

Kingdom Come?

Phil Jump wonders why public health is perceived to be in conflict with economic wealth

Some of us are fortunate enough to have been affected by Covid-19 largely only through an unexpected few months of living and working in lockdown. Many I am sure will have projects and accomplishments that bear testimony to this season of self-imposed house arrest. For me, it's been a short stretch of decorative walling in the back garden and co-authoring a book that outlines the history and mission of the Industrial Christian Fellowship (ICF).

As I read and researched its story, one thing that particularly struck me was the sheer ambition of the organisation in its early days. One factor that accounts for this is the array of influential and significant characters to be found

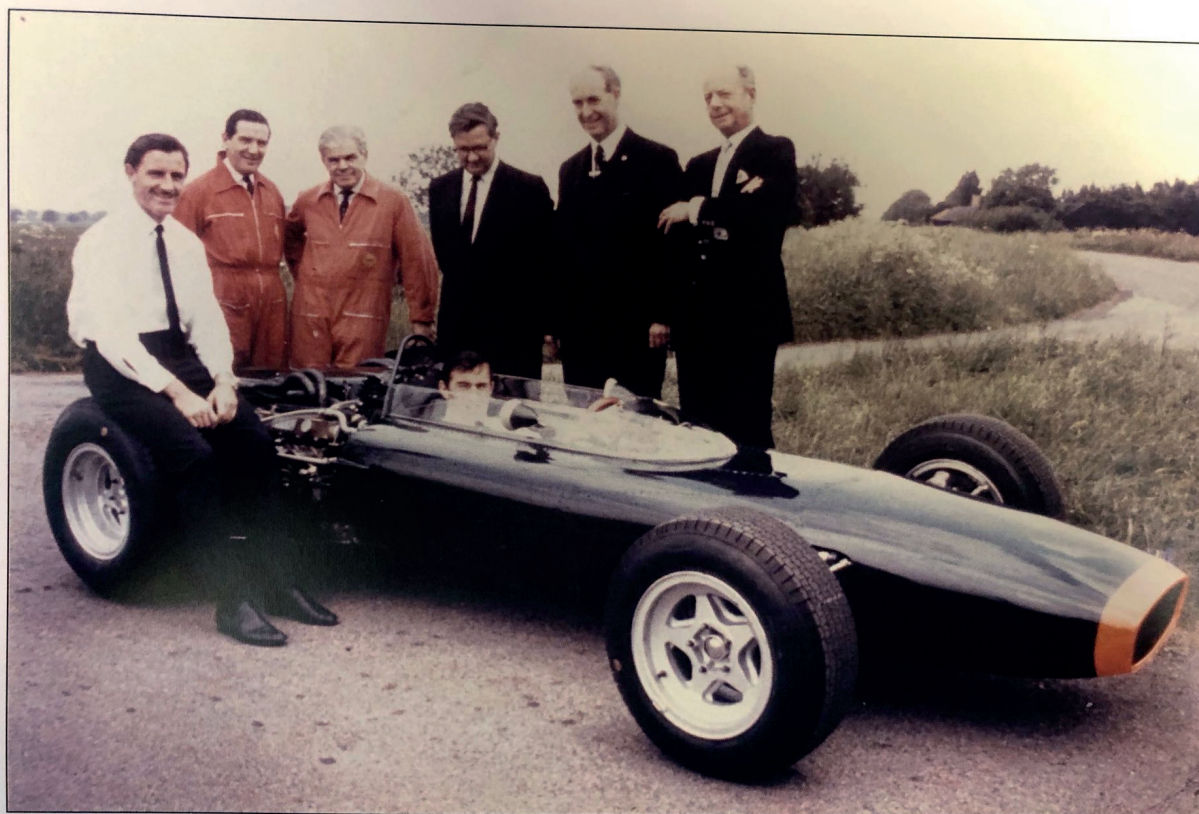
within its ranks. Several of these were senior diplomats and business leaders, influential political advisors and prominent church figures. And this of course was at a point in history where the Church wielded significantly more influence, locally and nationally, than it does today. They had a conviction that the vision of God's Kingdom around which the organisation was formed truly was a compelling blueprint for the organising of the whole of society. This emerged at a moment in the life of our home nations when the need for change was glaringly evident.

ICF's eventual destiny has turned out, thus far at least, to be considerably

more modest, and yet the reality of that original vision has hit home to me as the Covid-19 crisis begins the lifting of lockdown phase. Terms like furlough and R-factor are commonplace, while the previously inexorable angst around Brexit seems to have been relegated to a trivial distraction. This in itself serves as a reminder that we can all too easily become defined by the priorities of mainstream broadcasters. In reality, Brexit is no less a challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic, and our population was no less susceptible to disease and pandemic at the time when our well-being was relentlessly presented as being entirely dependent on a successful Brexit outcome.

Kingdom Values

Sir Alfred Owen, churchman and friend of Billy Graham, able to combine faith at work with bringing economic wealth



Graham Hill (Driver), Cyril Atkins (Chief Mechanic), Willie Southcote (Chief Engine Mechanic), Tony Rudd (Chief Engineer), Sir Alfred Owen (Chairman of Rubery Owen), Raymond Mays, Jackie Stewart seated in the latest BRM

But as the latest parade of ‘experts’ stoke our collective anxiety through the regular array of all too willing media outlets, it has quickly become evident that lifting of lockdown was seen as an ideological battle between irreconcilable opponents: public health versus the economy. Small businesses, for example, might have to be sacrificed, in order to avoid a further spike of Covid-19.

Yet amidst the resultant barrage of criticism and concern, no one seems to ask whether other ways are possible. Those original advocates of ICF were propelled by a belief in a society where these different interests were not seen as competing but as flowing one from the other. Their vision was founded on a renewed commitment to the Christian faith, advocated through ICF’s network of missionaries to the emerging industrial workforce, its publications and its influencers within the corridors of power at the highest level. We might still describe this today as promoting a vision of the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus commended to his followers that they should “seek first the Kingdom of God” he did not negate the need for economic security. On the contrary, he said “these things will be added unto you”. I would therefore argue that the Kingdom of God is defined neither by community physical health nor by economic wealth. There are moments when walking the way of God’s Kingdom can be at the expense of both.

Many have described the United Kingdom’s reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic as bearing the signs of God’s Kingdom. It is certainly true that the recognition of key workers, the

commitment of significant expenditure to protect the most vulnerable, the environmental benefits of changed working patterns, and the galvanising of communities into neighbourhoods of mutual concern, all resonate with what Christians often describe as Kingdom values. Some go so far as to anticipate a revival in churchgoing and Christian faith once lockdown fully subsides. At the time of writing it is too soon to know whether this will come to fruition.

While I would obviously welcome such an outcome, I struggle to be convinced that our recent changes in behaviour are anything other than signs of necessity. We have to acknowledge that the main motivator for politicians and citizens alike has been self-


preservation, not spiritual devotion, and the fact that we have proven ourselves able to adapt so quickly, shows that we are just as capable of changing back.

This is not to say that we will not embrace some of the lessons we have learned during this unprecedented season in our shared life. But that will require intention. In one way or another, we will get over Covid-19. Human nature being what it is, I suspect however that much of the good intent generated during this unprecedented season will be lost in a rush of self-indulgence to reclaim whatever it is we have missed most. So if preserving these values and behaviours truly matters, it will need its advocates and champions in the months ahead.

It is too simplistic to imagine that had our society been organised differently, the perceived tension between economic and physical health might not now exist. But as that society re-forms it is

interesting to note that business activity is already being cast as a necessary evil. It was precisely this mindset that, in the eyes of those early advocates of ICF, had led to a widespread indifference to the appalling conditions that had prevailed in some of Britain’s industrial centres. Theirs was a vision where mills did not need to be dark and satanic, with shalom reduced to a weekly sabbath rest from the tyranny and oppression of industrial expansion. Rather they believed that the collective endeavours of industry, politics and faith communities could create a world where enterprise and employment became in and of itself a means of *shalom*.

The very fact that “the new normal” has become such a commonplace term, means that we are at a place in the western world where change is both anticipated and might be embraced. Similar possibilities have confronted us before, and it is interesting to note that ICF was at its most ambitious in the immediate years that followed two global conflicts. We are by no means the only player in the field, as this journal bears testimony, and the challenge is now to re-articulate that vision: a vision of work and employment expressing and defined by the narratives of our faith.

Covid-19 has brought to us glimpses of the best and the worst of our human condition. The gods of this age will be all too keen to distract us from both, and to reclaim their ascendancy under which work and employment once again serve their purposes. The environmental cost and the socio-economic inequalities that come with that ascendancy have also become more obvious in recent days. What opportunities now exist have yet to become fully evident and are likely to be hard fought. But at the very least, this is a moment to remember that we believe in something different. 

‘...no one seems to ask whether other ways are possible...’



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