

A Journey from Faith to Work

Green shoots in Malaysia

■ by Mark Lovatt



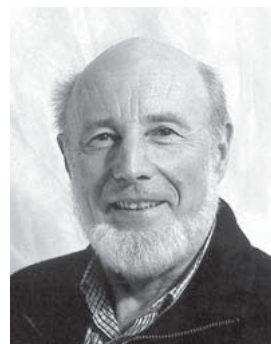
Following his article in FiBQ14.4, Mark brings us up-to-date with the progress in Malaysia of the initiatives to bring the Faith into the workplace. He begins by recounting his own launch out into the deep, and concludes that the Great Commission is likely to become effective in Malaysia through the world of work.

I arrived in Malaysia on 1st January 2009 after taking an overnight flight from London. My initial plan was to take a six-month career break to test if the Lord was calling me from my previous career in a large energy company to a new role of teaching systematic theology in the seminaries of Southeast Asia. It was an exciting time full of new possibilities. I was a bachelor, albeit an ageing one of 41 years, and being free of family responsibilities I was open to whatever the Lord might have in store for me. However, with my background in business development, IT and regulation compliance, perhaps it was to be expected that the Lord would bring all these factors to play in the role he had intended for me.

Soon after I arrived I was asked by one of the two seminaries I was teaching at to run a short course on business ethics. Many of their extension students were business people taking part-time theological studies, either as preparation for full-time church ministry or simply for their own interest and spiritual development. The course was organised by Extension Studies Director Sarah Yap, an ex-Banker who had a heart for working people. It was during that course that I first discovered the realities of corruption in a developing country, which many of the attendees had encountered first-hand. Initially I was shocked, then outraged that such things can happen, coming as I was from

the sheltered existence of a country (the UK) where institutions have been built over centuries to countermand such evils¹. I resolved, following that course, to do all I could to help with the situation, resulting in my current work today, which is working for Transparency International Malaysia helping businesses fight corruption.

The business ethics course caught the imagination of the English dean of the other seminary where I was teaching, Dr Tony Lim. Tony had attended Regent College, Vancouver, where Dr Paul Stevens (amongst others) had been working to establish the College as a world centre for workplace theology. I met Paul Stevens in 2011, incidentally, when he was visiting Malaysia, and he was very enthusiastic about our work in Malaysia. Tony proposed a new course for MBS (Malaysia Bible Seminary) based on his experience at Regent College, where students under the tutelage of Paul Stevens had visited senior business people in their places of work and learnt first-hand about their experiences of living their faith. Starting in



Dr. R. Paul Stevens





Malaysia Bible Seminary, Kuang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

▶▶ April 2009 we set up a similar course in Kuala Lumpur; this included Biblical teaching, visits to workplaces, and assignments on specific topics. Another of Paul Stevens’ alumni, Alvin Ung, was a fellow teacher on this course with Tony and I.

Following the course, Alvin, Tony, Sarah and myself, plus another Malaysian businessman Seng Gee Cheong, set up a study group for CEO or equivalent people wanting to impact the marketplace. We called this group ‘Integra’, combining integrity with action. For the course material we developed a concept called ‘Imaging God’, which created a spiritual DNA for an organisation so that, by its very nature and activities, as an entity it would become the presence of God in the marketplace, bringing justice and righteousness to both its staff and the industry around it. I also introduced the Imaging God concept at my new energy consultancy, 3E Energy, which I had set up with two Malaysian business partners. Through 2010 we worked between Integra and 3E Energy to develop the framework and implement it in our various organisations.

During 2010 I also developed a new theology course for MBS, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Marketplace.’ This course covered the

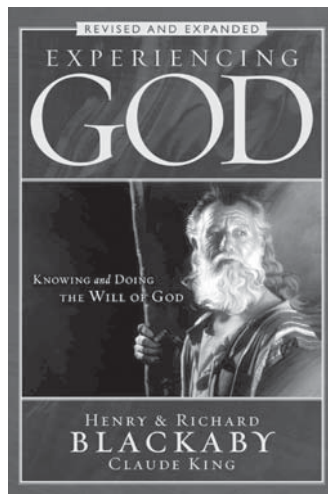
main areas of living before God in the marketplace, such as calling, ethics, leadership, Imaging God, environmental stewardship and so on. I taught this course in Kuala Lumpur, Sabah and Sarawak (both part of the Malaysian Federation in Borneo) in 2010-11, and received good feedback from the students, who were people seeking to understand more of God’s call upon their working lives. The initial response was small, however: the first course had only eight delegates, reflecting the prevailing view here, as in most countries, that God is largely uninterested in our work and has nothing to say on the matter. Bringing a change in this attitude is one of the main areas I and the people I work with are striving for.

In February 2011 I was invited one morning to attend a discussion and prayer meeting hosted by Alpha in the Workplace. The Alpha Course, developed by Holy Trinity Brompton in London, has been a worldwide success and is doing very well in Malaysia. The workplace version of the course, with a similar format (meal, DVD, then discussion, held over lunch or after work) is doing well². Other Christian organisations active in the workplace were also present: Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship (FGBMF), the Malaysian National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF), and church pastors actively involved in workplace ministry. ▶▶



Holy Trinity Brompton

▶▶ During the discussion time we agreed we should take a more collaborative approach and work out how we can operate together more effectively. We agreed to meet monthly to coordinate our activities and for prayer. Between us we also developed a ‘spiritual development pipeline’ which would enable each of us to focus on our strengths, fulfil our stage of the development for each person and hand them over to the next stage confident that it would take good care of them. For example, Alpha in the Workplace and FGBMF both concentrate on evangelism in the workplace.



Henry & Richard Blackaby
Experiencing God

Once the person has become a believer, though, what next? The objective is to bring them to full spiritual maturity so that they become increasingly effective for the Kingdom of God, deepening in faith and knowledge of God as they grow. Since the focus area is the workplace, and the means of evangelism is workplace-based, so should the spiritual journey continue in the workplace. Some excellent tools have been created, such as the online MAESTRO from Worklife Ministries, designed to be used in a lunchtime discussion format, which is similar to Alpha. Alvin Ung’s *Taking Your Soul to Work*, which Alvin developed with Paul Stevens³, is also a mixture of self-examination, exercises, and discussion. These and other resources can be used by workplace cell leaders to grow and develop believers to make them strong in faith and action as they go about their calling as workplace outposts of the Kingdom of God.

However valuable these things are in themselves, we believe that God has plans to transform not only individual lives, but the workplace itself, and ultimately society as a whole. It is when people take on the task of workplace transformation that their walk with God truly takes off: when their daily walk with God becomes focused not on themselves, but on God, his Kingdom and his work which, following Henry Blackaby’s model in

Experiencing God, God is already doing and which he calls us to join him in. The signs are that the workplace is a great new mission field, perhaps the field of our time, where God is already preparing the ground and is calling people to join him in his transformational work. The ‘Seven Mountains Mandate’ comes to mind at this point: it illustrates the way God is capable of transforming society at multiple points simultaneously, through the work of many people in many positions across the whole breadth of society.

So where are we now in our journey from faith to work? We believe that God is at work in Malaysia. We believe that he is calling men and women of faith across all structures of society to serve him in his purposes. We believe that this will take time, and it will happen according to God’s own agenda and intentions, just like other parts of the Great Commission. We also believe that biblically based, Spirit-inspired theology, leading to action, will have its part to play in this unfolding work. Finally, we believe that it will be through the world of work that much of this change will happen and that, as workplace practitioners of faith, by God’s grace, in his power, true change will come.

Although the work is slow, the impression I have is that this is a foundational time when the Lord puts things (and people) into place ready for it to ignite at the proper time. Our business, under the Great Commission, is to make disciples, not merely converts but those strengthened in their faith and understanding of God in such a way that they are capable of bringing God’s Kingdom in to their locality, just as Jesus did during his time on earth. That is the work we are engaged with here in Malaysia. ■

1 See my article in FiBQ 14.4, pp. 11-18
 2 Reviewed in FiBQ 13.2, p. 12
 3 Reviewed in FiBQ 14.4, pp. 31-32

Dr Mark Lovatt holds a theology PhD and is the Manager of the Business Integrity Programmes Unit at Transparency International Malaysia. He is also Director of Workplace Theology at the Malaysian Bible Seminary (MBS). Prior to his TI-M role he was CEO of a KL-based energy efficiency consultancy, having worked in IT and the energy industry in the UK. He is married to Debra, a Malaysian, and lives in KL.

