher profile. The MPA Council believes that an appropriate response to this important motion would be to undertake these two worthwhile, specific and achievable pieces of work and to report on them to Synod within the next five years. ■

Notes

- 1 CCBI, *Unemployment and the Future of Work: An Enquiry for the Churches*, London: CCBI, 1997.
Malcolm Brown and Peter Sedgwick (eds.) *Putting Theology to Work: A Theological Symposium on Unemployment and the Future of Work*, London: CCBI, 1998.
- 2 See, for example, Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
- 3 John Mantle, *Britain's First Worker Priests*, London: SCM, 2000.
- 4 Malcolm Brown and Paul Ballard, *The Church and Economic Life – A Documentary Study: 1945 to the Present*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006.
- 5 A good example of contemporary theological reflection on economics is: John Atherton and Hannah Skinner (eds.) *Through the Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations over Political Economy*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2007.
- 6 See for example, Rachel Jenkins, *Changing Times: Unchanging Values?* Manchester: The William Temple Foundation, 1991.

The Synod Debate

■ by Randell Moll



■ ■ ■ Randell Moll

General Synod debated the motion re Faith, Work and Economic life, for about an hour and three-quarters. It was subject to several amendments, most of which were agreed, and the resulting amended motion received overwhelming support in the final vote. The text of this is given below.

How it came about

The motion had been brought into being and worded by Randell Moll, (then Team Leader of Workplace Ministry in Herts & Beds), adjusted slightly on the advice of Susan Pope (Diocesan Secretary), David Cheetham (Diocesan Registrar) and officers of the General Synod. It was proposed, as part of a longer motion, at St.Albans Diocesan Synod in June 2007 by Simon Best, (Chair of the Board for Church and Society) following a presentation of the work of Workplace Ministry in Herts and Beds, given by Alan Harpham, Rev. Tony Ruffell, Rev. Michael Banfield and Rev. Randell Moll. The motion was passed with a large majority in St.Albans Synod and duly sent forward to General Synod.

General Synod background papers

Two background papers to the motion were provided for the General Synod. The first was

written by Randell Moll, and after circulation within a consulting group, was revised in the light of observations made by Simon Baynes (General Synod member), Canon Dennis Stamps (Ministry Development Officer) and Arun Kataria (Communications Officer). The second was provided by the Mission and Public Affairs (MPA) Council of the General Synod, under the name of its Chairman, Dr.Philip Giddings. MPA was generally supportive of the motion and accepted some, but not the whole, of the task asked of it by part (c) of the motion. In its paper the Council resisted the task of examining “the engagement of the Church of England with the economic sector” as being too broad and ambitious a task for the resources it had available. It made two specific recommendations regarding a symposium on the theology of work and a collection of educational materials relating to faith and work.

The Debate

The motion was proposed by Mr. Simon Baynes, a General Synod member elected by St.Albans Diocese. His introduction to the issues benefitted from his extensive knowledge of the business world and from his reflections on working life from

the standpoint of a committed Christian. There was a continuous flow of members wishing to speak, but owing to time constraints, the Chairman (The Bishop of Dover) could not allow all to be heard. The tone of speeches was broadly sympathetic to the need for the Church to address matters relating to Faith, Work and Economic Life. The Bishop of St. Albans, in particular, spoke powerfully in support of the motion and also pointed out that about 90% of this General Synod's business was devoted to inward-looking matters and only 10% - which included this motion - was outward-looking.

Amendments

Four amendments had been submitted prior to the debate. The first, in which Canon Professor Anthony Thistleton (Southwell and Nottingham) challenged the wording of part a) of the motion, gave rise to an inconclusive discussion about the spirituality of work: the amendment was narrowly lost. Mr. Allan Jones (Liverpool) won support for his amendment, which clarified "work" in part (a) of the motion, to include both paid and unpaid work. Mr. Clive Scowen (London) also won support for his strengthening clause which appears in the final form of the motion (below) as part (c).

The amendment proposed by The Ven. Hayward Osborne (Chair of the Churches' Industry Group Birmingham) addressed the concerns of the MPA Council as set out in its support paper, by

proposing an alternative wording to the original part c) of the motion, thus requesting the MPA Council to carry out its own two suggestions (above). In addition, this amendment requested that the MPA Division might undertake the much simplified task of compiling a "concise, factual, overview of the current and readily identifiable engagement of the Church of England with the economic sector" with the help of the agencies listed in the paperwork. It also called for a report back to Synod by the MPA Division by July 2010. Dr. Philip Giddings, Chair of the MPA, while commending the motion in general, spoke against these last two provisions, on grounds that the



■ Bishop of St. Albans ■

Division was already committed to five reports to General Synod within two years, and its resources were insufficient to undertake more than they had suggested. These last two parts of this amendment were lost.

The motion as passed by General Synod reads thus:

That this Synod:-

- (a) affirms daily work, be it paid or unpaid, as essentially a spiritual activity;*
- (b) recognises the importance of Christian values in economic life;*
- (c) encourages bishops and clergy to give greater priority to equipping and resourcing church members through teaching, prayer, affirmation and celebration, to fulfil their vocations, ministries and mission in their places of work;*

d) requests the Mission and Public Affairs Council to:

- (i) convene a symposium on a theological understanding of work for today as outlined in sections 5.3 - 5.4 of GS Misc 890B;*
- (ii) compile a collection of supportive resource materials for church members as outlined in section 5.5 of GS Misc 890B.*

Conclusion

Members of General Synod have given a warm welcome to the motion in principle. Work consequent upon it has been agreed.

Members of churches should hear more of it through reports back.

It is disappointing that the debate ended with no deadline for even an interim report, but this can be addressed by questions to the MPA Division at future General Synods. Action requested by the General Synod is now in the remit of the MPA Division, who will be in contact with the St. Albans Diocese.

More thought needs to be put into the next steps, by those sympathetic to the motion, and to the way the current work of church agencies in the economic sector can best be brought to the attention of church members, in cooperation with the MPA Division's work. To that end, the National Executive Committee of the Industrial Mission Association plans, at its next meeting, to consider its role in encouraging a productive focus for such momentum as has been generated by the General Synod debate. Similar organisations are urged to do likewise.

Meanwhile, all concerned with bringing the motion successfully through General Synod are grateful for all the support which has been received. ■