

DEACONS' TOOL KIT



THE DEACON IN THE WORKPLACE: THE SERVANT LEADER

Andy Farmer

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4 18,19)

As I complete my final year of Ordination training I am naturally reflective over how God has graciously supported and shaped me over the last three years. I am also cognisant of the path that lies before me and where the strength will continue to come from as I follow it. In this passage from Luke, Jesus reflects, that in order to best serve those on the margins, we firstly need to be Spirit-filled. This passage is after his time of testing in the wilderness and at the beginning of his public ministry. Some, like I was initially, may be unsure of how they can fulfil this sense of calling to ‘serve and meet people where they are’. For me this has led to the Permanent Diaconate. The aim of this article is to share a short description of the role and to reflect on how it might be used to grow God’s kingdom, particularly in the workplace.

Like many, work has always given me a strong feeling of personal identity, a sense of purpose, and been the source of long-term relationships and friendships. There have been trials and successes, and these experiences have helped with my personal growth and

development. My work experience has also been interwoven with my identity, purpose and relationships influenced through my faith journey. Sometimes it is easier to separate work and faith, but God values our work and we are called to embrace it. Work also gives us a great opportunity to minister, to serve and to witness to others.

Work is a gift from God and as such, it should be valued and enjoyed. It is an opportunity to steward and create value for the kingdom; it is a practical sphere for both ministry and mission. We only take our faith to work if we know that our work is valuable to God. As God laboured in creation, he expects us to do the same, establishing a community on earth based on mutual service. In the words of William Tyndale “There is no better work than another to please God: to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a Souter (cobbler) or an apostle”. The critical point is how we interface within God’s kingdom and society.

In fact, it is surely not coincidental that most of the parables that Jesus told had a workplace context, and that of the forty miracles recorded in the book of Acts, thirty-nine of them occurred *outside* of a ‘church’ or religious setting. The God of the Bible seems as concerned with displaying his power outside the walls of the church as he does within it. Paul goes on in Colossians to explain that everything we do is done with respect for our watching Master in heaven to whom we will give an account (Col. 3:23-25). Our work ought to make it obvious that we serve a God of justice and kindness. A Christian work ethic requires a commitment to excellence in the task.

In Acts 6 we glimpse the early church discovering a need for ‘deacons’, and the careful and prayerful social engagement they came up with provides a model for the ministry of the diaconate. It is ‘ambassadorial’ in focus rather than ‘liturgical’, the deacon being sent out by his or her church fellowship to minister in the community around and to represent the needs of the community to the church fellowship. Deacons can take the initiative, with the backing of the local church, to set up programmes which help to meet the needs they find: but deacons are not simply ‘community workers’. Deacons are also ordained ministers of the gospel and so their work will include taking the opportunity to share the gospel with those they meet, in whatever way is appropriate.

As a simple model, it might be helpful to think about ‘Faith at Work’ by looking from three distinct but related perspectives. **Looking in**, we can consider our own sense of spirituality, strength in faith and Christ-like attitude. **Looking up**, we can think about how our work is a form of worship and honourable to God. Finally, **looking out** is more of a call to evangelise and share our faith with others. Critical to living in each of these perspectives is the teaching, prayerful support and fellowship offered by our church.

Doing my 'day job' I interface with a large number of people external to the organisation I work for. I am responsible for a wide range of operational functions in a leadership capacity, and I have the associated pressure of being accountable for economic performance. From the perspective of being a Christian, I have to be aware of how individuals will react to my faith, as there is more scrutiny around my decision-making. I also have to be acutely aware of the relationship between the company culture/values and how this relates to my personal values. In my leadership role, I often have to develop and implement strategies that are primarily driven by the economic sustainability of the organisation.

A recent example of this has been the need to restructure the organisation following the ending of a significant government contract. This meant losing people from the organisation that I had worked closely with over a number of years. In essence, the challenge, as a leader, is this. Is it possible to take away an individual's livelihood in a 'Christian way'? For me the fundamental difference is that as a Christian, I believe people are made in God's likeness and that Christ died for them. This focusses my mind on their intrinsic worth and in consequence, how individuals should be treated. Other, non-Christian, leaders might argue that they hold an equivalent position; however, there is often a tendency to follow a process to favour individuals, rather than value all as individuals with equal high worth.

The next obvious question is whether and how this will change when I am ordained. From an internal and personal perspective, I am sure the training and development I have been through will better equip me to face new challenges. I also believe the authority that comes from my sense of calling will encourage me to be bold in Jesus' name. From an external, or perceived by others perspective, I will have to deal with the secular (and sometimes church-based) understanding of what a vicar/priest is. If I can show humility, be ready to listen and make myself available, then I am sure that there will be many opportunities to serve and share faith at work. For me this all comes back to the role of a Deacon as a servant leader.



More about Andy

Andy is Operations Director, OIS at Oxford Innovation with 20 years' experience of Operational Management and Business Transformation. He worships at St Andrew's Church, Buckland Monachorum in Devon. He's looking forward to being ordained a Distinctive Deacon this summer in Exeter Cathedral.