

New Wine and old wineskins

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

The constant clashes between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day are well documented in the Gospels. His responses are as many and varied as their criticisms, but on one occasion he illustrated this struggle by arguing that the inherited religious traditions of his day were no more capable of accommodating God's new covenant than is an old wineskin containing new wine. New realities need new ways of being embraced and contained.

At the time of writing, our nations are on something of a journey back from around 18 months of disruption, with many questions being asked about how our working lives will change as a result. Though COVID is cited as the cause, I would argue that in many respects it has more been a case of being forced to recognise and embrace changes that were already well underway. This publication has already included reports of radically re-designed workplaces where traditional desks have been replaced by a variety of "spaces" ranging from pool tables to isolation pods; where colleagues can collaborate, engage digitally through portable devices, design and create in environments to suit the context and their preferences. It is a relatively small step from such innovations to now working flexibly from home – and having taken that step, many seem reluctant to return.

It was interesting to read, some years ago, a report from the Trades Union Congress which succinctly outlined many of those emerging changes. Yet I could not help but feel disappointed when its narrative seemed to steer to a conclusion that the challenge was to maintain trade unionism as we have always known it, in the face of such changes. Perhaps I am being unfair, but

its concern seemed to be "how do we maintain our traditional wineskins in the face of these new varieties?".

However, as employers are already significantly reducing their office sizes to further accelerate the transition to flexible home working, concerns are being raised about its potential side-effects. Danni Harmer, chief people officer at Aviva insurance, has highlighted its potential impact on the gender pay gap. Speaking to the Daily Mail, she suggested that it is women who are more likely to take up the work-from-home option, and expressed her fear that workplace networks could consequently skew towards male employees. This in turn could make men more "visible" when promotions and senior appointments are considered. She clearly recognises the need for new wineskins to contain these new hybrid working practices.

It is interesting that much of the traditional resistance to home working stemmed from concerns that employees might abuse the resulting freedoms and short-change their employer in terms of time and commitment. Yet anecdotally at least, the suggestion is that the opposite has occurred, and employees are both more efficient and prepared to put in extra hours when working from home. Perhaps another element that now needs consideration is how to ensure that individuals do not over-work and maintain adequate boundaries when they are not surrounded by colleagues who can support and challenge them. What other, yet unforeseen, issues might result from individuals potentially operating in greater isolation?

But new technologies are also breaking some of the institutional monopolies, making it possible to perform tasks

as individuals that once required the resources of a large organisation. The degree to which YouTubers are now successfully competing with mainstream broadcasters for our attention and allegiance is one such example. This again begins to re-define some of the traditionally understood demarcations between employer and employee. How do the now self-employed protect their intellectual property, avoid being exploited by the online platforms on which they rely, or indeed manage the consequences of unwise and inappropriate online postings made in earlier life?

These observations are of obvious interest, but we might reasonably ask what specifically they have to do with faith. Yet we have to recognise that there remains a Judeo-Christian foundation to a good deal of our civic life in the West; this includes what is embedded in the practices and values of many traditional workplace institutions. As the landscape changes, what values will or will not become enshrined in the structures that emerge, and whose is the task of defining them?

ICF is one of a number of organisations who, for over a century, have recognised the significance of work and the need for a faith narrative that can both embrace and speak prophetically into our experience of it. Over the years, this has ranged from appointing workplace messengers to organising "crusades" in workers' canteens. But a new world is emerging and I sense that Christians too will need to consider what new wineskins we now need to create if our message is to be heard. Given the concerns expressed by Harmer and others, what are the issues of justice and wellbeing that will also need to be our focus as a new world emerges? 



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