

Precarious work environments and the gifts of routine, space, people and purpose

In this second article on workplace identity Kara Martin and Peter Cumming show us how we can resist our organisation's pressure to conform and affirm our Christian identity in the workplace by using routine, making the space a place of worship, ensuring we have Christian support, and maintaining our purpose of promoting good and holding back evil.

Many leaders experience unstable, even precarious, work environments. This is true for both independent workers participating in leadership roles in the gig economy and employees feeling a lack of attachment to their organisations.

Lack of attachment may be due to organisational changes, or to the challenge of balancing their commitment towards work and family, working from home, or because of a sense of being marginalised because of their faith.

At these times, it seems the only way to respond is to bury our anxieties and emotions, making them an invisible part of our identity. However, we exercise leadership best when we can contain our feelings so that our anxiety does not disable us. In this article we look at how we can make sense of our environment by creating a space—called a personalised holding environment—where we can be both soothed and interpret what is happening during times of uncertainty.

Our first article considered the theme of identity change in a workplace

environment through the lens of both the book of Ruth and the insights of organisational behavioural scholars. The disruptive context in which Ruth found herself mirrors our experiences from which we cannot escape in a world of relentless change. In a novel way, we applied the concept of identity work to Ruth, as she discarded, maintained and adapted her identity. Critically, we proposed that our self-conception could be granted (blessed) and furthermore, could be accomplished (to become a blessing). Consequently, when we problem-solve, negotiate, communicate, and interface with customers in our contemporary world of business experiencing disruption, our task is to craft an identity that consists of being a blessing (Gen 12:2–3).

This article aims to highlight research that considers precarious environments where a leader's work can be both productive and creative, and hence enriching. We acknowledge that modern work is complex. We propose a positive, theologically informed addition to this complexity by tracing the thread of the identity or vocation God has ascribed to us as priests and

vice-regents (Gen 1–2; Ex 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9). Consequently, whereas our natural action under challenging circumstances may be to withdraw and to experience only disruption, organisational research offers hope in the gift of constraints (routine, space), belonging (people) and meaning (purpose). We can ask, “How is God refining us?” in spite of, or even because of our challenging context.

Ideal, independent and detached workers

A prevailing image in the business world is that of the ‘Ideal Worker’, where a leader effectively declares, “my job is all that’s important”¹, resulting in the subordination of all else—the needs of their family, their health and their faith. However, many leaders feel a tension between an *expected* professional identity and their *experienced* professional identity². Navigating such pressure can result in a leader, consciously or unconsciously, making a choice between devotion to family or dedication to work. Effectively, anyone who puts anything ahead of their commitment to work can risk a loss of their leadership status.



Personalised Holding Environment

Photo: unplannedpregnancy.com

Padavic *et al.* highlight that one outcome of this distorted image of an ideal worker is the adoption of a prevailing cultural script which views men as the ideal workers and women as the ideal parents. They argue that this has contributed to gender inequality in top management teams despite years of more flexible work arrangements³.

The fantasy of an ideal worker leaves little room for what we refer to as our personalised crafted identity because it imposes instead an organisational one. Indeed, it neglects a full consideration of further important questions: “What does it mean to lead?”, “Why, toward what, and on whose behalf does one lead?” and “How does one get to lead?”⁴. For Christians, it also raises the question of workplace idolatry, that is “an attack on God’s exclusive right to our love and trust”⁵ because the ideal worker grants these exclusively to the organisation.

Present-day companies often operate in ecosystems or platforms and use the resources of external independent workers operating within the gig economy. These leaders are frequently key partners to firms, using their skills to implement key activities, and contributing directly or indirectly to the firm’s unique selling proposition (their distinctive products or services, the USP).

Independent workers can include management consultants, software engineers, artists, writers, consultants, and coaches, amongst others.

Other workers are employees and leaders of an organisation but see themselves as detached. Detached leaders are those who find themselves navigating the tension between commitment to their workplace and their own personal values and beliefs. They may be experiencing job insecurity and feeling unfairly treated, or have participated in a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programme which deliberately or inadvertently excludes their faith-based identity.

Kara’s story

Like many women, my work takes many forms, not just the work I am paid to do. I am a wife, mother, carer, mentor, preacher, speaker, lecturer, writer, coach and influencer. Some of those roles are paid, while many are not. Yet in every role there is the potential to lead others.

It is easy to find myself feeling unsettled by the precarious nature of my work: irregular income, lack of routine, the variety of spaces in which I do my work, disconnection from people, and no overarching sense of mission.

However, I find myself caught up in God’s story, and working in alignment with his purposes. Regular spiritual rhythms enable me to establish life-nourishing routines. Knowing myself always to be in God’s presence enables me to find that ordinary spaces are enchanted. I am conscious that I am never alone in my work, even though much of it is individual in nature. I consciously partner with God in my work, and I am aware that my intention is that my work benefit others. Finally, I know that even the most mundane activity can be reframed as an expression of my stewardship responsibilities: whether it is restoring order through housework, creatively communicating through writing or speaking, revealing truth through teaching, discipling my children to be caring and lovers of justice, or seeking to redeem the idea of work from Neo-Platonic dualism.

Ultimately, the productivity of my work is not something driven by me, but a gift from God. In fact, my ability to be a leader and influencer has resulted from opportunities opened up by God as he uses my work to shape me.

Sustaining a productive and creative self

Recent research by Petriglieri *et al.* showed that for detached workers, their anxiety increases and their work is rendered “precarious and personalised”⁶ when they deal directly with the market without any buffers from their organisation. It is precarious because your success or failure is more likely to be at the whim of the economic situation, and personalised because your identity is less informed by an organisation’s culture⁷. From these insights, they concluded that these leaders found the need to develop two

types of identities: a *viable* (productive) self and a *vital* (creative) self.

In the remainder of this article, we will unpack what it means to construct a holding environment that a leader could use under either of our two scenarios of independent work or lack of attachment. We define “holding” to mean the containing or limiting of a person’s emotional distress so that they can interpret and make sense of their dilemmas⁸.

One way of enabling this is to focus on biblical theology concerning our call to be vice-regents and priests who are to be a blessing to the world around us (Gen 12). After considering that, we highlight supporting components of a healthy personal holding environment (routines, space, people, purpose) and finally present a positive Christian approach for independent or detached workers who are in precarious contexts.

Work as a vocation: Priests and vice-regents

We affirm that the Bible speaks of our role, or vocation, in this world and helps us tolerate our life as precarious workers. To build our understanding of vocation, we start with Genesis 1:27–28

'Regular spiritual rhythms enable me to establish life-nourishing routines. Knowing myself always to be in God’s presence enables me to find that ordinary spaces are enchanted'



Archetypal Priests

Adam Delving

12th century stained glass panel

Canterbury Cathedral

Photo: Angelo Hornak

and 2:15. In Genesis 1, humanity, created male and female in the image of God, represents “God’s sovereign presence and rule on earth”⁹. As his vice-regents, we bear witness to him in a dynamic environment. The command to rule and subdue is humanity’s vocation in Genesis 1:27–28 and echoes a king’s role in the Ancient Near East. In Genesis, this is the responsibility for all humanity. When Adam names the animals he observes, interprets, codifies and communicates (Gen 2:19, 20).

Importantly, this rule excludes unfettered abuse of all types of resources (including humans) but is for the flourishing of people and creation, an important point for a leader¹⁰. So stakeholder management as an aspect of leadership has ancient roots!

Notably, the creation account depicts Adam and Eve as archetypal priests “cultivating/serving and guarding/keeping” God’s garden temple in Eden (Gen 2:15) and, importantly, having access to his presence¹¹. The same verbs (serving and keeping) are used of the priests in the Tabernacle in Numbers 3:7–8¹². It highlights the sacred nature of the task, and in God’s presence, Adam and Eve offer worship in everyday and ordinary tasks of service and guarding.

When we consider Genesis 2 with Genesis 1, we can conclude that their kingly and priestly activity represents “a beginning of the fulfilment of the commission of 1:28...to be extended over all the whole world”¹³. However, with

the rupturing of relationships in Genesis 3, the two integrated roles (vice-regent and priestly) split into two¹⁴. Humanity still bears God’s image but in a distorted form. The priestly vocation is only present when God allows access to his presence again. Biblically this begins in Genesis 12, with the calling of Abram, his access to God’s presence and the promise of land and descendants, necessary for the fulfilment of Genesis 1:28¹⁵.

After the liberation from Egypt, God reconstitutes his numerous and diverse people and establishes his covenant with them. The Exodus context is that they are in a geopolitical environment that could be potentially hostile and precarious. They have moved from Pharaoh’s oppressive kingdom to another with a merciful God as their King. They are anointed vice-regents, set apart, given a special status and called God’s treasured possession (Ex 19:4–6). In response, the Israelites were called to have a single-minded commitment towards God.

At Sinai, Israel is granted a vocation, mirroring the one in Genesis 1 and 2, exercised in a new Eden (the promised land) as a type of corporate Adam¹⁶. There are allusions to the vice-regent’s role in the nouns ‘kingdom’ and ‘nation’ and the more sacred references of ‘priestly’ and ‘holy’¹⁷. The people were to be on display to the nations and to bring the cares of the world to God, that is, to be mediators for the nations. Their tasks as priests included the interpretation and application in life of

God’s instructions. Behind Exodus 19: 6 is the inherent responsibility of Genesis 12:2–3 to be a blessing to the nations¹⁸.

Within the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:9 quotes parts of Exodus 19:6 and therefore also has Genesis as its background. In this setting, God’s sanctified people (1 Pet 1:2) as vice-regents and priests are living in a place of hostility, suffering persecution. In such a precarious state, they are to live their set apart (holy) lives in the everyday and mundane, even in the midst of suffering. Such a life is lived with access to God’s presence. Ideally this is recognised by their (unfriendly or hostile) neighbours (1 Pet 2:12). God’s suffering people are on display in the midst of difficult circumstances. Their ultimate purpose is to declare God’s mighty act of salvation, the basis of his people’s praise.

Creating a holding environment for work identity

Psychologists and organisational researchers speak of holding environments. When a person’s experiences are being ‘held’, that person’s emotional distress is contained, so they can interpret and make sense of their dilemmas. Critically, scanning and making sense of data is essential for a leader¹⁹. In contrast to being held, the impact of being ‘unheld’ can be the emergence of anxiety, anger and fragmentation within an organisation or a person²⁰.

Petriglieri *et al.* have done research in this area, and in this next section we will be in conversation with the endnoted article, particularly pages 135–153²¹. Their research demonstrates that independent workers do not naturally operate in a stable or enduring personalised holding environment; instead, such an environment needs cultivation, or it becomes weak. A holding environment allows emotions to come to the surface; this could either disrupt or enrich their work and work identities depending on the prevalence of routines, spaces, people and purpose. When these four factors exist, their study observed that independent workers express enrichment, suggesting hope and fulfilment. When they were absent, workers expressed a sense of failure, loss, self-blame, and losing themselves.

Personal holding environment	
Connections	
1. Routines	Viable self – to tolerate precariousness
2. Spaces	
3. People	Vital self – precariousness as creative
4. Purpose	

At the identity level, the precarious worker needs to cultivate a personalised holding environment with two aims in mind. First, developing the viable self gives the ability to tolerate precariousness and, therefore, be productive and sustain the self. Second, by tending to the vital self, precariousness can be viewed as creative or generative.

The gift of constraints

Behind the *viable* self were two elements, each with a function—first, a set of routines with time boundaries that constrain and focus the leader and allows them to be present at work. Second, physical boundaries or space for work gives a sense of confinement and acts as a buffer for the distress that could diminish productivity. Petriglieri *et al.* argue these elements

allow toleration of emotional tensions arising from precariousness. They noted that productivity was a felt experience, and that it was necessary to develop meaning which went beyond social and economic recognition though that concern remained.

The gifts of belonging and meaning

Behind the *vital* self there were also two elements with distinctive functions. Firstly, significant people in independent workers’ lives supported their work and soothed their anxieties. Secondly, a sense of purpose allows them to reorientate and to reframe how they perceive difficulties. The *vital* self taps into the desire to be inspired, feel alive and be present and authentic. In a word, it is creative because the independent worker experiences growth through it.

Underlying this way of dealing with the precarious was an existential concern that had more significant potential impacts on the stability and aspired meaning of one’s labour than social or economic concerns.

In conclusion, they found that the personalised holding environment of four elements functioned in the following ways. First, they could interpret and reframe these emotions so they could become a catalyst for valuable work in which they felt they had a stake. Despite its challenges, their leadership was now seen as more consistent with their identity, their self-conception of who they are, rather than being based on other peoples’ demands. Second, it gave them the ability to tolerate emotional tensions and be productive.

Theologically positive responses to precarious work identities

Christians who are leaders and able to integrate their faith and work have spiritual resources that enable them to more effectively ‘be held’ according to the elements described in Petriglieri’s article. Combining these elements with our vocation as priests and vice-regents empowers us for effective working and leading.

As vice-regents— stewards of God’s creation—we are cultivators, risk-takers, namers, observers, interpreters and sources of wisdom. As priests we are educators, prayers, worshippers, and conscious of becoming people fit for being in God’s presence. We may have the opportunity to mediate the knowledge of God to the nations (a teaching function) and mediate for the nations before God.

Remaining productive:

The gifts of constraints

Christian leaders are empowered to remain productive in spite of precariousness, since the first two elements (routines and spaces) pick up Wenham’s reflections on Gen 1:12, “There is a givenness about time and space which God has ordered by his own decree”²² and in his activity of bringing order out of chaos.

1. Routines

Our priestly vocation is a recognition of both the orientation of our work toward God and the need to fit in with rhythms that remind us of our creatureliness.

Shortly after the creation of human beings, and their appointment as vice-regents over creation, God introduces the Sabbath (Gen 2:2–3). The Sabbath (literally “ceasing”) reminds us that we need to stop work, and enter a rest-work rhythm. This practice reminds us that we are creatures, not creators; and that our work should never be the object of our worship. However, in our everyday and mundane aspects of life we can offer worship (Rom 12:1).

Christians typically have other rhythms of reading and prayer, worship and self-examination; as well as celebrations (especially Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter) that provide a regular sequence of activities linked to the story of the Gospel. However, we are free to imagine rhythms that fill our days with spiritual practices for work. An example would be using a three-fold pattern of orienting, engaging and reflection on our work²³.

'The workspace is the place of our worship'



Photo: The Beacon

2. Spaces

Space is important in our vice-regent vocation. The Genesis 12:1–3 promise to Abraham included land, as well as descendents (a nation) and the potential to be a blessing. Space is important for God's people, but it is also important for God. The creation of the Tent of Meeting provides boundaries for the inhabiting of God's presence (Ex 33:7–9). Once the land has been entered into, then a temple is built, and God's presence enters that (2 Chr 5:14). In the New Testament, Pentecost signals the coming of the Holy Spirit on those who believe (Acts 2:1–31), and now Christians themselves become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20), an indicator of our priestly vocation.

It is because of God's mercy, that in the space of our workplace, we can "Take our everyday, ordinary life—our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering" (Rom 12:1, *The Message*). Consequently, the workspace that is part of our identity formation is the place of our worship, despite our sometimes precarious existence.

Being creative:

The gifts of belonging and meaning

Being made in the image of God includes the responsibility of "filling" the earth (Genesis 1:28); continuing to unfold the process of creation. It gives us a responsibility for others, an awareness of community, and an enduring sense of purpose in all our work.

3. People

Our vice-regent responsibilities were never designed to be exercised as individuals, but in the Garden, Adam and Eve were expected to work in community (Gen 2:18), that is, we are to help each other. God himself desires to work with us also (Gen 2:5, 19). There is also the imperative that we are to be a blessing to others (Gen 12:3, Ex 19:4–6). Our work as leaders is never meant to be an end in itself, but to be done in community for the sake of others. In Romans 16, Paul highlights his life history as being encouraged by a diverse range of partners, including Phoebe, a patron and a woman of influence. In our precarious state, we, like Phoebe, need to be beneficiaries of reciprocity²⁴.

At a practical level, creative sensemaking happens with support and in partnership. When you experience the messiness of precariousness, a good question to ask is: who has God provided for you? Often, other Christians will show you empathy, encouragement and support. There is nothing more lonely than a leader without friends, since friends allow us an opportunity to express what cannot be expressed in the workplace, as well as space to reframe the problem and a posture of curiosity in seeking a solution.

4. Purpose

Exercising our vocation as vice-regents leads us to continue God's work in the world, through our ordinary work. Robert Banks has helpfully broken this into six categories: being creative, providing for others and the planet,

revealing truth, en fleshing Jesus' work of redemption by promoting good and holding back evil, showing compassion and seeking justice²⁵. For all of us, many of these six elements are components of our work and give our work a renewed sense of purpose as we align ourselves with God.

These activities of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11–21) can also be expressions of our priestly vocation, as they are part of what Beale is describing—referencing Psalm 8: "the ultimate goal of humanity was to fill the whole earth with God's glory"²⁶. As leaders, we are culture makers and culture shapers, able to align that work with God's desire for human flourishing.

We conclude by discussing Peter's lived experience.


Peter's story

I have worked in global companies with strong cultural identities. There were norms of behaviour, symbols and underlying assumptions consistent with these organisations' desired cultural alignment. In my workplaces there has always been the fully committed worker who set the tone or image of what leadership should be in my workplaces. There was a time, being competitive by nature, that this raised seemingly intractable tensions between my lived-out Christian faith and my desire to be affirmed in a workplace setting. Early on, I neglected my commitments to my family, friends and fellow-Christians because I could not manage my anxieties when I detached myself from the organisational norms.

Slowly, I have been learning to stay in the tension and be curious. Not that it is so high that I risk burnout, or so low that I lack a sense of energy and engagement. I have been forced to work on identity issues in this middle space and ponder how to positively bear witness. My insights have continued to grow, first, as a vice-regent when managing money as an investment professional and, more recently, as an executive coach. I observe that I have been more resistant to the priestly role, in part because the image of a priest has been more set within a

church setting, which has not been my lived reality. However, more profoundly, it's because it raises the need to practise a more intercessory role, of praying the difficulties of my (sometimes) precarious work environments and bringing them to God. When the context has allowed, it includes engaging in a dialogue with my faith-based impulses in a way that allows the conversation to continue.

One fundamental characteristic of being a good coach to leaders is to 'hold' your client, so they contain their emotions

and make sense of their environment to become better leaders. Guiding clients through Petriglieri's et al. framework of routines, space, people and purpose is highly beneficial when they experience unstable environments, because it releases their creativity and productivity. A theological overlay deepens these benefits for a leader who wants to be driven by their faith. This overlay allows the toleration of demanding environments, the exercise of vocations for God's glory, and for human and creational flourishing. 

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