

Faith, Work and Economic Life

1. The July 2008 sessions of General Synod debated a Diocesan Synod Motion from the Diocese of St Albans concerning work as a spiritual activity. As amended, and passed by the Synod, the motion read:
‘That this Synod:
 - (a) affirm daily work be it paid or unpaid as essentially a spiritual activity;*
 - (b) recognise the importance of Christian values within economic life;*
 - (c) encourage bishops and clergy to give greater priority to equipping and resourcing church members through teaching, prayer, affirmation and celebration, to fulfil their vocations, ministries and mission in their places of work; and*
 - (d) request the Mission and Public Affairs Council to:*
 - (i) convene a symposium on a theological understanding of work for today as outlined in sections 5.3–5.4 of GS Misc 890B; and*
 - (ii) compile a collection of supportive resource materials for church members as outlined in section 5.5 of GS Misc 890B.’*
2. The response to this motion is contained within this paper, the accompanying edition of the journal *Crucible* (to be found in the Synod mailing) and the supplementary paper, GS Misc 974B, sent electronically to Synod members.
3. The GS Misc 890B, referred to in the motion was a background paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council. The sections of the paper to which the motion refers read as follows:

...the Mission and Public Affairs Council believes that there are two specific and achievable pieces of work which would take up the concerns of the motion and be of real value to the Church’s mission and ministry. Moreover, these pieces of work can be done within existing budgetary provision.

The first is to give further consideration to a theological understanding of work *for today*. The literature on theology and work is surprisingly thin and little of it relates clearly to contemporary patterns of work and all the diverse activities which fall under the definition of “work”.

The Council therefore proposes to convene a symposium to take this forward. It would bring together theologians, economists, labour market analysts and people with differing work experiences, and draw on perspectives from different areas of church life. Its objective would be to produce a collection of writings which would add to the resources available for the Church in thinking about economic life. There have been a number of recent publications addressing theology and economics, but not with an explicit focus on work today. There is a gap here which an MPA-led project can profitably fill.

The second piece of work MPA proposes is to examine, in conjunction with adult education and other specialists, the resources available for parishes and congregations to enable their members to be better

supported in dealing faithfully with the questions and dilemmas which arise in their working lives.

4. These objectives have been addressed, and this paper is a brief introduction to the resources which, as a result, are now made available to Synod.

A Theological Symposium on “Work”

5. The theological symposium was held in January 2010. Five theologians, each actively addressing issues concerning human work in their studies and writings, came together in London over two days, joined by a representative of the diocese of St Albans, and convened by the Director of Mission and Public Affairs. Each of the five had previously submitted a short paper, these had been read by all participants and, in the course of the symposium, they were discussed, amended and the ideas developed in the light of the exchanges. The participants then revised their papers into their final form.
6. MPA is extremely grateful to the Editorial Board of Crucible for agreeing to devote an issue of the journal to the publication of the five papers and for extending the print run so that all Synod members should have a copy.
7. The symposium asked: what is the “gap” we are seeking to fill through this work? The gap we identified is the relatively low profile of human work as a major theme in contemporary Christian Ethics. The purpose of the symposium, and of publishing the papers, was to act as a showcase for some of the most interesting contemporary scholarship in this field and to promote (perhaps even to provoke) others academic theologians to develop and deepen the consideration of work as a proper subject for theology. That is why we set out to publish in a journal which will have an enduring existence in libraries as well as a circulation wider than Synod alone.
8. We hope that Synod members will find the papers interesting and stimulating. Our wider audience is the active community of serious Christian ethicists, teaching and researching in universities and theological training institutions. “Work”, in our view, deserves more of their attention than has been given in recent years. Our hope is that these five papers will open up new questions and stimulate new research and scholarship which will, in time, become a major resource for church people, lay and ordained. In short, our hope is that the tunes hummed in the academy today will become part of the church’s familiar hymnody tomorrow.
9. The five authors of these papers not only represent some of the most interesting work being done on theology and work today but cross divides of denomination and theological tradition. They include a Baptist, a Roman Catholic and a Methodist as well as Anglicans. Human work is one arena in which Christian discipleship involves thoroughly ecumenical encounters, so this breadth of background is of special value here. The participants were also at different stages in their academic careers, some still studying at doctoral level, others already established and respected as authors in their own fields. One participant straight from the symposium to the (successful) viva for her PhD, the topic of which is reflected in her essay in this collection!
10. We hope that Synod members will enjoy the five papers. We also hope that members might draw this edition of Crucible to the attention of others and help to raise the profile of this work within and beyond the church.

Resources for Parishes and Congregations

11. The second response to the St Alban's DSM has, as intended, been pursued as a joint venture between MPA and the Education Division's Adult Education Adviser.
12. The challenge, in this case, was that a simple list of resource materials would be (a) quickly out of date, and (b) could not claim to be fully comprehensive without a disproportionate amount of research. Instead, we sought to identify different resources, addressing the distinct elements of mission touched upon in clause (c) of the motion. The result is the annexe to this paper – GS Misc 974B.
13. We have taken the wording of the Synod motion as the structure for our response, focusing in turn on teaching, prayer and worship, and affirmation and celebration in the context of reflecting on work.
14. We have not sought to provide a comprehensive directory of resources but have concentrated on those which we know to have been used effectively among adult educators and other practitioners.
15. An interesting question which emerged from contact with practitioners concerns the relatively low take-up rate for resources on "work". There is a frequently-expressed desire, especially among lay Christians (and evinced by the lively debate at Synod), for opportunities to reflect on the connections between faith and working life. There are also, as GS Misc 974B suggests, a good number of study programmes and other resources available. Yet the resources seem not to be used at levels commensurate with the stated demand.
16. We can only speculate about why this may be. It has been suggested that studying faith and work is likely to be more challenging than reassuring and that this puts people off. It has also been suggested that questions of faith and employment are of greater concern to lay people than to clergy and that the latter tend to act as "gatekeepers" when parish study programmes are being designed. But it would take considerable research to come up with evidence about why parishes and other groups are less active on themes of faith and work than might be expected. The question remains one which deserves further reflection in local contexts.
17. It may be that GS Misc 974B can contribute in a small way to wider awareness of the resources and opportunities available in this field. Synod members are able to help here by drawing attention in their dioceses and parishes to the resources mentioned in the paper.

The Changing Face of Human Work

18. There is, of course, much more that could be done to equip churches to take human work more seriously. This is where the work of others, such as the Industrial Mission movement through many decades, has been of importance. Many in IM have devoted considerable time and reflection to the theological and moral questions raised by work and impacting on individuals and communities and have worked closely with groups of lay Christians on those reflections. It has not been our intention to duplicate this long-term, committed, work.
19. The importance of staying with the issues of work over the longer term becomes clear when one considers how the terrain has changed, even in the

short time since the St Albans DSM entered the Synodical process. Since then, the depth of the financial crisis has become apparent. Austerity measures designed to address a historically large budget deficit have been introduced alongside plans to reform the benefit system in order to tackle a perceived culture of entrenched worklessness. In the last two years, unemployment has risen steadily and appears likely to continue rising, at least in the short term.

20. No doubt a new economic context will, in due course, result in new theological reflections and church-led initiatives. The kind of questions about work and worklessness which churches and individual Christians want to address may change too. We hope that this paper and its annexes may help to stimulate that new work and thinking. Some of the churches' responses to the Coalition government's "Big Society" thinking may be relevant here (see GS 1804 and the debate in General Synod in November 2010).
21. In the context of rising unemployment, it is also worth revisiting the British churches' major report from 1997, *Unemployment and the Future of Work*.¹ Appearing just as the first New Labour administration took office, with the then-Chancellor, Gordon Brown, committed to increasing employment, the report perhaps appeared to be speaking to the converted. But, whilst the statistical data in the report is, naturally, somewhat dated, its discussion of the importance of work, measures to combat unemployment, and the theological reflections contained in a number of useful Annexes, remain extremely pertinent. In particular, the report's emphasis on the moral significance of work and employment echoes the Synod motion's concern to emphasise the spiritual significance of work.
22. It is our hope that the resources offered now as, a result of the St Albans DSM, will be of interest and use to Synod members, dioceses and parishes, and may, in time, contribute to new and deeper work in the fascinating and enduringly important field of faith, work and economic life.

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¹ *Unemployment and the Future of Work: A Challenge to the Churches*, London: Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 1997