

Four Worlds of Work

Looking back over a fascinating and varied working life, Peter Curran tells of his involvement in four different worlds of work: commercial (with BP), not-for-profit (as an international development consultant), voluntary (including his local church) and caring (notably family). The different worlds interrelate, and all can be places to serve God in a satisfying way.

Before I describe my experience of work, I feel it is appropriate to set out briefly my theological understanding of work.

The significance of work

Work, whether paid or voluntary, in employment or caring duties, is part of God's purpose for humankind. As Genesis 2:15 states, human beings were placed in the garden (the world) 'to work it and take care of it.' Through work they participate in God's activity and thereby share in the work of creation.

Work is the principal means of *sustenance* so that we can secure food, clothing, and shelter in the world God has given (Genesis 1:29-30; Genesis 3:19), and on top of these a decent way of life for ourselves and our dependants (1 Timothy 5:8; Proverbs 28:19). The Apostle Paul upholds the principle that, where possible, people are to supply their own needs through their work (2 Thessalonians 3:10, 12),

so that they are not dependent on others (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). His tent making is an example of this (Acts 18:3; 20:34). Correspondingly, the Proverbs exhort us to work and not be idle (e.g. Proverbs 6:9-11). Work is how we provide for our needs, support our dependants, and improve our lot; in the words of the theologian, Karl Barth; 'men work to earn their daily bread and a little more.'¹

Ideally, work gives the opportunity to use and develop skills and thereby find *satisfaction* in the achievement of our tasks. Such satisfaction is hinted at as God rested after the work of creating; 'God saw that all that he had made, and it was very good.' (Genesis 1:31). The writer of Ecclesiastes outlines the frustration and meaninglessness of much toilsome work, yet recognises that satisfaction can be found within it; 'That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil - this is the gift of God.' (Ecclesiastes 3:13). Work is certainly

made harder by human wrongdoing and frustrated by a world tainted by sin (Genesis 3:17-19), but from the beginning God ordained work as something both necessary and good for humankind. It remains an integral and natural part of life (Ecclesiastes 5:18; Psalm 104:23). Clearly, many in unfulfilling jobs may experience more frustration and drudgery than satisfaction, but work has the potential to yield satisfaction (and I believe this is God's intention).

My work life has been (and remains) varied and interesting, and divides into four main worlds: commercial, not-for-profit, voluntary and caring. All four worlds have contained work's perennial mix: often satisfying, engaging and challenging, and at times frustrating, stressful and disheartening. But overall, I believe, these experiences of work have enabled me to use and develop my skills, support my family, and serve others and God, albeit in different ways.



'..and it was very good', Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Earth's Creation (1994), private collection, by kind permission.

The commercial world

My primary career was in the commercial sector with BP², firstly as a geochemist using my university degree (a Joint Honours in Geology and Chemistry) then in Human Resources (HR), later in Project Management, and at the end of my time in the company, in Learning and Development.

Initially, I was able to use my scientific knowledge and develop as a technical professional, within the field of oil and gas exploration. A sideways move took me into HR roles, where I swapped the science of inanimate rocks for the joys and complexities of working with and for people! I learnt new skills in recruitment and reward, employment law, resolving problems, and leading teams and projects. I led a challenging project in Angola, working in the context of a civil war, learning the subtleties of interacting across cultures, as well as picking up a smattering of Portuguese. My final role with BP was as Learning and Development Manager for Africa, based in South Africa. I led a team to provide training services across 12 African countries; again, a challenging, cross-cultural experience based in a country wrestling with its apartheid past. As a family, we rode the roller-coaster of dramatic change brought about by expatriation: we let out our home, moved across the world, struggled to find a house, the children joined new schools and clubs, my wife gave up her job, and all of us changed environment, church and a hundred other things. This was all caused by my job.

Working in the commercial world was fast-paced, competitive, with the constant pressure to perform well, and always more work than the time to do it. In my experience, however, it was usually well supported, with training opportunities to learn new skills, supplemented by coaching by capable managers. Two managers I especially remember from different points in my career were Lyn and Robin, whose examples I have always tried to emulate in my own leadership roles:

their clear vision, concern for people, strong values, and their belief and trust in me. Lyn saw more in me than I saw myself, demonstrated the strength of female leadership, and created a safe and positive team environment. She helped me develop my HR, facilitation and training skills which proved invaluable later. Robin showed me the importance of clear leadership that inspires and motivates others, and the fearlessness to speak up and tackle challenges head-on.

Some raise their eyes at a commercial career, as if there must surely be more worthwhile purposes for a Christian than contributing to the profits of big business? I would say:

- We all have to earn a living, and many people will by necessity be employed in the commercial world since that is where most jobs are.
- In so doing, we are helping to make the world go round by creating wealth and contributing to the economy. It is this economy that then makes possible the work of the not-for-profit sector (which looks to donors for its income) and much voluntary work.
- Whatever we do as our work, we honour God if we do it well, as serving the Lord, as Colossians 3:23–24 states: ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.’

In my latter years with BP, the organisation, like many others in the late 1980s, underwent great change with many reorganisations and downsizings resulting in job cuts and redundancies. This was an education for us all in adjusting to a world where ‘jobs for life’ were no more, and people had to learn to cope with the deep psychological knocks of being made redundant or of an uncertain future. I was studying part-time for a Masters degree in Theology during this time,

focussed on Christian character and work.³ It got me thinking about work in God’s purposes, and how to support people through the difficult experiences of job uncertainty and redundancy, which led to some publications.^{4–6}

The not-for profit world

On leaving BP in 2003, I embarked on a second career as a Consultant, mostly in the areas of HR and learning and development. Having recently worked in developing countries, my consultancy work quickly gravitated to such places, and I soon started to work with not-for-profit organisations such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Tearfund. Over the past 23 years, this has involved challenging projects in many parts of the world, often in conflict or post-conflict environments such as Afghanistan and Iraq, in many African countries (DRC, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda) across Asia (India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand) and latterly Palestine, Yemen and Ukraine.

As during my time in the commercial sector, I found that some reflection and study around my work helped me to understand it better. Similarly, to underpin my consultancy knowledge and skills I undertook a part-time PhD in Management Studies as a way of following up my interest in trust and justice in organisations and the way they treat their employees.⁷

Work in the not-for-profit sector usually appears more directly beneficial to others, particularly those in great need due to natural disaster, conflict, poverty and increasingly, climate change. So, it can be satisfying for this reason and meets biblical injunctions to help those in need (e.g. Deuteronomy 15:11; Proverbs 31:8–9; Matthew 25:35–40; Philippians 2:4; 1 John 3:17–18). However, it relies heavily on the commercial and public sectors for its financing (donors are governments, foundations, private companies, individuals, etc.), its logistics (aid trucks run on fuel



Peter Visiting Nairobi slum, Kenya, 2009

produced by companies such as BP), and its people (many I have met in aid organisations learned their professional skills in the commercial world). Without these other sectors, the wealth, infrastructure and skills would not be there to enable the work of the not-for-profit sector, so all parts of this jigsaw are needed.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are sometimes criticised for how they use the money granted them, and occasionally for falling below their own standards in ethics and safeguarding (e.g. the abuse of vulnerable people in disaster situations). All organisations have the duty to protect the people they come into contact with, as well as investigate potential shortfalls and to hold perpetrators accountable. To function professionally, NGOs need the necessary structures and procedures in place to manage people and resources, thus creating the unavoidable overheads of any organisation. Having undertaken projects with teams at multiple levels within Oxfam, Save the Children, Tearfund, Plan, Right to Play, and other NGOs, I have worked alongside some amazing people in some of the most difficult working environments imaginable – where it is hugely satisfying to get a job done against all the odds and to see the direct benefit brought to people at risk or in great need. In my experience, the huge majority of humanitarian workers do remarkable work: they choose to

live and work in difficult contexts, are often paid less than they would receive in other sectors, and are well motivated to serve others.

Here are a few examples of my own experience in this world. As interim HR Manager during the Asian Tsunami response of 2004/5 with Tearfund/LEADS in Sri Lanka, I supported the team working to get aid and temporary housing to displaced families whose homes had been washed away. This was an experience of international aid workers coming in to support national staff, who were leading the effort within their own communities. With government and UN coordination, every aid agency imaginable was on the ground, their work made possible by generous giving from individuals and donor countries.

With Skills for South Sudan, I helped in the effort to rebuild the civil service in the run up to independence by creating a curriculum for civil service training and equipping South Sudanese trainers to train and coach civil servants.

This was also, for me, a venture into the public sector, since the project, which ran over five years, supported fledgling government departments in what would become, in 2011, the new country of South Sudan. As a team of South Sudanese, Kenyans and Brits, we camped in tents by the Nile in Juba, trained trainers under mango trees in 40°C heat, navigated governmental bureaucracy, and were encouraged as people worked alongside each other

despite tribal differences. I was deeply impressed by the resilience of people who had experienced decades of war, coped with danger and multiple displacements, and yet kept the hope of peace and nationhood alive.

With Oxfam, I have undertaken capacity strengthening in many fragile environments including Yemen and Gaza, working with both expatriate and local staff. I have learnt to respect the traditions and religious sensitivities of these communities, enjoyed learning of their ancient histories, and have stood alongside them in their current struggles. In Afghanistan, I saw the enthusiasm, commitment and growing of skills of women at last given meaningful professional and leadership roles. Sadly, this progress has gone into serious reverse in recent years.

One positive drive common to many NGOs over recent years is to increasingly localise relief and development initiatives so that it is the people whose communities are affected who are leading on tackling the challenges, with international staff providing support. I see my training work as part of this; to strengthen the management skills of those I work with so that they are better able to lead in their own context.

In an attempt to better understand the predicaments of many of the countries I have worked in, I undertook a part-time Masters degree in International Relations.⁸ With colleagues from

the development sector, the EU and UN, NATO, the military, diplomats, lawyers, homemakers, and an MP from Kosovo, we learnt about the causes of conflict and the complex statecraft (and sometimes Machiavellian antics) of international relations and diplomacy. We saw how powerful states and leaders can dramatically affect history, but also how international organisations (including NGOs) alongside communities and individuals on the ground can be an influence for good.

The voluntary world

Alongside paid work in the commercial and not-for-profit sectors, I have always had a foot in the voluntary world. Churches set a great example of the power and necessity of voluntary work, where people regularly give of their time and abilities in service of the mission of their church and the community in which it resides. As a teenager, I learnt the challenges and pitfalls of leadership as co-leader of a youth fellowship, as a Sunday school teacher/leader, and as an officer in the Boys' Brigade. Before starting at BP, I undertook a voluntary year at a Christian outdoor centre in North Wales, experiencing teamwork alongside other volunteers, supervising groups of young people, and encouraging self-discovery and faith through outdoor activities. In church over the years, I have served as a home group leader, Parochial Church Council member, occasional preacher,

and latterly as Captain of 1st Guildford Boys' Brigade Company.

During COVID, with all travel and face-to-face consultancy work curtailed, I became co-leader of Stoke Community Support (SCS), a local food project, which rapidly built a team of 80 volunteers and provided emergency meals for up to 200 families twice a week during the pandemic. Originally the inspiration of two churches and three schools, the project grew to take referrals from 13 schools, the NHS, Borough and County Councils, and other caring agencies across Guildford. A royal visit and a slot on BBC evening news further encouraged volunteers and yielded positive publicity, which enhanced fundraising. With the cost-of-living crisis rapidly following on from the pandemic, SCS latterly morphed into St John's Community Support (SJCS), an ongoing food project based in my local church, and supporting families in need across the town. Work with these food projects marks the first time I have been involved in large-scale humanitarian type relief in my own town (which is somewhat sobering in a developed country such as the UK) and has utilised project and leadership skills learnt in other work.

I have been involved as a Trustee with the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR), for a time Chair of Trustees, now a member of its Global Board. I

have been able to apply experience from management of organisations, cross-cultural working, and the development/not-for-profit sector. I have learnt how people in small civil society organisations can influence policy upwards, and how, getting such organisations together to form a movement, can influence national and international policy at a high level (such as at United Nations and COP discussions).

Voluntary work enables us to fill gaps and meet needs, and thereby show God's love in a very practical way (Matthew 25:35-40). It also gives opportunities for people to apply skills learnt elsewhere (such as leadership, project management, problem solving, logistics, finance), thus ensuring that activities are done well and goals achieved. For those who have retired from previous roles, it is a satisfying way to give back: one member of the SJCS team said, 'This is the best thing I do at church.' It is also a way of creating community cohesion, as people work together to address the issues facing them. I have found that people are often willing to volunteer their help if someone is willing to shoulder the overall leadership. Knowing they do not have ultimate responsibility and are not committing themselves to something beyond which they are able to cope creates the umbrella under which people can willingly give their time and energy.



Peter in Bor, S Sudan, 2010



SJCS Volunteer Team at St Johns Church 2023

I have also learnt that there is perhaps more skill involved in managing volunteers than employees. In paid roles, if ‘push comes to shove’ you can tell someone what to do, so if they want to continue in the organisation, they comply. In voluntary situations, it arguably takes more skill to keep people motivated and with you, since they can just walk away if they are dissatisfied.

The caring world

Caring, including parenting, is an area of work often overlooked and frequently unpaid, yet can be just as demanding, frustrating and satisfying as those mentioned above. The Bible outlines such care as a key responsibility (1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:8; Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4). It is often undertaken alongside or around other work, and is arguably of greatest importance since it involves those closest to us. In most families, parenting responsibilities are shared;

historically this fell more to the mother but there has been movement towards a more balanced approach over recent years. When our own children were young, my wife, Clare did most of the parenting during the day and I would take over in the evenings (when Clare went out to work), and we would share duties at the weekends. New skills are picked up and, when children turn into teenagers, skills that have been learnt elsewhere, such as negotiation, conflict management and counselling, can be very useful!

When my father was widowed, my brother and I took on weekly caring support for him, juggling this with other work and overseas assignments. Now as grandparents, Clare and I enjoy supporting our children in their parenting duties; as with many couples where both partners need paid jobs to manage the bills, the covering of caring duties requires flexibility and innovation.

In conclusion

One of the prayers used at the end of the Church of England’s communion service boldly states, ‘Send us out in the power your Spirit to *live and work* to your praise and glory.’ It is through work activities that we earn a living, care for our families, serve others, use and develop our skills, find satisfaction, and ultimately, serve God.

I can say that work in the four worlds I have experienced (commercial, not-for-profit, voluntary and caring) or any mixture of them, can be satisfying and fulfil God’s purposes. It is a matter of finding the areas of work where God wants you, and then to undertake these roles to the best of your ability. This brings satisfaction, as well as service to others and to God. As I have experienced, it may vary throughout life, and often skills learnt and used in one world of work can be transferred and utilised in another. 

1. Barth, Karl: *Church Dogmatics*. Volume III Part 4. T & T Clark Ltd, Edinburgh, 1961.
2. Oil companies are viewed somewhat negatively now due to the very real dangers of climate change, although given that most of us drive cars, take flights and use plastics, arguably they still have a role to play as the world transitions to more sustainable forms of energy.
3. Curran, Peter: Master of Arts Dissertation *Christian Character and Work*, Archbishop’s Examination in Theology (Lambeth MA), supervised at the University of Oxford.
4. Curran, Peter: *A Way Forward: Coping with Redundancy*, CWR, 1995.
5. Curran, Peter: *Handling Redundancy*, Grove Books Ltd, 1995.
6. Curran, Peter: *All the Hours God Sends? Practical and Biblical Help in Meeting the Demands of Work*, IVP, 2000.
7. Curran, Peter: PhD Thesis *Justice and Trust when Organisations Downsize*, University of Surrey, 2010.
8. Curran Peter: Master of Studies Dissertation: *The Effectiveness of Institutional Capacity Building and its Role in State Building in Post-conflict South Sudan*, University of Cambridge, 2013.



Peter Curran lives with his wife Clare in Guildford, Surrey, where they are members at St John’s Church, Stoke-next-Guildford. For the past 23 years, Peter has worked as the Principal Consultant of Explorer Consulting, mainly in the not-for-profit humanitarian sector. This follows an earlier career of over 20 years with BP. Both careers have been undertaken alongside voluntary and caring roles.