

Workplace Chaplaincy – A Contemporary View

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Introduction

This paper is not an attempt to describe each situation in which workplace chaplains are involved, rather it is an attempt to explain what the context for workplace chaplaincy is, how that affects thinking and what that could mean for the future. Intentionally it attempts to challenge and provoke response.

The workplace in 2010

Sixty years ago the economy was driven by large-scale manufacturing, large mills, car manufacturers, docks and mining, a period when there were ‘jobs for life’ and people received long service awards. Currently the UK economy (estimated to be the fifth largest in the world) is driven by a service sector accounting for 76.2 per cent of GDP, with industry and manufacturing 22.8 per cent and agriculture just 0.9 per cent.²

The pace of change in the economic world is increasingly rapid and successful companies have to adapt when external changes threaten profitability. Illustrative of the speed of change is the use of Twitter. In 2007 there were 5,000 tweets daily, now there are 50 million.³ In a recent conversation with a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a global company, I was told by the third CEO of that company in five years, that staying in the same role within a company for more than eight years was not advisable.

Long-term security of employment is now a thing of the past in most sectors. Currently flexibility of workers and workforce is part of the constant challenge to become more efficient and in multicultural workforces where many faiths are represented, part-time and zero-hours contracts abound and work which many won’t do may be taken willingly by migrant workers.

In this context, how companies understand themselves has become very important in their resolve to stay at the cutting edge against global competition. Companies are keen for workers to be creative, determined,

bold, resourceful, innovative, imaginative, supportive, proud, light-footed, focused and nimble.⁴

Workplace chaplaincy 2010

Workplace chaplaincy overlaps with healthcare, forces, education and agricultural/rural chaplaincies, but its emphasis generally involves supporting staff or service partners in commercial organizations and engaging critically with the economic context.

Workplace chaplaincy has broadly kept in step (or maybe half a step behind) the changing face of the economy. Workplace chaplains were, at one time, often full-time and usually found in heavy manufacturing industry. During times of high unemployment, workplace chaplains became involved in innovative projects supporting young apprentices and school leavers, and when factories closed down chaplains were available to the former workforce, even after the gates were shut.⁵ Today, although all those illustrations may be true from time to time, workplace chaplaincy is focused far more on service industries like retail, the public sector and the arts, and chaplains tend to be part-time and often volunteers.

The flexibility of today's chaplains is also illustrated in their practice. As electronic communication has increased electronic chaplaincy has become a reality.⁶ In my current chaplaincy, like many of the company's employees, I have inhabited seven office spaces in six years.

Part of the pressure to keep in step is illustrated by recent attempts to change the name of the Industrial Mission Association (IMA) which have failed. However, rebranding has been a feature of IMA's regional branches.⁷

A meeting in the West Midlands to attempt to make sense of the recent financial crisis (both economically and theologically)⁸ also illustrates workplace chaplains' desire to keep in step in the midst of all the confusion. Working with innovators and successful businesses, 'Affirming *and* engaging prophetically with plans and events'⁹, recognizing the complexities and challenges brought about by democratic capitalism are daily tasks for workplace chaplains. For example, having heard the pain of employees going through restructuring in the last couple of years, many chaplains are nevertheless acutely conscious of the pressure on companies to become more efficient and profitable; when companies which fail go under, even more employees lose their jobs.

So, whilst workplace chaplains become involved in workers' grief at the loss of old ways, they remain conscious of the need for flexibility. This is, in its turn, in tension with the need to spend time building trust,

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and all the time chaplains are dependent on the ‘generous hospitality’ of businesses and individuals. The welcome which companies offer to workplace chaplains is precious and often comes as a surprise. Chaplains are guests, grateful for the hospitality on offer and for the opportunities to be present in places of need and to listen to people in the working world with its tensions, job insecurities and uncertainties. At the same time chaplains are aware that a company may ask them to leave. The accompanying feelings of vulnerability are a necessary part of mission.¹⁰

The backdrop for all this work is the church. Within the body of the church there may be unrealistic expectations of dramatic outcomes (like mass conversions), rather than a curiosity to discover what is being experienced by those in the world of work. Unrealistic expectations can also lead to a failure to analyze critically what has been revealed in the workplace and might or might not have relevance for the church. This can be expressed in a temptation to tie things down, for example to open a shop¹¹ rather than allow space for a retail chaplaincy to evolve.

Generally, in the IMA, chaplains would say that they are there for people of all faiths or none¹² and work ecumenically as well as with people of other faiths. This is often a prerequisite for the acceptance of chaplaincy in commercial organizations, but church members may have a view that chaplaincy is not for all, if that includes working alongside other faiths or non-Christians without trying to proselytize. Institutionally, some churches also may have a weak view of chaplaincy for all, wanting to focus just on their denomination, or hierarchically on the so called ‘good and great’ (meaning the powerful, rich and influential). Such attitudes, combined with today’s economic structures with their tendencies towards globalization, consumerism, commodification and secularism can weaken workplace chaplains’ engagement with marginalized workers.

Methodist workplace chaplaincy 2010

Methodism is involved in chaplaincy to shopping centres, town and city centres, exhibitions and conference centres, the law courts, police, airports and a casino, as well as chaplaincies in manufacturing, transport and the public sector,¹³ but this is not unlike other churches’ chaplains’ experiences.

The distinctive contribution of Methodism to workplace chaplaincy and economic mission was perhaps best encapsulated in Bill Gowland’s desire to be where people ‘work and toil and sweat and swear’. This ‘sweat’ contains a drop of Methodism’s lifeblood and shows Gowland’s determination to be present with poorer workers who expressed their grit in the face of

oppression and exploitation. The fire in Gowland's blood, led also to the growth of Luton Industrial College and subsequently the resources of the Luton Fund.

In 2003 the Let your Light Shine (LYLS) report¹⁴ offered Methodism a strategy for engagement with the economy. LYLS encouraged a widening Mission in the Economy which included regional economic mission enablers and perhaps, at times, was felt to imply that workplace chaplaincy was secondary to the real engagement.¹⁵ Endorsed by the Methodist Council, the LYLS agenda failed to make a great impact on the Church. Whilst it wanted to take The Methodist Church Engaging with Business Industry and Commerce (MIBIC) in a positive direction, LYLS did not fire up ordinary Methodists. The report was intellectually stimulating and had practical applications, but perhaps it ignored Methodism's connections with the organization of workers which led to Tolpuddle and the grass-roots actions designed to make the workplace a fairer environment through unionization. Whilst this is also in the Methodist blood, we rarely explore this relationship, and even may feel somewhat embarrassed about it.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Methodism UK has restructured and the Luton fund is no longer ring-fenced for Mission in the Economy work.¹⁷ The current drive within Methodism to rationalize and become more focused on what are perceived to be its core activities have, in this case, meant a withdrawal from the general area of MIBIC and a re-examination of chaplaincy. The church that emphasizes the 'four alls' and the priesthood of all believers even now attempts to offer chaplaincy to every person. LYLS wanted the number of chaplains to increase¹⁸ and the number has grown since its publication in 2003. Alongside this growth, there is still a desire amongst Methodist chaplains to focus on social justice as it emerges in the work, and concerns of chaplains today include human trafficking and exploitation.¹⁹

The future of Methodist workplace chaplaincy and potential impacts

Wesley's 'four alls', placed in the context of economic mission, suggests that workplace chaplaincy will continue to be significant to Methodists. Working in challenging environments and being in contact with the 'sweat' of workers of many different faiths, of atheists, capitalists and communists may seem to take away a chaplain's Christian (ritual) purity, but chaplains are positioned to understand the world and take up common causes out there, where they emerge. Chaplains can critically analyze rather than reject or accept the morality of the workplace. If they are able to challenge churches' unrealistic expectations and encourage compassion and curios-

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ity then this might help the integration of the church with working people and economic models so that the introduction of Sabbath spaces and a greater sense of community (*koinonia*) become possible.

Methodist revival and unionisation grew from beginnings where people were not afraid of workplaces, politics and economic structures. Unlike liberation theology and the worker priest movement, both of which were silenced in the Roman Catholic Church, Methodism can reconnect with its political and economic traditions through workplace chaplains (and others). But, within a global economy where democratic capitalism is king, what does unionisation mean and what has Methodism to offer?

Other churches are well equipped with hierarchical structures to be at ease with those on the boards of commercial organisations; Methodists are far more unsure and uncomfortable in these places. Methodists have an imperative to explore the economic landscape with the tools at their disposal. By doing so they will discover an imperative to work ecumenically and with other faiths but this will sharpen a sense of uniqueness rather than threaten Methodist identity. At the same time this work will keep us humble: we are a very small part of the picture.

Our smallness is not necessarily a bad thing – we are not to be conformed to this world, and a small amount of Methodist salt going into the secular soup of our society has in the past had far-reaching consequences. The same may be true if we are able to continue to be confident in our traditions and priorities.

The future particular impact of Methodist workplace chaplaincy could be in the rediscovery of the urban, motivated, poor – marginalized and exploited workers could discover that, within Methodism, there are individuals, offering a transformative perspective, who can be reached. This will not be achieved in isolation or by trying to copy the structures or approaches of faith-partners. Methodist chaplaincy will need to prove itself (as bread proves) by the way it is received.

On discovering that the Communion he was distributing was in a real sense not just the Body of Christ but the lives and bodies of the slaves, Bartholome de las Casas turned against slavery. Methodists must be alert to the most vulnerable and enslaved members of our society and rediscover communion. Workplace chaplaincy, at its best, offers a way in which to do this.

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NOTES

- 1 The Revd Stephen Willey is Chaplain at the National Exhibition Centre.
- 2 http://www.economywatch.com/world_economy/united-kingdom/
- 3 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/7297541/Twitter-users-send-50-million-tweets-per-day.html>
- 4 These are words I've heard used in relation to workers at recent management and company briefings
- 5 I'm aware, for example, of the work of the Revd Brian Jones in West Yorkshire in the 1980s and that of the Revd Colin Corke at Longbridge.
- 6 See <http://www.ichaplaincy.org.uk/>. I get several tweets a day from members of an HR Department.
- 7 In the West Midlands, 'Workcare Coventry and Warwickshire' and 'Faith at Work in Worcestershire' have both rebranded.
- 8 Moving beyond the economic downturn at <http://www.cigb.org.uk/news/page/2/>
- 9 Here I am quoting from 'The Harborne High Street Project' an unpublished paper reflecting on high street chaplaincy by Amy Merriman (2009). My paper draws on Amy's reflections in several places and I am grateful for her willingness for her work to be used in this way.
- 10 David J. Bosch, 'The Vulnerability of Mission' in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, pp. 73–86.
- 11 This was the case in two situations I'm aware of.
- 12 The CIGB website quotes its constitution which says it will work as part of God's creative purpose for all humanity.
- 13 Many listed at back of LYLS.
- 14 Available at <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/light.pdf>
- 15 See, however, footnote 16 below.
- 16 I've heard it said that there was 'a sigh of relief' from some Methodists when the annual Joseph Arch celebrations came to an end. Methodist website article however, shows it is still in Methodists' blood: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentoworld.content&cmid=1825>
- 17 Mentioned only once as a restricted fund on the Methodist website (in LYLS – 2003).
- 18 LYLS p. 31.
- 19 The theme of the 2010 Workplace Chaplains' conference.