



*Chapter One*

***Discovering  
God's Call in  
the Workplace***



## Discovering God's Call in the Workplace

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*"We children of our time have to be the Church in a totally different world and atmosphere . . . It is the laity, living and working in this world, which daily experiences the deep gulf between what the Church stands for and what the world drives at."*

*Hendrik Kraemer, 1958<sup>2</sup>*

Christians have received an awesome privilege: By following Christ we become God's partners in seeking the realization of God's loving purposes for the world. Biblical writers explain this privilege in different ways, but the key point is that the church is given a critical role in helping all people know and respond to the good news and extraordinary consequences of God's mighty deeds for the world as the One who creates it, redeems it, and brings it to final fulfillment.

The record of Christians' handling of this privilege is spotty. On some fronts we and our forebears have done better, on others worse. The area of modern life where Christians have stumbled most in carrying out our mission is the workplace—the places where most of us spend a large portion of our waking hours, working for good pay, inadequate pay, or no pay; wearing white collars, blue collars, or no collars; enjoying it, hating it, or tolerating it. Here, typically, the world's self-reliance and resistance to God are most pronounced; here the testing of Christians' faithfulness to God's call to the divine-human partnership is most acute.

The present-day distance between faith and work has roots deep in the past. Since an early stage of the church's history, Christians have repeatedly been lured by alien concepts (mainly

those formulated by ancient Greek philosophers) to regard their faith as having little to do with the world. Consequently, many have believed that God is found best by looking inward or upward, into the realm of spirit; they have thought that involvement in the struggles and cares of everyday life distances one from God and imperils the soul.

This “spiritualizing” of Christianity has been accompanied and reinforced by an equally regrettable “clericalizing” of the church. As early as the third century, the leadership role of clergy gradually developed in ways that departed from New Testament patterns of mutual ministry and gave clerical perspectives and interests a place of dominance in the church. There have been—and are today—many good Christian people serving as clergy, but an unfortunate consequence of long-standing clerical dominance is the fact that laypeople’s perspectives and interests, significantly influenced by their daily engagement with the secular world, typically have played a secondary role in setting the church’s agenda and shaping its life.<sup>3</sup>



## Exploring the Present Chasm

**I**n modern times, with the rise of secularism, the chasm separating the realm of faith and the realm of work has grown wider and deeper. Occasionally, connections are made, but for most people today, the two worlds rarely connect. Consider:

- In many organizations an unspoken agreement exists that “religion is not spoken here.” This taboo has been prompted partly by extension of the principle of church-state separation beyond the realm of its

legitimate application. It has clearly been strengthened by the growing religious pluralism within American society (“we don’t want to offend somebody of another faith”). One usually hears “God” and “Christ” mentioned in the workplace only by those who speak their names in anger or frustration, with no intention of making a religious point.

- The absence of faith-talk from workplaces stems also from the influence of modern economic theories attempting to explain working, buying, and selling in categories that are narrowly commercial and pay little attention to deeper human realities. For them, self-interest and profit maximization are legitimate lords of the marketplace.
- Industrial and technological development has fostered increased work specialization in organizations, pushing people to construct mental barriers between different fields and to hold narrow views of their own work roles. The tendency toward compartmentalization assigns religion to the private side of life, making it difficult for people to see its connection with such fields as business, law, and technology.
- More recently, intense global competition and economic hard times have made “lean and mean” the reigning values in many workplaces. They allow little space for such “soft” (and godly) qualities as respect and compassion.

Chief responsibility for the modern worsening of the work-faith chasm probably rests on the work side of the divide. But we must not overlook the substantial contributing role played by continuation of the church’s own long-standing acceptance and reinforcement of it. So significant is this role that we shall give it major attention in a later chapter.

Fortunately, not all Christians have made their peace with the chasm. A far-seeing minority has refused to accept it.

Instead, they have mounted a determined effort to build bridges between the world of faith and the world of work.



## Connecting Two Worlds

**T**he major impetus for this effort came from Europe during the middle decades of the twentieth century. At that time, especially following the devastation of World War II, thoughtful Christians from various denominational traditions began to ask what the church must do to help build a humane future in which this kind of destruction and terror never again would be unleashed. As they searched the Scriptures and their own hearts, such lay and clergy trailblazers as Joseph H. Oldham, Suzanne de Diétrich, Hendrik Kraemer, and Yves Congar concluded that, with the centuries-old culture of “Christendom” now vanquished by modern secularism, the entire church must embrace the mission of bringing the gospel to a post-Christian world.

They also agreed that this task is the mission, or ministry, bestowed by baptism on all Christians, not just clergy, for as the New Testament affirms, all have been baptized into Christ and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve him everyday, in every realm of life. Only by faithful implementation of this truth can Christ be recognized as the “light of the world” and Christian people fulfill their purpose as “the salt of the earth” (John 8:12; Matthew 5:13).

During the first several decades after the war, this new outlook was increasingly affirmed by leadership circles within the churches. So persuasive did it become that two summit gatherings of Christians gave it enduring expression. The first

was the 1954 Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches:

Lay ministry is the privilege of the whole Church . . . to share in Christ's ministry to the world. As He came to minister, so must all Christians become ministers of His saving purposes according to the gifts of the Spirit each has received . . . . It is the laity who draw together work and worship, it is they who bridge the gulf between the Church and the world . . . .

The real battles of faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices, and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations. Very often it is said the Church should "go into these spheres," but in fact the Church is already in these spheres in the persons of its laity.<sup>4</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church was not involved in the World Council of Churches Assembly, but ten years later, at the Second Vatican Council, Catholic bishops from around the world made a comparable affirmation of the laity's role:

[The] laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is in each and all the secular professions and occupations . . . . They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven . . . .

Now, the gifts of the Spirit are diverse . . . .  
He calls some to give clear witness to the desire for a heavenly home and to keep that desire green among the human family. He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the celestial realm by this ministry of theirs.<sup>5</sup>

In the first decades following the Evanston Assembly and Vatican II, many ecclesiastical bodies declared the importance of lay ministry in the secular world, especially in the realm of work. Resolute groups of Christians (mainline and Evangelical Protestant, as well as Roman Catholic) were formed to promote and support it. Scores of books, journals, and conferences explored this theme.

Two observations must be made about this shift of outlook. First, it would not have occurred without the supporting presence of powerful new theological currents that reflected fresh understandings of Scripture, especially regarding God's initiative in human affairs and God's calling of the whole church to mission in the world. Here was a compelling alternative to views that had long supported the spiritualizing of the gospel and the clericalizing of the church.<sup>6</sup> Second, this shift was a theological development with potentially far-reaching consequences for the everyday activity of laity and clergy—consequences that were explored with zeal by some, but with mounting hesitancy by others.

During the 1970s and the 1980s that hesitancy became more and more apparent. As familiar patterns of the Christian past began to be reasserted, this promising new movement lost the favor it had earlier enjoyed among church leaders. However, during the 1990s favorable winds again began to blow, perhaps due especially to peoples' growing dissatisfaction with their harried work lives and a hunger for more humane values in the workplace. Renewed interest in connecting faith and work

appeared here and there within traditional ecclesiastical circles and even more strongly among new “parachurch” organizations developed beyond the familiar structures of denominations and congregations (a development to be examined in a later chapter).

Today, a curious mix is present within American Christianity. One finds numerous high-level pronouncements (mostly dating from the 1960s and 1970s) that strongly affirm lay ministry in the world, but one finds relatively few congregations giving deliberate, sustained attention to this aspect of the Christian mission. Among most people, when “ministry of the laity” is discussed with conviction, the conversation tends to focus more on laypeople’s volunteer roles within the church than on their everyday roles within the secular world (a fact driven partly by increased financial pressures within the churches, partly by an expansion of congregation-based activities, and partly by a dwindling supply of clergy).

Episcopal clergyman Loren Mead well describes the anomalous situation among the American churches:

“Ministry of the laity” is a cliché today, so routine that it’s almost boring. Nobody questions it . . . . It is also true that very few people seem to have much grasp of it and very little is consciously done about it in the denominations—other than talk about how important and good it is. For these and other reasons, it is hard today to recognize the revolutionary meaning in the phrase.<sup>7</sup>



## Revisiting the Fundamentals

**B**ut the critical fact today is the presence of a small and growing minority gripped by the vision of Christians living their faith actively in the world of work. They are determined to recover and unleash the “revolutionary meaning” of this vision throughout the church, so that it is widely embraced and implemented among Christian people. They know it has such meaning and potential because it reflects fundamental truths of the gospel. These fundamentals not only challenge long-held views and practices but also provide the wellspring for what can become a reinvigorated Christianity.

This vision encompasses four central affirmations:

1. *God’s mission embraces the workplace.*

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), he was voicing a central conviction of biblical religion: God’s gracious reign and redemptive mission reach to the whole world God has created and to every realm of every person’s life.

God cares about workplaces because no part of the world’s life has a greater impact—for good or ill, advancing or hindering God’s mission—than the decisions made and the dramas acted out in countless workplaces around the globe.

Moreover, God cares about what happens in workplaces because God cares about the individual people who spend a large portion of their lives at work and are shaped significantly by what happens there.

God has a goal for every person. Each of us has been created in the divine image and is intended by God for a future, beginning now and extending beyond this present life, in which we and the whole creation are blessed by God’s Spirit, are filled

with perfect love, peace, and joy, and are brought into lasting communion with God.

This vision of God's future recurs throughout the Scriptures and is called by a variety of names ("the kingdom" and "the new creation" are the two we shall chiefly use). In the places and times when people's Christ-like acts accomplish God's will "on earth as it is in heaven," that experience gives them glimpses and foretastes of the kingdom, preparing them for God's intended future for them. But when people's experiences turn their affections and commitments in other directions, they resist God's will and frustrate God's intention for them.

Because of the importance of the workplace in shaping the world's future and people's lives, God is present in each workplace, seeking to awaken people to the blessed life of the kingdom, and to attract them to the paths leading toward it.

## 2. *The time has come for the church's mission to embrace the workplace.*

God calls the Christian community to be the chief instrument of the divine mission in the world. As one New Testament author puts it, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Because Christians already are present in workplaces virtually everywhere in the nation and because what happens there so greatly affects the lives of people—whether it is the classroom, the fire station, the Oval Office, or the second shift at the deli—this mission frontier has a priority claim upon the church. Here the gospel's "marvelous light" must be affirmed and demonstrated by Christian laypeople. Here they must act in ways that allow its life-healing and life-transforming power to make a difference.

In our own time, as the church discovers this neglected dimension of its mission, it will find itself visited afresh by

God's Spirit, who works to energize the whole church and each Christian for participation in God's mission in the world.

And, as some observers have noted, when pastors and other church leaders catch this vision and give proper attention to helping laypeople address tough issues of daily life and work, they will find that the church wins the active participation and financial support of men and women who presently are disenchanted with this institution that helps them so little with everyday issues that matter to them so much.<sup>8</sup>

### *3. Taking faith to work brings spiritual renewal to Christians.*

Each of us who prays for the coming of God's kingdom most fully experiences its peace and power when we offer ourselves, like Jesus, to be used by God as instruments through whom others can know the demands and joys of the kingdom.

God calls us to make this self-offering and to receive the Spirit's empowerment in every realm of our lives, not just in the workplace. When those of us who work make this self-offering in the workplace, where such practice typically is difficult and elusive, we discover God's presence there. It is experienced as a gracious power moving us beyond our hesitations and enabling us to live the gospel and to manifest something of God's blessed future.

We then are empowered to become means, albeit imperfect ones, for helping others in the workplace catch glimpses of God's new creation and journey on their own paths toward that destination. At such times, "the power at work within us" does indeed accomplish "far more . . . than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

To the degree that this happens, our life in the workplace takes on new purposefulness and satisfaction. We know that even if parts of our work experience continue to be disagreeable, something extraordinary is happening. Our workplace is becoming a place of grace and we are being blessed there.

4. *Discipleship at work brings health and vitality to secular institutions.*

At a time when many workplaces and institutions are dispirited and stressed, attached to values and patterns of institutional life that encourage unethical and uncaring behavior, those workplaces need an infusion of a power capable of making them more humane and more productive. And for the many people who know how barren their work has become and are eager to find meaning in it, the time is ripe for the discovery of a spiritual fountainhead capable of making work purposive and satisfying.

The millions of Christians present in workplaces in this country and around the world constitute an enormous, but as yet barely tapped, source of fresh vitality for a multitude of institutions and, through them, for the whole human family. As the Gospel of Matthew says, reflecting ancient civilization's experience of the life-enhancing quality of salt, Jesus' disciples are "the salt of the earth." It is difficult to imagine something happening with more far-reaching beneficial consequences than for present-day Christians to discover and exercise their "saltiness."

So, at the start of a new century and millennium, the stage is set for Christian people to recognize and embrace the role God intends for them in the workplace. As that happens, the twenty-first century truly will become a time of new beginnings.

What exactly is that role?



## A Pioneer's Story

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One of the most notable advances ever made in Christians' thinking about workplace ministry was set forth in 1991, by an American Lutheran layman, William E. Diehl (pronounced "deal"). Before that time, most discussion about serving God in the workplace remained at the level of generalities. Diehl now proposed a practical model of everyday ministry that was relevant to every Christian who works. This breakthrough came after Diehl's long personal journey of spiritual discovery and an ever-deepening understanding of lay ministry. His story deserves telling.

As a young man, William Diehl was like many other Christian laypeople in the 1950s, active in his congregation, but receiving little help there in thinking about the actual difference his faith could make at work. Looking back on those years, Diehl later said: "My Sunday experience had no connection to my Monday world. The words that came to me from the Bible and the pulpit made no sense to me in my weekday world."

To his dismay, Diehl realized that many people in his congregation welcomed the separation. They were eager for a break from the pressures and problems of the workplace. Moreover, his congregation gave tacit approval to the Sunday-Monday disconnect by encouraging members to think they fulfilled their lay ministry responsibilities through volunteering for important church-centered tasks and by contributing their hard-earned funds to the church. In Diehl's case, his teaching of a Sunday school class and serving on the church council led to his winning an award for being an exemplary layperson.

But he knew that as useful as such deeds might be, something was missing. As a good Lutheran, he had absorbed

Martin Luther's sixteenth-century discovery that God calls all the baptized, not just monks and clergy, to participate in Christ's priesthood. More critically, by the late 1950s Diehl had begun to read books by European and North American church leaders caught up in the momentous discovery of God's summons to ministry in the workplaces of the world.

In this period of creative discontent, William Diehl was looking for a way of understanding the difference his faith could make to the tough issues he encountered day after day in his sales (and later, managerial) job at Bethlehem Steel. What should he do about the friend working for another company who wanted a "special consideration" in their business transaction? About the likable subordinate who was doing shoddy work? About the colleague who was pushing her religion on employees? About mounting pressures from environmentalists? About his own opportunity for advancement at the cost of more time away from his family?

The spiritual journey Diehl embarked upon has been described in his eight books written between 1970 and 2003. None of them has made a larger mark than *The Monday Connection*, published in 1991.<sup>9</sup> Diehl's presentation there of a practical model for every Christian's ministry in daily life has the merit both of taking into account all areas of a person's work experience and of including all the outreach responsibilities to which God invites Christians involved in the world of work. It provides valuable conceptual tools and guidelines for helping a person think concretely about opportunities for ministry present in the daily routines of the workplace. And it provides an antidote for any Christians tempted to think their work is unchallenging or unimportant.

My own reflection on Diehl's model of workplace ministry has led me to make a few shifts in its presentation and theological accents, so as to make it fit better with my own experience and understanding. I encourage readers to make comparable amendments in my restatement of the model, if doing so helps them embrace it and put it into practice.



## Overview of Christians' Four-Part Ministry at Work

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**A**s I understand God's intention for Christians in the workplace, we are summoned to make our work a part of God's work for the coming of the kingdom. We do so through:

*A ministry of competence:* serving God and neighbor by doing our work well, through full use of the gifts God has given each of us, so that the human family is built up and moved nearer the abundant life of the kingdom.

*A ministry of caring:* being attentive and responsive to the needs and hurts of people in our workplace, so that they experience something of the authentic community God intends for the human family.

*A ministry of ethics:* moving perceptions and practices of right and wrong at work to a higher level, so that workplace ethics better approximate the ways God wills people to live together.

*A ministry of change:* developing new institutional practices and systems that help all people be and do their best, so that the place of work more nearly becomes a place of grace.

In the next two chapters this four-part model of workplace ministry will be examined closely. I believe that with practice and persistence, many Christians will be able to carry it out in each job they hold, though probably not all four parts with equal intensity or effect. But there are some jobs and circumstances

where one or perhaps even several parts will be out of reach. Blessed is the person in a job and circumstances where action occurs on all four fronts.

Two important questions are raised by this way of viewing Christians' workplace ministry:

1. *Will such activity, joined with Christians' other ministries in the world, result in the consummation of God's kingdom?*

No. The kingdom belongs to God, and it is God who determines when the kingdom will come in its fullness and how much of our earthly accomplishments will be embraced by it. Meanwhile, sin and evil continue to resist God's intentions and to damage people. Our vocation is to witness to the new life of the kingdom in all we say and do, in the workplace and in every realm of life. We do so confident that God will make use of our words and deeds to prepare us and others for God's gracious future.

2. *Is there a place for evangelism in Christians' workplace ministry?* Yes. Witness to the good news of God's kingdom is a task to which God calls us in every realm of life. It pervades all four parts of our ministry at work. It is also a witness to Jesus Christ, for he is the one in whom the kingdom is present most fully and seen most clearly. We can hope that people in the workplace are so struck by our deeds that they ask why we do them. We then should seek appropriate ways to tell them it is because of what we have learned about the meaning of life from Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, our daily witness-by-deeds to kingdom life can help confirm people's deep hunger for a better future and give them a glimpse of what God has in mind for the human family.

Someone has aptly said that most people in workplaces today do not regularly read Matthew,

Mark, Luke, or John. But they do see us, day after day.  
Our calling is to be for them “the fifth Gospel.”

We now must look more closely at Christians’ ministries of competence, caring, ethics, and change.



## Endnotes

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1. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 467.
2. Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Westminster Press, 1958), pp. 111, 113-114.
3. “Spiritualizing” has been helpfully analyzed in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Fortress Press, 1997); on “clericalizing” see Paul M. Minus, “Lay Movements,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 3 (Brill/Eerdmans, 2003).
4. *Evanston Speaks: Reports of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (WCC, 1955), pp. 59-60, 64-65.
5. Walter J. Abbott, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Herder and Herder/Association Press, 1966), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, section 31, pp. 57-58; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, section 38, p. 236.
6. This important development is addressed in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, esp. Part 3.
7. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (The Alban Institute, Inc. 1991), p. 24.
8. The chief study making this point is Robert Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

9. Diehl, *The Monday Connection: On Being an Authentic Christian in a Weekday World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). Diehl's retrospective comment quoted above appears on p. 10.
10. Trueblood, *Your Other Vocation* (Harper and Brothers, 1952), pp. 57-58.
11. As, for example, in Ephesians 6:12 and Colossians 2:15.
12. Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (Ballantine Books edition, 1985), p. xiii.
13. A recent study of this phenomenon is Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2001). The authors conclude that a major factor turning business leaders away from the churches is the anti-capitalist bias of many clergy.
14. Satullo, "Lay Ministry Battle Story: Grey Areas in Black Type," in Verna Dozier, ed., *The Calling of the Laity* (The Alban Institute, Inc. 1988), pp. 10-11.
15. The first De Pree quote is from Laura L. Nash, *Believers in Business* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), p. 262; the second quote is from Max De Pree, *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), p. 172.
16. Sandra Herron, "Reflecting Christ in the Banking Industry: The Manager as Prophet, Priest and King," in Robert J. Banks, ed., *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections from the Marketplace* (The Alban Institute, Inc. 1993), pp. 83, 85.