

Faith in Business Prayer

Richard Higginson recovers a random selection of prayer letters from the Faith in Business Prayer network which started in early 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic broke out. For the first couple of years the content was dominated by the impact of COVID-19. Subsequently letters covered climate change and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the final letter here was about the effects of Long Covid.

When the coronavirus pandemic broke out in early 2020, Faith in Business took two new initiatives. Prompted by the fact that we had to cancel at short notice the Retreat scheduled for March of that year, we launched Faith in Business Monthly, a webinar comprising talks and discussion held on the first Thursday of each month. This clearly met a need and is still going strong – see www.faithinbusiness.org/Groups/352038/Faith_in_Business.aspx. The second was to send out a regular prayer letter (initially fortnightly but now three-weekly) to those who wish to receive it. We did this because the onset of the pandemic was a devastating development that left many of us in a high state of anxiety and bewilderment. The idea was to offer some biblical Christian reflection on events as they rapidly unfolded, and suggest ways in which we might pray

for ourselves and others, nationally and internationally.

Faith in Business Prayer received a positive response, and it too is still going. By the time this issue of FiBQ is published, 75 prayer letters will have been written and sent. A network of 40 people receive them, and about 10 of us meet online quarterly to share prayer needs and concerns.

Throughout this time, the focus of the prayer letters has been work-related. For the first couple of years the content was dominated by the impact of COVID-19. I recently skim-read these letters and found myself reliving stages of the pandemic I had almost forgotten about. I thought you might be interested to get a feel of what I wrote. In a fairly random way I have picked out excerpts from five letters, each of them separated by a period of six months.

Prayer Letter no 4 13 May 2020

RETURN TO WORK

Of course, many people have never stopped working, doing so from home, and many will continue in that vein. But this is the day when many people who can't work at home have been encouraged by the Government to return to their normal workplace. As we all know, this has stirred up a huge amount of concern and debate.

Many are concerned about whether they will be safe at work. Social distancing measures are hard to implement in certain types of workplace. Pray that companies will find ways of operating that keep employees protected and safe, but also ensure reasonable productivity. Pray that employers may



Return to work 11 May 2020

Photo: People Management

be compassionate and understanding towards those who feel fearful and are reluctant to come into work. Pray against a surge of workplace infections.

Many are concerned about how they will get to work. People are being encouraged to walk or cycle to work, but that is not practical for those whose workplace is many miles from their home. They are being discouraged from using public transport, and safety on buses, trains and the underground is a clear matter for concern: not easy to socially distance there. But if workers who normally use public transport to get to work travel by car, there is the danger of our roads getting clogged up. Pray that people will have wisdom in knowing how best to travel. Pray against a surge of infections in transit.

Many are concerned about the knock-on effects on their children. If they go back to work, who will look after their children who cannot yet return to school? They feel pulled in different directions: the call of their workplace, employers and colleagues on the one hand, and that of their partners, children and families on the other. Pray that people will make careful and caring decisions in handling this dimension

of life. And pray against a surge of infections in our homes through people carrying the virus from their workplace and means of travel.

There are also those who would like to return to their workplace but cannot. This may be because there is little or no work to do, because the supply or demand from their clients has dried up. Or they may work in sectors that are not yet allowed to reopen. Pray for people who are longing to be productive and contribute to the life of the community but are currently frustrated in doing so. Pray that they may find alternative ways to work or help others in a voluntary capacity.

I'd like to request prayer for one particular sector with whom I have a close connection. My wife Felicity is a nursery school teacher. Her school has continued to teach a small number of children of key workers during lockdown. But now the government is expecting nursery schools to reopen fully at the beginning of June. This poses severe challenges. We are mystified as to why the government's policy on schools reopening focuses mainly on the youngest children (nursery, reception and level 1, as well as level 6).

The youngest children are those least able to understand and practise social distancing. Pray for schools, teachers, parents and families who are struggling with this situation.

I don't know about you but sometimes the only prayer I can summon up is 'Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy'. But in the face of all this suffering, anguish and uncertainty I still feel we should be bold and pray for God's blessing:

'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace' (Numbers 6:24-26).

Prayer Letter No 16 November 11 2020

In my last prayer letter I said that in response to the pandemic we had reached a critical stage and exhorted us to pray for God's wisdom as the Government faced difficult decisions. Well, this was followed a few days later by a return to 'lockdown'. Whatever we think of the wisdom of that move, it had the virtue of the Government doing something decisive. However,



Early years social distancing

Photo: Matrix Global Schools, Malaysia

Katalin Karikó and
Drew Weissman

Photo: Science



Nobel Laureates for discoveries enabling the creation of a new kind of vaccine, including some of the first ones for COVID-19

this lockdown is less stringent than the original one and the evidence is accruing that it carries less public support. Some of the Government's regulations about what is and isn't allowed to be open appear highly arbitrary. This is fuelling a good deal of resentment, not least among those who own and run businesses. For instance, many locked-down specialist retailers who sell "non-essential" goods have been left fuming because some of their competitors (notably the big supermarkets) are allowed to sell these non-essential goods alongside "essential" ones. They are complaining that the big chains will "sweep up all the pre-Christmas sales". However, the Government has said that retailers with "sufficiently distinct parts" should close the parts selling non-essential items "to limit interactions between customers and the opportunity for the disease to spread".

I'm sure we can all feel sympathy for businesses which have made huge efforts to be responsible and introduce COVID security measures but now find themselves forced to shut while competitors stay open. We need to pray about this. Let us pray against an upsurge of a huge wave of resentment which can have such negative personal and social effects. But let us pray also that justice

may prevail - that the Government will make as wise and fair adjudications as is possible in a situation where there are no straightforward answers.

And now for some encouraging news. Prayer letter no.14 contained a Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession which included a prayer for scientists working on a vaccination. I'm sure we all rejoiced over this week's news that Pfizer and BioNTech have developed a vaccine which has been tested on 43,500 people with very promising results. There are other vaccines which may follow soon in its wake. This is a cause for rejoicing and cautious optimism, and the scientists who have worked so hard to develop vaccines over the last few months, along with members of the public who have volunteered to take part in the trials, deserve much praise. But we also need to redouble our prayers. Let us pray that these vaccines will indeed have the hoped-for positive effects without any dangerous side-effects. And let us pray for wisdom, fairness and competence in the distribution of the vaccines. May governments be protected from a selfish grab-all mentality demanding more than their fair share. May poorer countries that are in desperate need not be muscled out by the more powerful and richer ones. May distribution within

each country target those who are most needy and vulnerable.

One of you in an email response reminded me of the importance of joining in wider prayer movements concerning the pandemic. In that respect I'm pleased to alert you to an initiative taken by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, with the support of other church leaders, urging Christians to spend a period of each day in prayer over the coming month. See www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/churches-hold-month-prayer-second-lockdown-begins. This is their recommended prayer for the week November 9-15:

Lord God, at this time of crisis when so many are suffering, we pray for our nation and our world. Give our leaders wisdom, our Health Service strength, our people hope. Lead us through these parched and difficult days to the fresh springs of joy and comfort that we find in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Can I encourage you all to pray that prayer this week? Let us do so in a spirit not just of petitioning God but listening to God. Thank you to the person who reminded me of Habakkuk 2:1: 'I will stand at my watch-post, and station

myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint'. Habakkuk is surely a prophet for our times.

Prayer Letter No 28

19 May 2021

I started writing these prayer letters at the time of the first lockdown in March 2020. At the time there were two things I didn't anticipate: that the pandemic would last so long and that the situation would prove so volatile, changing rapidly from one fortnight to another.

Since I last wrote we in the UK have passed the latest Government milestone, May 17, and we are now allowed to do lots of things that were previously forbidden, from hugging our families to attending cinemas and football matches, at least in limited numbers. Progress in vaccinating people has accelerated and numbers of COVID-19 deaths remain low.

Yet compared with a fortnight ago there seems to be a widespread state of unease, which has affected even our normally optimistic Prime Minister. We are aware that horrific numbers of cases

and deaths continue in countries such as India, and we are aware that a new Indian variant is spreading rapidly in this country. Government spokesmen are now expressing uncertainty about whether Step 4, the final stage of relaxing restrictions on activity planned for June 21, will now take place.

Amidst this uncertainty, there are two particular areas of business activity which cause a lot of concern to me as well as to many others.

The first is the opening up of restaurants and particularly pubs to customers indoors. We know how easily and quickly a pub can become congested. We also know that many pubs in cities and towns attract young people in large numbers. However, the majority of people under 40 in the UK have not yet been vaccinated. Was it wise to ease this restriction before such vaccinations had taken place? Is the opening up of pubs indoors taking place a month or so too early?

The second is the opening up of overseas travel. Holiday-makers are resuming their practice of travelling to foreign destinations. We know how international travel has played a major

role in the spread of the virus from the earliest stage out of China to the most recent stage out of India. Isn't this asking for trouble? Is it wise to allow these relaxations on travel even if they are modest, limited and involve people going into quarantine?

In this third stage of implementing its roadmap, the Government is clearly putting more trust in the general public. It is allowing greater freedom while urging caution. If Boris Johnson was feeling more confident we would have seen him pulling a pint in his local pub on May 17. Ministers urge members of the public not to visit 'amber list' countries while the very fact that they are amber and not red makes it possible for them to do so. The messages feel very mixed.

What this adds up to is that for the Government plan to work and the country to proceed safely to the next stage, a huge collective act of self-discipline is needed. We need people not to swarm into pubs nor book foreign holidays in large numbers. Knowing the fallen state of human nature and noting some of the excesses we have seen over the last 12 months, this seems



unlikely. But as Christians we should not resort to cynicism or despair. Let us set a responsible example ourselves; let us encourage people to be disciplined and exercise self-restraint; and let us pray that God will – perhaps by a quasi-miraculous act of common grace – help people to be surprisingly sensible. So here's an unusual suggestion for prayer:

May the general public be surprisingly sensible!

However, there are knock-on effects of what I'm advocating for business. If I am right that congestion in pubs/restaurants and airline travel are particular danger areas, that means a reduction in the number of hoped for customers. The consequence is that these business sectors are likely to need longer, more sustained and more substantial government support than other sectors. I have actually heard this suggestion made by some businesspeople in these other sectors; they are grateful for the support (especially furlough support) they have received but feel the time may have come for government help to business to be targeted more precisely.

This is a matter that requires great wisdom and careful handling by decision-makers. It also requires businesspeople in the hospitality and travel sectors to recognise that there may be a tension between their own commercial interests and the common

good. So my second suggestion for prayer is not a million miles distant from the first: **May these businesspeople be unusually understanding and servant-minded!**

In Philippians 4:5 Paul says 'Let your *epeikes* be evident to all'. The Greek word *epeikes* is difficult to translate and there is no one single English word that does justice to it. If you compare the different translations you will find gentleness, graciousness, moderation, forbearance, fair-mindedness. In truth it is a subtle but strong combination of all of these. Some have even suggested '**sweet reasonableness**'. It's my conviction that this is a quality much needed in the present time in the life of our nation. Pray that God may pour out this *epeikes* quality among us, both in the Christian community and well beyond it.

**Prayer Letter no 40
3 November 2021**

THE PROBLEM OF METHANE

A fortnight ago we focused our prayers on COP-26, and it seems appropriate that with the conference now well under way but with much hanging in the balance, we should do so again.

It is fair to say that COP-26 has started with world leaders and conference organisers scoring a number of embarrassing own goals: the increase in air pollution caused by so many

politicians arriving in private jets, the difficulties the Israeli energy minister had in securing wheelchair access, and the failure of the presidents of two of the world's most powerful countries, Xi of China and Putin of Russia, to attend.

Nevertheless, the first few days have seen some progress. The most encouraging is the agreement by 105 countries to reduce methane emissions to 30% below 2020 levels. Sadly, three major methane emitters, China, India and Russia have not (yet) signed up. But it does include significant players such as the EU, USA, UK, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iraq and Indonesia.

Methane emissions come from a variety of sources including landfill sites, gas wells, food waste and ruminant livestock such as cattle and sheep. It is a compound of carbon and hydrogen which is notoriously effective at trapping heat. The effects of methane are more short-lived than carbon dioxide but they are also more potent. This means that reducing it significantly can have quite a rapid impact on temperatures. As the EU Commission President, Ursula van der Leyen, said in hailing the agreement, 'Cutting methane is one of the most effective things we can do to reduce short-term global warming. It is the lowest hanging fruit.'

Implementing this agreement will not be easy. There is little detail or transparency on how the 30% reduction



Oil production is responsible for around 40% of methane emissions

Photo: hkhtt hj



will be achieved. It will undoubtedly require significant changes in diet among the populations of the countries who have signed up to it. In particular, eat less – or preferably no – beef! It is symptomatic of public indifference to this moral imperative that a major roundabout in Cambridge is regularly clogged up by drivers queuing to get into a McDonald's takeaway. The UK Climate Change Committee recommends that people should consume 20% less meat and dairy by 2030 and 35% less by 2050.

Cultural shifts like this will of course have effects on employment. If less cattle are bred for consumption this has implications for cattle ranchers, dairy farmers and McDonald's employees, among others. So part of our prayer should be that people can look beyond (understandably) protecting their own short-term interests to heeding the wider long-term interests of humanity and planet earth.

A PRAYER FOR COP-26

Here is a helpful and positive prayer for COP-26 produced by Tear Fund and written by Ruth Valerio. I commend it to you:

*To our God
who made and can move mountains.
who created people and can touch their
hearts and minds,*

*who declared that the world was very
good and can make it be so again,
who has the world in his hands,
be praise and glory.*

*We lift before you the COP climate talks
and the future of the planet.
We are sorry for the damage that has
been done,
but we come before you knowing that
you are a God of mercy and miracles.
We pray for the world leaders gathering
in Glasgow,
that they would do what is right and fair.
May the common desire to protect
the world enable good conversations,
positive actions and bring about unity.*

*We pray for those joining from
countries on the frontline of climate
change who are experiencing the
worst impacts, having contributed the
least. We pray that their voices would
carry weight and power, and that you,
God, would protect their place at the
negotiating table.*

*Lord, would you help us in the UK to
host with humility, compassion and
generosity.*

*You are a God for whom nothing is
impossible or too late.
In the face of this climate crisis, we hold
on to the hope found in you.
Hear the cries of your people, God.*

Prayer Letter no 52

18 May 2022

We all know that the media are a fickle bunch. For nearly two years coronavirus was the dominating story day after day. During that time we focussed most of our prayers in this network on how COVID-19 was affecting people, particularly in the workplace. Then Russia invaded Ukraine, and that has become the lead story that eclipses all others; again with good reason, because it is a terrible event with momentous consequences. I am not suggesting we stop praying for Ukraine. Last week I came across this simple but moving prayer for Ukraine, Russia and peace in Chichester Cathedral. You might like to use it:

*O God,
It is your will to hold both heaven and
earth in a single peace.
Let the design of your great love
shine on the world of our wraths and
sorrows,
and give peace to Ukraine,
peace among nations
and peace in our hearts,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

LONG COVID

Nevertheless, it would be quite wrong in our prayer lives to forget the effects of the pandemic. Fewer people are now

Shortness of Breath in Long Covid

Photo: cognitivefx



getting infected with the virus and there are many signs of life returning to something like what we consider normality. But COVID-19 has left a heavy toll, and not just in the lives of those who have lost loved ones. There are many left with the lingering impact of the virus in their own bodies.

The Office for National Statistics has calculated that in the UK 1.5 million people (i.e. 2.4 % of the population) are suffering from Long Covid, and the Guardian estimates that a quarter of these have been doing so for over a year. Long Covid eludes precise definition, but the typical pattern seems to be where the person has suffered from acute symptoms for at least four weeks with significant ongoing symptoms after 12 weeks. These symptoms include persistent fatigue; breathlessness; joint and muscle pain; dizziness; chest pain; brain fog (not being able to concentrate or think clearly); depression and anxiety. Most of us probably know at least one person – maybe more – who has Long Covid.

Those suffering from this condition are profoundly affected in their working lives. Some continue to be so ill that they are unable to resume working. For them absenteeism is turning into

despair about ever being able to work properly again; to redundancy and early retirement. Others are trying to return to work but finding it very difficult. For them presenteeism is a life of trying to continue but doing so amidst great hardship and knowing that you are not the worker you were. The problem can be compounded by the variability of the condition: days when you think you're a lot better followed by days when you feel worse again.

Inevitably, employers vary as to how understanding or sympathetic they are. Some are highly supportive to Long Covid sufferers and others are not. Because it is a new condition, knowledge about Long Covid is in the process of being acquired and not yet widely shared. One fact that is coming to light is that the group most badly affected are women in the 35-49 age group, with large numbers working in education, health and social care. In short, a group playing a key role and carrying a heavy burden both in their family lives and professional roles.

So let us pray for people with Long Covid:


- That God may give them perseverance, endurance and hope

in their troubles; that he will bring healing both to exhausted bodies and troubled minds

- That they may find the support they need from their families, friends and employers
- That new and flexible work patterns may be found and accepted for those 'feeling their way' back to work
- That the Church might be sensitive to people with Long Covid in their congregations and communities.

Finally

It will be evident that as time has gone on, the focus of the letters eventually shifted away from the pandemic to other major issues in our world. But the concern to address the work-related aspects of these issues has remained. In addition, I have sought to draw attention to helpful prayer material produced by others (including the ICF's excellent collection *Love:Work*) as much as possible.

If any readers are stimulated and encouraged by this article to join the prayer network please contact me at richard.higginson@cantab.net. You would be very welcome. 



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He has just stepped down as Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of *FiBQ* and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*.