'The two cultures'

Sharing the value and richness of Christian insights with those in the world of work is not a problem of intellectual credibility, but of cultural dissonance. In the post-industrial society an increasing proportion of those economically active are 'knowledge workers', handling information, data and words rather than materials and products, who are often stimulated by new ideas and ideals. They might be quite open-minded, or even in favour of a Christian viewpoint if this did not immediately present them with a cultural chasm separating them from their working world. Anyone with the courage to straddle or jump this chasm deserves our support and encouragement.

Worlds apart?

o   At work we are called upon to be innovative, creative and participative; at church to be passive, conforming and controlled.

o   At work we are required to identify our strengths and seek recognition; at church to confess our weaknesses and claim forgiveness.

o   At work there is often conflict, if not always of an aggressive kind; at church conflict is denied or suppressed.

o   At work the role of the professional is being severely questioned; at church professionals are imbued with almost mystical powers.

o   Work demands intense periods of intellectual and/or physical activity; church places emphasis on being rather than doing, on silence, contemplation and reflection.

o   Work puts a value on logical thought convincingly articulated; the spiritual life has a point at which logic must cease and words are shown to be the dangerous things they are.

o   Work demands 'performance measures' and is concerned with 'outcomes'; church puts emphasis on doing one's best and leaving the outcome to God.

Of course there are jobs which require quiet reflection, some bureaucratic work environments, and some enterprising churches. But my main point is that the culture of church and the culture of working life are so different as to create a barrier which few are motivated to remove.

Consequences of 'the two cultures'
For the ordained ministry

o   Clergy have failed to capture the moral high ground in the workplace because of the Church's mediocre record as an employer.

o   They tend to see the world of work in terms of atomised skills and tasks, skills which they consider should be freely available for the service of the local church. For example, they perceive a bank manager as someone who will 'do the books' and a teacher as someone to take a Sunday School class, overlooking the interpersonal, planning and decision-making skills such people possess.

o   They cling to a model of the work situation which depicts it as stressful, monotonous and unfulfilling.

o   They offer to give but do not expect to get. They could learn from management how to harness the skills and abilities of knowledge workers to fulfil given objectives, but they do not ask. When they claim to want management skills they usually mean administrative techniques, like budgeting, not realising that a manager's task is not to run things but to change things.

- They are often forced by their congregations into becoming instruments of control, conformity and continuity. There are intricate hierarchies both in the professional structure of The Church of England; and in the committee structures of nonconformity: terms such as 'steward', 'elder', 'pastor', 'class leader', 'superintendent', all emphasise a control model.
- At the time of a rapidly changing, disparate and mobile labour force, they still tend to equate working life with those employed in large-scale organisations. Even clergy who have made successful contacts with knowledge workers have difficulty in relating to other sectors of the economy. Some growth areas within the economy at present are residential care, fast food franchising and security. Can the church be any more relevant to these workers than it was to the miners, dockers and steelworkers of previous eras?

For the laity
- Lay people often need the church to be a point of continuity in a changing life, and thus stifle innovation through a desire to escape.
- They compartmentalise, keeping church and working life apart on the grounds that they want to be accepted for what they are, rather than what they do. Alternatively they assume that having achieved prominence in one sphere, they can legitimately dominate that of church affairs.
- They like to promote their own image as men and women of the world by portraying the clergy as rather naïve. They often underrate the managerial abilities clergy possess, and do not use them intelligently, demanding about 50% of the latter's intellectual ability and 200% of their time.
- They invest too much emotional capital in their dealing with the clergy so that rigorous discussion is replaced by dependency or aggression.
- Those Christian groups which do exist within secular organisations and professions largely resemble special interest cliques rather than radical change agents. The vast majority of lay people have acquiesced in the secularisation of public debate so that the Christian viewpoint is left to such extremists.

Bridge-building

The way through these problems may be very difficult to find but it has to do with enabling and empowering. It means the ordained ministry enabling the laity to articulate their concerns, to make open choices and to use the resources particular to themselves. It means lay people developing for themselves an appropriate and holistic role in the public arena and requesting the clergy to help equip them for it. The solution is not for each to take a circuitous route to the other's camp, but to build bridges between the two cultures. Once bridges are built, there will be the opportunity of frequent and fruitful traffic across them and the common search for the meaning and purpose of being human can begin.

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