

Shedding The Yoke of Mammon:

Economic Stress and the Gift of Sabbath

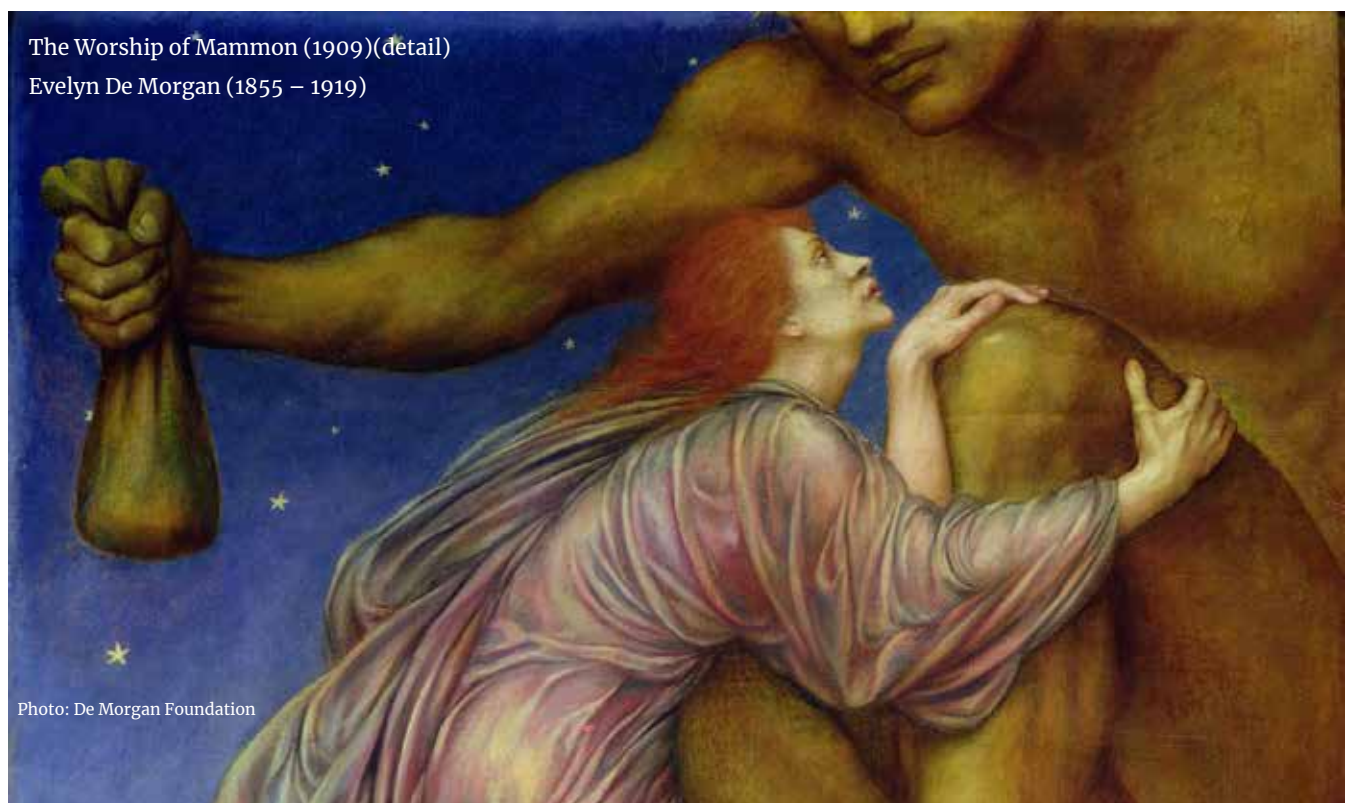
Kenneth Barnes, with help from C. Sara Lawrence Minard, looks at how and why people feel overwhelmed by their circumstances, and subjugated by a vast, powerful and impersonal economic ecosystem. Change seems impossible in the face of embedded power structures, organisational resistance to change and the increasing constraint on employees' time. Ethical behaviour, especially for large businesses, comes at a financial cost which they can ill afford. Employees, often lonely, especially if isolated because of their religious beliefs, risk losing their jobs if they challenge the prevailing ethos. Sabbath, properly understood, gives believers the tools they need to throw off the yoke of mammon, and take on the yoke of Christ.

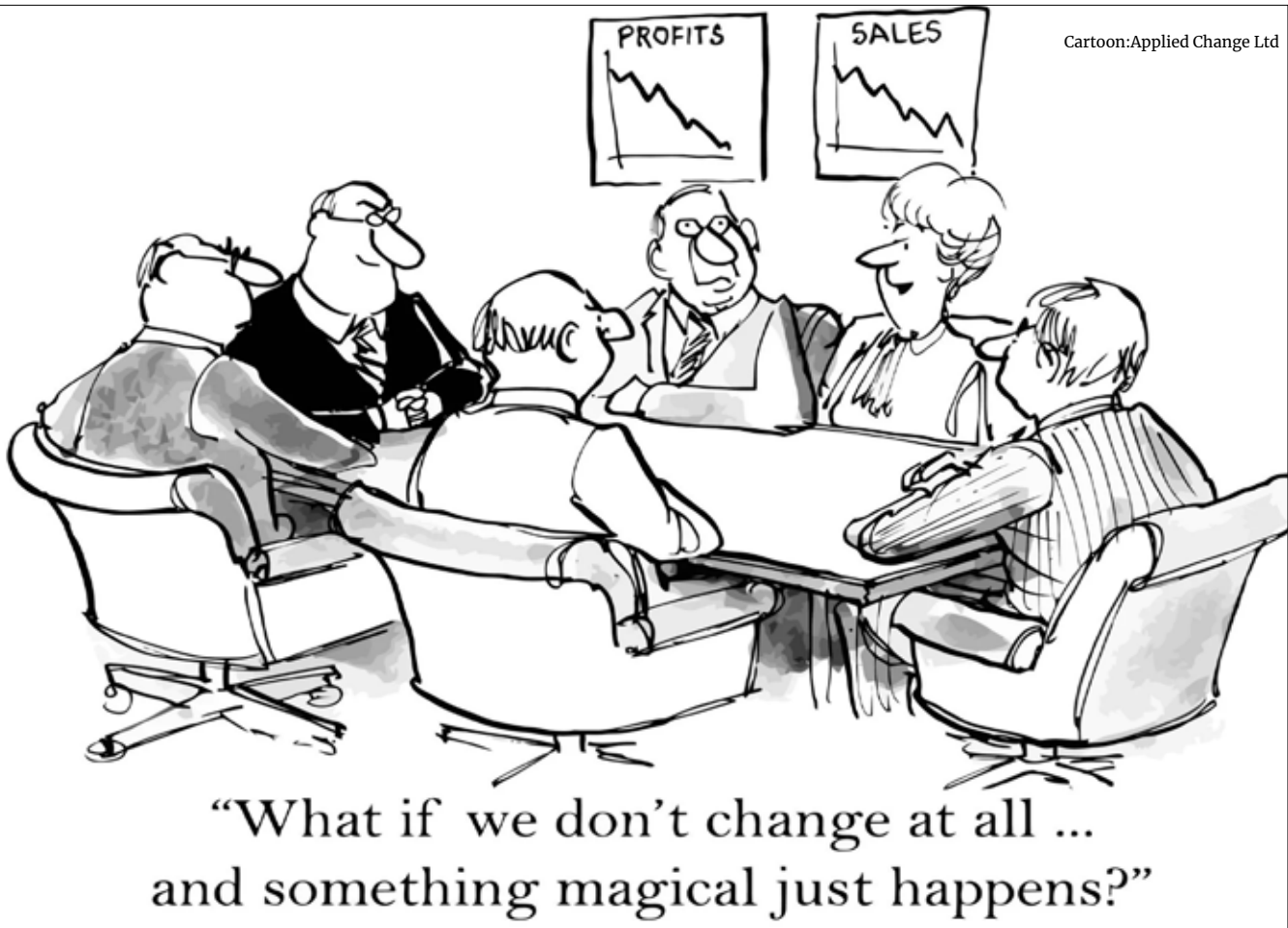
The word mammon (μαμωνᾱ) appears only four times in the New Testament (Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:9, 11, 13). In each instance it is used by Jesus to describe material wealth. It is probably derived from “mamona” (ܡܡܘܢܐ) in Aramaic (the *lingua franca* of many Palestinian Jews in the 1st Century C.E.), meaning a “treasure in which one puts one’s trust”. In Matthew, it is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:24) and in Luke, the so-called Parable of the

Dishonest Steward (Lk. 16:1-11). In contrast to the more common word for “treasure” (θησαυρός) found throughout the New Testament, its juxtaposition in the Matthew passage with God (θεός), who is to be “served” (δουλεύω), suggests that mammon possesses some agency capable of tempting one away from God. This led to the Church’s general personification of mammon as early as the 4th Century C.E., and the specific

identification of mammon as an evil deity in the Middle Ages¹.

The personification of mammon need not be taken literally for the image to ring true. While mammon itself may be a metaphor for the negative impact of both individual bad-actors and malignant systems, the effects are the same. People feel oppressed by forces they cannot see and appear beyond their control; they are hurting and they’re looking for ways to cope.





Recently the Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics in the Public Square at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary convened a distinguished group of Christian leaders, from the church, the academy and the marketplace, to explore the conditions that contribute to economic and workplace stress. They included CEOs and those whose ministries (both church and parachurch) serve business leaders, as well as economists from secular universities and theological scholars. They came from diverse backgrounds, political affiliations, and faith traditions; each came with a wealth of knowledge and experience; and all came with a genuine desire to better understand the difficult challenges faced by people of faith at work and in business. What follows are some of the more common issues shared by the delegates, revealing how and why people feel overwhelmed by their circumstances and subjugated by a vast, powerful and impersonal economic ecosystem.

Embedded Systems

First among the challenges mentioned by delegates were the “embedded systems” that drive so much of our economic behaviour. Some of these systems are internal and unique to particular organizations, while others are endemic to entire sectors.

One feature of these embedded systems is an inherent resistance to change, both individually and corporately, that make it very difficult for conscientious actors to improve working conditions. As Rehman et al (2021)² note, despite decades of research and the introduction of countless change management programmes across institutions large and small, most change management efforts fail. Most of those failed efforts have only to do with business processes or organisational changes, not the more difficult task of changing employee behaviour and/or informing corporate culture. Despite the desire of people of faith to effect transformation in both the workplace and the economy, resistance to change persists,³ even though research has

shown that it can be done, if people believe that there is a “just” (aka “virtuous”) cause behind the change.⁴ Perceived economic efficiency alone, however, is an insufficient motive for people to change their behaviour. There must be more at stake than a performance review for people to disrupt the *status quo*.

Another challenge cited by the delegates, that falls under the categories of both embedded systems and resistance to change, is the impact of entrenched power structures, both internally and externally. As Rodrigues et al (2011)⁵ and others have noted, the power of top-line managers to enhance their own power bases through a constellation of asymmetric information, consolidated relationships, and control over resources, helps to create environments that are resistant to change. In fact, those who propose change are often targeted by top-line managers as threats to their hegemony; and are often subjected to “neutralisation” efforts.



Another inhibitor to change that might be considered the result of embedded systems is the increasing constraint on employees' time, as staffing shortages, increased workloads, and employer expectations make it difficult for employees to think about anything other than the immediate task at hand. For many, gone are the days when employees were encouraged, and even empowered, to think about ways to improve processes and increase customer satisfaction, as speed, growth, innovation, agility, and cost reductions have become the primary focus of many businesses today.⁶ If employees don't even have the time to think creatively about how to improve their own businesses, how can they possibly attempt to transform the way people think about the impact of their actions on both the general economy, and on society as a whole? The answer is, they can't; unless they are willing to go against the grain and risk the probable repercussions.

While the ENRON bankruptcy, the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the LIBOR scandal, the Madoff pyramid scheme, the collapse of FTX and countless other examples of corporate malfeasance are proof positive of the need for systemic change, they are also examples of what happens when performance metrics are reduced to nothing more than short-term monetary results. The fact that most companies are in the business of generating profits and returns for their

shareholders is obvious. Unfortunately, the outsized influence of this brute fact often leads to a combination of short-termism, greed, unethical behaviour, unlawful practices, and catastrophic business failures, and must be challenged as the sole end of business. Until it is challenged however, most people will simply follow the crowd, without realizing the long-term damage they are doing to themselves and others.

Lack of Control

The next most mentioned inhibitor to effecting meaningful change and transforming economic behaviour, is what symposium delegates simply described as "lack of control". That is not to say that change agents don't have the ability to influence behaviour and culture; it simply means that external influences will often dictate the *foci* of organizations' attention to the point where control over narratives, events, policies, procedures, and the use of scarce resources are concentrated among too few actors.

First among those external influences is the market itself. Every business, and it may be argued every organisation, is subject to the vagaries of ever-changing markets. Simply put, markets are driven by supply and demand, and changes in demand, brought about by new market entrants, new technologies, or other factors, can put tremendous strain on companies' assets (especially cash), and force businesses into "survival mode".

When businesses and organisations find themselves facing existential threats, it is not uncommon for more lofty ambitions to be relegated to the dustbin of relative obscurity.

This is especially true of publicly traded companies, where the pressure to outperform the market is relentless. Shareholders vote with their money, and underperforming stocks may be dropped in a nanosecond, and executives replaced at the whim of their Boards. This pressure makes it very difficult, even for senior executives, to influence corporate behaviour in ethically positive ways, if it is thought that ethical behaviour comes at a financial cost.

Lastly, the effects of workplace stress and widespread burnout are two other factors that contribute to corporate cultures that are resistant to meaningful change. Simply put, it takes a lot of energy to be a change agent, and delegates to the conference reported feeling "overworked and under-appreciated". This of course, saps people's energy and disincentivises them in their efforts to lead the difficult process of renewal and transformation.

No Room for God

Among the concerns most expressed by the conference's delegates was a general feeling that God has not only been eliminated from economic discourse, but from economic consciousness. Business and other

forms of economic activity are seen as radically secular, with no room for consideration of the divine, or even religiously informed ethical constraint. Work is viewed primarily as a means of subsistence, a kind of “necessary evil”, even among the very ambitious who see it as a means of acquiring great personal wealth. Rarely however, is it understood as something sacred, something fundamental to the essence of our humanity, or a potential source of human flourishing.

Similarly, most economic activity is based upon a presumption of scarcity. Competition for limited, and potentially insufficient resources, creates a “zero-sum game” mentality, where one person’s gain inevitably results in another’s loss; and the purpose of the “game” is to win at all costs, with little or no consideration of how one’s economic decisions and/or actions impact other people, other communities, or the natural environment.

These things of course, run counter to biblical teaching on the sovereignty of God and the nature of humankind; the abundance of God’s provision; the meaning and purpose of work (and

other forms of economic activity); and humanity’s ongoing role in the maintenance of God’s creation (aka “the cultural mandate”). This misalignment is not only disconcerting for people of faith, but its memetic entrenchment also makes it very difficult to renew people’s minds and transform their behaviour for the benefit of all.

Loneliness and Isolation

Among the many challenges cited by delegates to the conference was a palpable sense of loneliness and isolation in the workplace. In a recent article by former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in *Harvard Business Review* (2017), this problem was described as an “epidemic”, with a negative health impact equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.⁷

The causes of loneliness in the workplace are many, but as workers become more connected “virtually” (i.e. via information technologies), they experience a greater sense of disconnection in “reality”. Citing previous studies from the American Association of Retired People (Wilson and Moulton, 2010) and *Harvard Business Review* (Saporito, 2012),

Murthy notes that:

We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s. Today, over 40% of adults in America⁸, report feeling lonely, and research suggests that the real number may well be higher. Additionally, the number of people who report having a close confidante in their lives has been declining over the past few decades. In the workplace, many employees — and half of CEOs⁹ — report feeling lonely in their roles.¹⁰

People of faith are not immune to this reality; in fact, they are often isolated because of their religious beliefs and/or affiliations. People of faith are often objectified in the workplace, either because of their outward expressions of faith and/or their lack of social conformity; or because of their unspoken expressions of faith, such as clothing, religious markings, religious observances, and other indicators of religious belief. While this is especially true for religious minorities, it is increasingly true for anyone who identifies as a “believer” of any kind, in the workplace.

Loneliness at work

Photo: Chronwell





Sabbath

Photo: Soul Shepherding, Inc.

Insecurity

Much has been written about the precarious nature of work in both standard and non-standard settings (Muntaner, 2016¹¹; Jonsson, et al, 2019¹²; Cumming and Martin, 2023¹³; Shoss, et al, 2023¹⁴, etc.). In the case of the latter, the nature of contract-work itself is the primary cause of concern. The so-called “gig economy” is based purely on transactional utility, with little concern for the well-being of independent contractors. In the case of the former, there are many reasons why people are concerned about their job security. Increased competition from abroad; the expanded use of stringent performance metrics; the decline of union representation; a geographically fluid employment pool; rapidly changing business processes; shifting demographics; and even the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI); have all contributed to an environment where employees are in constant fear of losing their jobs.

Prior to the impact of Covid-19, the power dynamic between employers and employees was so one-sided, that some employers even used the threat of redundancy as a perverse form of “motivation” (Hassard, 2018), to keep employees “on their toes”, and more importantly, to keep them from disrupting the *status quo*.

It is a very brave person indeed, who risks their livelihood to inform corporate culture along religiously inspired lines. Yet, it was Jesus himself who famously asked the question: “what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mk. 8:36). Staying silent in the face of moral turpitude may seem expedient at the time, but as many will attest, to be complicit in wrongdoing can be both

career-limiting and soul-destroying in the long run.

Yet even those who are willing to take a stand against ethically compromised cultures, sometimes doubt whether the risks they take – and the sacrifices they make – will have any lasting impact on individual and corporate behaviour.

Feeling Spiritually Bereft

As Christians in the workplace find themselves in ever more hostile environments, they often succumb to the temptation to conform. As a measure of self-defence, or even survival, they collude in the compartmentalisation of their own lives, until their faith becomes marginalised to the point of nominal influence. The fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23), are replaced by selfishness, melancholy, divisiveness, impatience, meanness, cynicism, crassness, and reactive, ill-considered behaviour.

The exclusion of one’s faith from activities that occupy most of one’s waking hours can easily result in the relegation of God from an ever-present reality to an occasional consideration. Lost are regular rhythms of prayer and devotion; and work, instead of being one’s “worship” (Rom. 12:1), is nothing more than the means to a material end. Overworked, underappreciated, and faced with the regular prospect of “moral tragedy”¹⁵, many Christians in the workplace report feelings of resentment, anger, helplessness, and overall dissatisfaction at work. And so, the unrelenting hegemony of mammon continues unabated, with catastrophic consequences for the health and well-being of real people and ultimately, the dysfunctionality of organisations.

Sabbath: An Ancient Solution to a Modern Problem

When one hears the word “apology” it is normative to think of an act of contrition. “I’m sorry”, one might say when asked to make an apology, even though the word itself is derived from the Greek *apologia* (ἀπολογία), meaning “to give an account” (i.e. explain). Over time, the common association of contrition with explanation came to change the meaning of the word itself, at least in common parlance.

The same may be said for the word “sabbath”. While normally associated with the noun Sabbath (i.e., the Judeo-Christian “day of rest”), or even the verb “rest” itself, the word sabbath (שָׁבַת) actually means “to cease”. Its common usage was derived from its association with the aforementioned religious ordinance, and its accompanying constraints (Exodus 31:13-17).

Why does the change in word meaning matter? It matters because the common use of the word has obscured its intention and direction within the metanarrative of the biblical epoch. Far from being a mere injunction against manual labour or other forms of “work”, as it is often understood, the biblical use of sabbath is far more encompassing. As Autumn Ridenour, Mockler Professor of Christian Ethics at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, explains:

... (humans) are spiritual creatures meant for sabbath rest that reflects eternity as ‘gathered time’. Sabbath directs humans to participate in the disruption of time demanded by the monotony of work, particularly in a digital age. By practicing sabbath, we participate in a posture of receiving rather than producing, consuming, or performing alone. Instead, we receive our primary identity as persons made in


the divine image and likeness who are redeemed as children of God.¹⁶

This broader understanding of sabbath, presents a biblical construct of “sabbath as prism”, through which one may view, and better understand, the cosmic purpose and value of all human activity. Seen this way, sabbath becomes a faith-based practice that readies the heart and mind and builds the resilience needed to challenge cultural norms present in business and economics. Sabbath, properly understood, gives believers the tools they need to throw off the yoke of mammon, and take on the yoke of Christ (Mt. 11:28-30).

In a soon to be published book, the Fellows of the Mockler Center invite readers to consider sabbath as an opportunity to heed the words of the Apostle Paul: “*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed*

by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). The authors propose five areas where a more comprehensive understanding of sabbath may assist believers to build resilience by reshaping their professional identity in accord with God’s will and purpose for their lives. They include the following:

1. sabbath as “reprioritization” (ensuring our values are aligned with God’s values, and not the world’s values)
2. sabbath as “resistance” (refusing to submit to the “tyranny of now”)
3. sabbath as “reimagination” (reclaiming “sacred spaces”)
4. sabbath as “renewal” (healing broken relationships)
5. sabbath as “redemption” (deliverance from the bondage of mammon, through faith in Christ)

As the people of God prepared to enter the Promised Land, God’s parting words to Joshua were: “be strong and courageous, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go”. (Joshua 1:9) The same words may apply today, to any believer who dares to promote a practice as counter-cultural and antithetical to modern sensibilities as sabbath-keeping. It will strike many as irrelevant and impractical, legalistic and archaic. In fact, it is none of those things. It is a remarkably relevant and imminently practical antidote to the social ills wrought by “postmodern capitalism”¹⁷. Far from being proscriptive, it is a free gift from God; and while it may be an ancient practice, its power and its blessings have never been needed more than they are today. 

1. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09580b.htm>.
2. Rehman N, Mahmood A, Ibtasam M, Murtaza SA, Iqbal N and Molnár (2021) 'The Psychology of Resistance to Change: The Antidotal Effect of Organizational Justice, Support and Leader-Member Exchange'. *Front. Psychol.* 12:678952. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.678952.
3. Folger, R., and Konovsky, M. A. (1989). 'Effects of procedural and distributive justice on reactions to pay raise decisions'. *Acad. Manag. J.* 32, 115-130. doi: 10.5465/256422
4. Rehman N, Mahmood A, Ibtasam M, Murtaza SA, Iqbal N and Molnár (2021).
5. Rodrigues, J.J.M. and António, N.J.D.S., 2011. 'MANAGERS' ENTRENCHMENT, POWER AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE'. *Euro Asia Journal of Management*, 21(40).
6. <https://www.informationweek.com/it-life/whatever-happened-to-six-sigma->
7. <https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>.
8. https://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/loneliness_2010.pdf.
9. <https://hbr.org/2012/02/its-time-to-acknowledge-ceo-lo>.
10. <https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>.
11. Muntaner C (2016) 'Global precarious employment and health inequalities: working conditions, social class, or precariat?' *Cad Saúde Pública* 32(6):e00162215. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102-311X00162215>
12. Jonsson, J., Vives, A., Benach, J., Kjellberg, K., Selander, J., Johansson, G. and Bodin, T., 2019. 'Measuring precarious employment in Sweden: translation, adaptation and psychometric properties of the Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES)'. *Bmj Open*, 9(9).
13. Peter Cumming and Kara Martin, 'Precarious work environments and the gifts of routine, space, people and purpose', *FiBQ* 22:1, pp 9-14
14. Shoss, M. K., Min, H., Horan, K., Schlotzhauer, A. E., Nigam, J. A. S., & Swanson, N. G. (2023). 'Risking one's life to save one's livelihood: Precarious work, presenteeism, and worry about disease exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 28(6), 363-379. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000366>
15. For the purposes of this work, “moral tragedy” shall be defined as participation in an action or decision that violates one’s conscience or religious beliefs.
16. Ridenour, *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging Toward Death*, London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2019.
17. Barnes, K., *Redeeming Capitalism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018



Kenneth Barnes spent many years as a senior international executive for several multi-billion dollar companies doing business on six continents. He is chaplain and mentor to international graduate students at Oxford University. His main areas of research and teaching are the intersections of theology and economics and faith at work. His recent book projects include Light From the Dreaming Spires, Redeeming Capitalism and “Religion and Business Ethics: Religious Perspectives on Business” in Routledge Companion to Business Ethics. He is married to Debby, a singer, songwriter and professional voice-over artist. They have three children and three grandchildren.