

Where now for Faith at Work?

Phil Jump asks how we will learn from the changed world and adapt our mission to it.

There is no escaping the fact that Covid-19 has disrupted just about every aspect of life in recent months. Its impact is perhaps the one thing that almost every institution, community and individual have in common.

While churches are debating the relative merits of opening their premises or concentrating on their online activities, night clubs and bars are fighting for their existence against the latest wave of lockdown measures and restrictions. Families are debating the reasonableness of not being able to visit loved ones in care homes, while sports fans argue about whether or not it's better to watch live games with

or without fake crowd noise. Schools, offices, transport, leisure, retail and every other sector that I have overlooked are struggling to define and determine a "new normal" against an ever changing and uncertain backdrop. It has even forged a previously unimaginable, policy-defining link between an international footballer and the people who work in school kitchens!

Yet as I reflect on all of this, I sense that Covid-19 has not so much forged these connections as revealed some longstanding realities that we too easily learned to overlook. And I would argue that what all these things have in common, in one way or another,

is the interconnectedness of human beings with one another. It has brought home to us that how human beings behave in one context has an impact on many others. Working from home is a wonderful way of avoiding infection, reducing my carbon footprint and increasing efficiency, but leaves city centre sandwich bars bereft of customers and workplace communities more and more displaced from one another.

But this "all of life" realisation is nothing new – it has defined organisations like Faith in Business and Industrial Christian Fellowship for decades. Because one of those areas of



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'City centre sandwich bars bereft of customers'. Liverpool in lockdown, October 2020.

life which both impacts and is impacted by our daily work is our faith. And yet the pages of this publication and others will often lament the failure of both sectors to recognise this. So as people continue to debate and negotiate an anticipated “new normal” it feels important for faith communities to recognise the connections that have been re-revealed, and also to offer their own contribution in a way that is accessible and relevant.

Work is ultimately a collective human endeavour, and it is how, where and why people work that will have significant and lasting impact in each other’s spheres of influence. The relationship between faith and work is therefore no mere add-on or optional extra; it is a fundamental fact of life. What we have faith in will affect how, why, where and when we work. Even that a sandwich shop is established is an act of faith – faith that a significant raft of individuals will return regularly to their offices, require food and refreshment and choose to obtain it from those who offer themselves as its providers. It is no less an act of faith on the part of those customers, that its proprietor and staff will prepare food in a safe, wholesome and reliable way. Yet it is a faith transaction that had probably become such an intrinsic feature of the workplace infrastructure that it was hardly ever noticed. Like so much else in life, it is only when something is lost or disrupted that people begin to recognise its presence and value.

Faith revealed by such relationships is more than a set of religious propositions; it is an attitude of mind and a way of life. Will we continue to


recognise this faith foundation in our society once the pandemic is over? It strikes me that Covid-19 has the potential to change everything or change nothing in the longer term. There will be those who will want to enshrine the key lessons we have learned, and others who will want to get everything back to “normal” as quickly as possible. The reality is likely to be a mixture of the two, and may well depend on how well various ideas and possibilities are articulated in the months and years ahead.

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The greatest mistake for faith communities is perhaps to simply assume that “new normal” will define itself without them, and theirs is the task of simply reacting to whatever emerges. How it is achieved and communicated needs to be a matter of some serious discernment and discussion, but I sense that this is a moment to become proactive in articulating our own vision for the future of the world of work.

Those who recognise this might well feel the pressure to use lockdown as an opportunity to plot that way forward, but we also have to acknowledge that we have yet to fully discover what kind of world we will emerge into. We cannot forget that while Covid-19 has been our main preoccupation, other things have been happening in our world: a change of American presidency and Britain’s departure from the European Union are two of the most obvious. These too will have their impact as things move forward. But there is much we have yet to discover. Will the shift to working from home become a more permanent change or will we simply revert back

to our previous patterns of working? How will this impact our experience and understanding of “workplace community”, or for that matter what yet unrealised pressures might this exert on the lives of our families? Will the now recognised status and significance of “key workers” translate into revised pay structures, changes in career aspiration, or will the financial sectors continue to be seen as those that call the shots and offer the best rewards? The Church of course will have its own internal questions as we consider which committees should remain on video conferencing platforms or how and whether to continue to offer access to services online. Perhaps the task of organisations like our own is to make sure that these internal concerns do not eclipse our engagement in the challenges of a wider business society and our provision of platforms for those discussions and observations to happen.

As current Chair of Industrial Christian Fellowship, it is my privilege to serve an organisation that has existed for over 100 years. It has had a chequered and varied history in that time, but without doubt the significant markers in its story and influence are those times (usually after world wars) when significant questions have been asked about the shape, purpose and values of the nation that was seeking to emerge. Its success may have at times been limited, but what never seemed to be in doubt was the significance of the message and vision that it carried. It is hard to argue that we are not at a similar moment again, but the world is shaped by very different forces today – online influencers, social media platforms, even international footballers. This is a time not only to reflect carefully on the message we are called to share, but the means by which we make it known. 



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