

“DANGER! CHRISTIANS AT WORK”
“Called To The Ministry”
1 Thessalonians 4:11,12

From time to time here at Wade Street Church (and, no doubt, in other places as well), we interview folk who are serving God in particular situations. Only two weeks ago we spoke with Dr Andrew Potter, who works with the blind in Benin. We pray for them and their ministries, as we do for people who are setting off on the path of ministry via training or college courses. Last month we prayed for Ann Badcock and for Wallace and Tina Lopes. It's right that we do that, that we recognise those who are prepared to use their gifts in what many refer to as “full-time Christian ministry” beyond this church.

But we also recognise *within* the church those who use their specific gifts in working with young people in the Mob or in Sunday School, those who act as leaders in Alpha courses and other activities directly linked to the life of the church, those who we believe have been called by God to lead within the church. Again, it's right that we do this. But we need to recognise, too, that those who are set apart in this way are really only a small part of the congregation. As we resource and support those who are involved in the various aspects of the church's life, we do so because we believe that we are in some way building the Kingdom of God. We hope (and pray, I trust) that through these means other people – outsiders, the unchurched, non-believers, whatever you want to call them – will be brought closer to God and will commit their lives to him.

That's fine. It's a way in which the church has traditionally viewed its mission. But when we stop and ask how many unchurched people we connect with through church-based activity, the number is pitifully small. It's what one writer has described as “cold-contact farm”. We have to wake up to the fact that very, very few people come into church for the first time of their own accord these days. Simply holding a gospel service or trying to put on an outreach event will not draw people into the orbit of the church, and we often devote a disproportionate amount of resources and person power to it..

But ask yourself another question. How many people do you connect with at work? As you go about your daily activity, how many non-churched people do you regularly come into contact with? I reckon it would be a safe bet that it's a much bigger number than the church ever connects with. [Let me just pause here to say that I recognise that there are many of you here today who do not go to work – for all kinds of reasons. You may be retired or looking after young children or unemployed or unable to work or training or whatever. Don't switch off because I'm talking about people at work. Translate that word, which I'll use as a kind of shorthand, into whatever your situation is, wherever you meet people regularly – at a club, in the shop, walking the dog, at a toddler group, down the gym, over your fence.]

You and I are the church out there, out in the world, outside the comfort of this little holy huddle. And you have a part to play in the life of God's kingdom at your desk, behind the counter, on the production line, in the staff room – wherever you are. The tradition of the churches from which this local church has sprung – the Baptists and the Congregationalists – is based on a theology which sees the church as a “gathered church”. In other words, it is when we come together that we form the church. That's true, and I don't want to knock it. But this gathered church also needs to behave as a scattered church. We come here together once a week or so to worship, to listen for God's word, to encourage one another (at least, that's the theory!). But for most of the week we are scattered about the country in all kinds of other situations.

In those situations you are the church. You are ministers of the gospel. God has called you, given you a vocation, set you apart, whatever phrase you want to use, to be his ministers in the places where you work day by day. As we've already said, most people do not come to church these days – so, at least to start with, the church must go to them. And the few leaders we have in this congregation cannot possibly get into all the places where you live and work. You are the Christians at work. So over the next few weeks,

I'd like us to have a look at what it means to be a Christian, a minister, at work. It's an area that has been much neglected over the years (although we have dealt with it a few times over the past eleven years in this church), but which we need to think seriously about if we are truly to get to grips with the way God is working in our society. There are a number of books and other resources that you might find helpful, but the one I would recommend most highly is Mark Greene's little paperback *Thank God It's Monday*. There should be some copies on the bookstall, and it has a list of other books and resources in the back.

This morning, what I hope you'll go away with is a sense that you are actually called to serve God where you are – not necessarily by preaching in the staff room at lunchtime or by converting people through witty Christian slogans on your wall, but by living out day by day the values and the attitudes of the Kingdom of God. God can use you – he wants to use you – just where he's placed you, because no-one else can do what you are doing. And that has implications for the whole congregation as we try to support and help one another in this area of service. Yes, it's great to be able to pray for those who are involved in training for some kind of traditional ministry, it's good to be able to meet with and pray for those who are using their gifts to further the kingdom in the primary schools of Lichfield or the hospitals of West Africa – they are vital ministries and need all the help they can get – but we also need to pray for and support those who are grappling with the issues thrown up in trying to lead others in the workplace or trying to work ethically in the marketplace or trying simply to carry out their jobs without losing their cool under pressure.

There are a couple of instances in the gospels where it is clear that Jesus had this kind of ministry in mind. Yes, we know that he called a small group of people to work closely with him – his disciples. They were people he trained in a particular way to carry out a particular ministry. But there were others, too, who were used by Jesus to minister for him just where they were. Remember the story of the woman Jesus met at the well in Samaria? John tells that story in his gospel in chapter 4. He met with a woman who was drawing water from the well – a risky business as far as his reputation was concerned. He was a Jew: she was a Samaritan. He was a man; she was a woman. He was a teacher of righteousness; she was a woman with a well-known history of sexual adventure. But he changed her life. She discovered in Jesus a new way of living, a new purpose to life.

And what was her response? In *John 4:28* we read that she left her water pot and rushed back into town to her neighbours and friends to tell them about Jesus. A little later (in *4:39*) we read that “*many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony*”. The point I'm trying to make is not that she went around telling her testimony – although she obviously did, and it's not a bad pattern to follow – but that she went and told the people she already had contact with. Jesus didn't know them, but she did. Her life was changed and she wanted those who were closest to her to know about it.

In Luke's gospel Jesus himself makes it even more explicit. He and his disciples have encountered a man who is a total outcast. He is plagued with demons, living in the graveyard, naked, raving and violent. Jesus works a miracle in his life and transforms him into a calm, rational, ordered individual. It causes quite a stir in the area and the man asks Jesus if he can join his band of disciples, if he can become part of the special ministry team. But Jesus says “No”. In *Luke 8:38,39*, we read that Jesus tells him to go off to those he knows best, the people of his town, and tell them about what God has done in his life. He is sent off to minister to those he knows. It's his vocation from Jesus.

What's your vocation? What has God called you to do? That job that you're doing is God's vocation for you. God has given you gifts that you can use for the betterment of society and for the extending of his kingdom. Your skills on the computer, your ability to communicate knowledge to schoolchildren, your particular method of dealing with other staff, your visionary qualities, your delight in talking with other people, your skill with a lathe, your aptitude with numbers – they are God-given gifts. Do not disparage them.

Some of the Christians in Thessalonica were doing that. They were Greeks who had a rather snifty attitude to work, particularly manual work. The people amongst whom they lived were influenced by the pseudo-religious philosophy of the age which held the intellectual and the spiritual to be far superior to the manual and the practical. So those who became Christians carried that idea over into their new-found faith. They would rather sit around and debate theology than work. They would rather meditate than get their hands dirty. That's partly why Paul writes to them as he does in the reading we had earlier. Look at *1 Thessalonians 4:11,12*. Don't stop working, he tells them. That's the very place you are likely to be able to "*win the respect of outsiders*".

I come across people from time to time who bemoan the fact that there doesn't seem to be any place for them to use their gifts in the church. They dearly want to and they feel that's the right orbit of activity for a Christian. They just go to work to earn enough money to keep the wolf from the door, but want to devote themselves to ministry in the church. Church is where proper Christians do it. But Paul is saying here – and it's behind what we read in Luke and John – get on and put all you've got into your workplace because that's where God has called you to have an effect on those who would never, ever go near a church. Own your gifts and thank God for them. Use them to his glory. Fulfil your vocation in your everyday life. Be a minister for him where he has placed you.

"That's all very well for you to say," you might reply. "But how do we actually minister for God in the workplace?" Well, to start with, simply by acknowledging that God has given you an ability to use for the good of those around you. The skill you use in your daily occupation, whether it's some kind of high-powered ability to sell a product to those who need it or a skill in engaging other dog-walkers in conversation, is something you can use to win the respect of outsiders – to make your little bit of the world a slightly better place and thus to give glory to God. In his letters both to the Ephesians (6:7) and the Colossians (3:23), Paul tells even the most menial of slaves, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord not for men.*".

Where's the first mention of the gifts of the Spirit in the Bible? It's in *Exodus 35:30,31,34*. And what are the gifts? "*Skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts ... the ability to teach others [these crafts].*" These people, Bezalel and Oholiab, were gifted by the Holy Spirit to be craftsmen and trainers. That was their ministry. They made things and taught others how to make things and managed the whole lot. You craftsmen and teachers and trainers and managers – you're gifted by the Holy Spirit to do that, so make the most of it. It's your calling, your vocation – and God is empowering you to do it by his Holy Spirit.

But remember that in your own situation you will probably be one of only a very few Christians there. No-one else will be praying for most of your co-workers, so you can. You don't necessarily have to tell them. You don't have to ask for their prayer requests every morning. Just pray for them. Pray for the person in the next room, the person you see in the canteen every day, the checkout operator you always use at the supermarket. [This is a slight aside from the main point of this morning's sermon, but the point has been made that, in an increasingly fragmented society, it is good to develop some patterns of behaviour which bring you regularly into contact with the same people, be they someone you sit next to on the bus or train everyday, using the same checkout at the supermarket, always buying your sandwich from the same shop, etc. In that way, you can get to know someone over a period of time.] And for those you are that bit more friendly with, listen to them. Build relationships with them. It takes time, but it's worth it.

Those who are ministers in the more traditional sense of the word – church pastors, leaders and so on – meet together fairly regularly to share our joys and our problems (usually the latter, it has to be said!), to support and pray with one another. So too, you workplace ministers should find time for that. Share your concerns with others. Talk to other people in this congregation who are in similar situations. Arrange to meet to pray, or share prayer concerns on the 'phone or the Net. Let off steam together. And seek out other Christians in your workplace who may be feeling like you do.

And ask for help or prayer or advice from others in the church here. If a colleague asks you a question about your faith that you cannot answer, don't flannel: tell him or her that you'll ask someone on Sunday. If there's a problem at work, don't just assume that because others might not understand the technicalities of your situation they don't care about you. Every Tuesday at the church prayer meeting we mention work issues as a matter of prayer: it would be good to have some specific things to pray about for you. And there's always the prayer page on the church website if you happen to be away from home for a few days and need something prayed for, especially those of you who travel abroad a lot.

Out in the porch there are some green questionnaires for those of you who would like to put something down on paper. It may be that the church (this local one and the wider church) has not got to grips with this issue in the past, but we've got to start somewhere, and all the help you can give would be greatly appreciated.

So don't look down on your work as just a necessary evil, or just something you do between opportunities to get involved at church. You are called to that situation. God wants you there. You have opportunities there that no-one else does. Make the most of them and use them for the kingdom of God. The world is not your oyster, it's your parish – and God's called you to be a minister in it.