

Re-plotting the landscape

Phil Jump asks whether Covid-19 has changed or simply revealed the integration of faith and work

I must admit there are times when confronted with the editor's regular request to produce my contribution for FIBQ, that I struggle to identify a key faith and work issue that emerges from current events. But writing amidst the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic I find myself in the opposite place – there are simply so many issues and questions arising at the moment, it's hard to know which to choose!

Covid-19 has turned our world upside down – that has been true for the world of work and it has been equally true for our institutions of faith. Whether it's home schooling, digital conferencing or online worship, just about everyone has become used to interacting with the world around us through a computer or smartphone screen, while many of the familiar refrains of the Church like the challenge to prioritise human wellbeing ahead of economic growth seem, at least for the moment, to be unquestioningly embraced. The recognition of 'key

workers' has led to churches taking an active interest in the working lives of their congregations like never before, while society in general has increasingly come to recognise a person's worth for the job that they do rather than the salary they earn.

These are just snapshots of a landscape that deserves our prolonged attention, yet we can hardly afford to pause and take stock, as vaccine roll-out is already beckoning us towards a 'post-Covid world' about which all kinds of expectations are being generated. But what will that world be like, and more to the point, what will be the role and purpose of the Church within it?

Readers could be forgiven at this point for wondering if I had lost sight of the context here. After all isn't the task of FIBQ to reflect on the purpose and place of work in the light of our faith, as a deliberate counter to our perpetual tendency to focus on our religious institutions? But I ask this question

in response to a sense, at least on my part, that part of the 'turning upside down' of our world is to redefine many of the traditional boundaries that have tended to be perceived between faith and work.

I have to be honest and say that what initially prompted this line of thought was a sense that the Church has largely disappeared during Covid. This of course is partly due to our premises having to remain closed. Where they have been open, the focus of attention has tended to be the purpose for which they have been requisitioned, rather than the message their occupants have traditionally sought to enshrine. So when a cathedral is temporarily transformed into a vaccine hub, there is certainly a degree of media interest, but might we also be somewhat disturbed that it is considered novel for a religious building to be used to serve the health and wellbeing of its surrounding population?



Lichfield Cathedral
vaccination centre

Photo: Express & Star

There are many such stories to tell, and we should be pleased and delighted that they exist. Yet their tone tends to measure the value of faith in terms of how it contributes to overcoming a pandemic, rather than how it offers guidance and support in navigating our way through this crisis. While I am sure that our national faith leaders have not been silent, it is interesting to note how their voice has been seldom heard, and it is the 'Captain Toms' of this world who have been heralded as our moral leaders! Do faith communities have a role in the emerging world other than being seen to 'do their bit' alongside everyone else, and indeed should we expect anything else to be the case?

I found myself confronted with these questions again when I recently attended a conference (online of course) that brought together key stakeholders to consider the way forward for my native Merseyside. It is a measure of the place that the Church still holds in my part of the world, that both opening speakers were key figures from the Christian community and were very much invited and expected to set the agenda. But as I looked at my notes of subsequent contributors, representing everyone from local universities, political groups to a Premier League Football Club, it would have been hard to tell which were speaking from a faith perspective and which were not. The simple truth is that virtually everything that would once have been largely seen as the exclusive domain and responsibility of the Church is now being done by someone (if not everyone) else. So Premier League football clubs have set up foodbanks, while Marcus Rashford – a striker for the opposition, no less – has become the champion of school meal provision. TV channels are constantly reminding people to attend

to their mental health, businesses are talking about the need for compassion and medical researchers are arguing for social justice in vaccine allocation.

There were moments, particularly in the early days of this crisis, when Christians celebrated the re-set of society's priorities as those that far more resembled what we often describe as the 'values of God's Kingdom'. Yet as time has gone on, not only do we have to admit that society largely seemed to achieve these changes without our help; we have at best struggled to distinguish ourselves from other agencies working for the good of society, and often appeared to have considerably less to offer.

I have often argued that a lot of what has been described as 'change' in the last 12 months or so has in fact been a matter of discovering realities that already existed – after all, there is a generation who are not so much astonished by the possibilities of online communication platforms, as amused that we find them astonishing – they've been using them for ages! So perhaps what recent events has brought home to us is that we lost our distinctiveness and influence some time ago; it's just taken a worldwide pandemic for us to realise it.

There are those who fear that congregations will be decimated by this recent crisis – having got out of the habit of going to church every Sunday, they are unlikely to rediscover it. But is this necessarily a cause for dismay? For as I have already outlined, while we have no idea how many people will be inclined to attend church services

post-lockdown, it does seem that an awful lot of them have begun to do things in the last 12 months that we might once have described as Christian. And we have to recognise that many of those who have been working in the 'front-line' are not only people of faith, but could be argued to be living out the values of their faith like never before! Let's face it: Jesus said a lot more about loving our neighbour than he did about going to church.

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So is the Church's role in the 'new normal' to simply rebuild its institutions and structures, or is it to continue to impress into people that spirit and attitude that has led to such widespread good in the last year? (And I acknowledge that not everything we have witnessed can be described in such terms). Is it possible to do that without maintaining our organisation and infrastructure, and if so how?

I am not sure what the answers to these questions are, but it seems vital that we begin to ask them.

As we do so, we have to recognise that much of what good has been achieved is because people have gone to work, or their workplace has become that key catalyst in re-purposing or re-focussing their endeavours in pursuit of the Common Good. So should we necessarily be concerned if the boundaries between faith and work have become somewhat blurred? After all, if Covid-19 has not so much changed our world as opened our eyes to what already existed, perhaps it proves the point that people like me have been banging on about for decades, that it is simply mistaken to assume that there is any gap between these two in the first place! 



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