



Faith, Work and Christian Discipleship

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Leader's Guide

Session 5 - **Work and the
Church: worship, church
programmes, and church
operations**



Faith and work in the lives of Christian disciples

Leader's Guide

Welcome to this ICF resource, which is one of six discussion outlines about faith and work. These leader's notes are designed to be used in conjunction with the participants handbooks that can be purchased from ICF. The leaders' notes include additional study material and theological reflection. It is unlikely that the group will have the capacity to absorb or engage with all of this, but it offers further ideas and insights that you can inject into the conversation when you feel it would be helpful. Remember that your role as a leader is to stimulate and moderate discussion – you don't have to include everything that is outlined in these notes, nor should a discussion be constrained by them if it goes off in a direction that is useful to the group as a whole.

The relationship between faith and work is quite complex with many and varied aspects. We cannot cover every element of it, but the discussion starters in this series seek to introduce what we consider to be some of the most significant features. The direction and content of any discussion will depend upon the particular experiences and perspectives of those who participate in it. The task of a good group leader is to allow the conversation to flow in appropriate directions, pay attention to see everyone is included and to hold the general principle of encouraging a Christian understanding of work by relating the biblical narratives and theological reflections to the day to day experience of the group's members. This should include work in all its forms: formal and informal; manual and managerial; creative and intellectual; caring and technological and so on. This is what we might often refer to as a theology of work. These discussion outlines should provide you with the resources to begin to make connections between the Bible and attitudes to work and its practices.

Our purpose is to go further than simply encouraging people to act as Christians while they are at work (important as this is!) Rather we seek to explore work itself as an expression of Christian discipleship; consider how work might enable us to participate in God's mission to reconcile all things and to reflect on work in the light of God's purpose for human beings as stewards of creation. If you are to help others engage with these realities, they are issues that you might helpfully think through for yourself first.

The six key themes are offered as a basis from which you can develop a group discussion in which members reflect on their own experience of work. The emerging conversations will depend not only on the particular jobs that people do, but the workplace cultures in which they operate and the nature of their own discipleship journey. The atmosphere of the group needs not only to be a place of learning, but also pastoral sensitivity – work is not a positive experience for everyone, and talking about it might well reveal hurts and struggles that need to be heard with care and acceptance.

The six study guides in this series are:

1. **What is work?**
2. **Covenant and contract; work and rest**
3. **Fair remuneration for work**
4. **Faith, ethics, and work**
5. **Work and the Church: worship, church programmes, and church operations**
6. **Work, community and transformation**

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Session 5 Work, worship, church programmes and operations

Session outline

This session provides the opportunity to consider how our experience of local church relates and equips us for our daily work. This requires a degree of self-reflection – an important part of the leader's role will be to try and keep the conversation constructive and creative. Try to not simply consider what could be better, but how that can be brought about.

Introduction

There is a notice that some workers may place on their door on Fridays. It reads, 'Today is POET'S day' and accompanied by the translation, 'Push Off Early Tomorrow's Saturday!'

You may often hear prayers in vestries prior to services that go something like this, 'Lord, take from our minds all the concerns of our work and life last week and all the problems of the coming week, as we come into your presence to worship you.'

In one staff room on Monday morning a colleague who sits huddled over a mug of coffee says, in a weak mournful voice, 'Mondays don't suit me.'

These comments underline the division that can exist between the world of work, everyday life, and our worship of the Living God, where the Sunday service becomes the equivalent of the secular weekend's leisure and shopping. Worship can too easily become a comforting escape from the complexity and challenge of contemporary secular life, with the result that God's people tend to evade their responsibility to be salt and light. There is a flight from reason, where worship becomes a welcome respite from a tough and demanding world. We also deny God the opportunity to encounter us in the concerns of our life in the world: to challenge, direct, forgive, and bring peace. We have already discussed in session 2 God's pattern of work and Sabbath rest.

The session begins by inviting the group to reflect on their own experience, which in turn might reveal the degree to which some of the concerns above are present in the group members' own experience.

To what degree do you feel your everyday life, your worship of the Living God and your experience of the world of work inter-relate and connect?

What in your experience indicates that there may be a growing division between these in the way that we tend to live and act today?

Do you find that the worship that you experience is a comforting escape from the complexity of contemporary life, if so, how might it change to equip and inform your engagement with it?

Discipleship as engagement with the world

Christian discipleship is a full-time occupation, seven days a week. The Christian faith needs to relate to every part of our lives, for there is no part of our lives with which God is not involved. But if we are not careful, church life can easily tend to become inward with all its time and energy directed toward increasing congregations, running organisations or looking after the fabric and plant of the church buildings. This can leave some of the congregation feeling that the church is not really interested in what happens in their life and work away from the church. They will say that the church does not meet their needs as workers and yet in reality they often didn't expect or even want it to do so. This situation has a number of facets to it involving both leaders and people.

Has the church betrayed its calling to be the people of God in the world, and if so, in what ways?

We must recall the early church's understanding of baptism being into full-time service (**Romans 6:1-14**) and recognise that Jesus did not call his disciples to be attenders at the weekly morning church service.

Mark 8:27-35 is a key passage focusing on Christian discipleship, where the confession of faith and the practical business of following imply each other. There is an interrelationship between believing the right things and doing the right things - what we believe should affect, and be seen, in what we do; right belief should be demonstrated in right action. Luke recalls that the first disciples left everything behind and followed Jesus (**Luke 5:1-11**).

We are challenged by the Apostle Paul to live our lives as our worship of God (**Romans 12:1-2**), and to be those who do the work of God (**Ephesians 2:8-10**). So we can define Christian discipleship in terms of our everyday lives, where *living* is worship, and *being* is mission.

In this we live as imitators of Christ (**1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; Eph. 5:1-2**), and as those created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) to take care of creation (**Gen. 2:15**).

The Church is more than the community that hears the word preached; it is the community that takes responsibility for the response given to the preaching of that word.

Does the ministry in your church give people insight into the ways in which, as workers, members of families, or citizens, they are sharing in the mission of Christ and so may have hope in the midst of struggle? Or do the preaching, prayers, and songs suggest to them that the ordinary work and social life of the congregation is of little worth, because to be 'real Christians' they have to be a special churchly person, for which, given their commitments in the everyday world, they may not have the time?

One central aim of the Church is to see a radical transformation, which actively involves the whole community - a dynamic process that affects each person's life, the environment, the community and society as a whole. So our faith has to be a lived faith, and adults learn principally through involvement. For example, only when people are face to face with a homeless person do the issues of homelessness and housing really begin to impinge and become more of a priority in church life. Only when people share in the staffing of a night shelter do they begin asking why there isn't more affordable social housing. Engagement in practical concern results in politicisation.

But one problem is that if we only provide a service, give first aid, we fail to empower people, instead of enabling oppressed groups to take greater control of their situation, and work for change within it. The model we are suggesting is risky because those we work alongside may be enabled to ask challenging questions of the church as well as of the authorities.

We have sought to define work as caring for and redeeming creation, which we might describe as 'seeking the Kingdom of God.' This is the calling of the church, it is also the true vocation of work whether that is about stewarding the earth's resources, harnessing nature, building community, developing humanity, caring for others and so on. There is a natural alignment here yet we live in a world that seems more comfortable to separate the mission of God and the world of work.

The importance of faith for our witness in the world, can be summarised as follows:

- it questions our norms and values
- it challenges accepted behaviour patterns
- it asks what ideas are being fostered in our approach to work
- it challenges our ethical stance.

The group is invited to consider how their own discipleship raises questions and challenges as they engage in day to day work and living.

Worship:

Life and work can leave us bruised and battered, which does not help us to find God and God's purposes within them. We need times in church services that enable us to move beyond ourselves to encounter God. Author Studs

Terkel prefaced his best-seller *Working*, with the statement that:

*This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence - to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfight, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for all the walking wounded among the great many of us.*²²

Sadly, the same can often be true for many carers and home-makers. Worship must be constructed to make the connections, to recognise God's universal presence and sovereignty in all of life, and to provide teaching that lays a theological foundation for work and leisure. A helpful liturgy will be grounded in what we share in common, recognising that all that we do and are is part of God's creation. Liturgy needs to become the people's work, their expression of their lives.

We are helped by prayers of intercession in our churches that express an understanding of the needs and pressures of the working world. If our prayers only speak of witnessing at work, we create the impression that there is no sense in which the whole of work belongs to what God has called us to do in the world. People often do not see that computer technology, hairdressing, rolling steel or caring for children has anything to do with God's purposes in the world. We realise our creativity in work, and worship God in offering the product of our work and in recognising the presence of God in all that we do. In doing this we are following the earliest forms of worship in the Old Testament, where the people brought the first fruits of their labour. Then, we begin to find God in the most unlikely places.

Through the Incarnation, God enters our world, and we see again and again in the Gospel narratives that Jesus interacts and engages with the working lives of ordinary people, having an impact on fishermen, farmers and tax collectors. Through the Incarnation God rescues our work from the dominion of darkness. It does this by making all of life, including our work, an arena in which not only to serve, but to meet God. It gives work the possibility of being sacramental. All we do, all the things we make or produce can be seen in the light of God's command to act as stewards of the earth. As we bring our lives before God we recognise that this will involve a rich mixture of word and sacrament, symbol and art form, music and dance, songs of praise and silent reflection. We bring all this into focus at the Lord's Supper where the whole of life is offered as a sacrifice to Christ with whom we have died and been raised to live the resurrection life.

In a culture that emphasises individuals and their personal growth it is especially important to stress this corporate dimension in linking life, work and worship. God does not cease to be at work in his saving story when we leave the table and its churchly context. So the eucharistic community, the believers gathered regularly round his table, are witnesses and channels of God's grace and truth in re-enacting that drama of salvation in their secular lives, that is, we are to carry that eucharistic reality with us and live it in the world.

Harvest Festival services give us a particular opportunity to reflect the whole of life and work, when we recognise the God of all creation. But we will need to be creative and use symbols that represent the work and lives of the congregation.

All Hallows By The Tower is a church that ministers to the City of London and holds a variety of services and meetings on weekday lunch-times for those who work within 'the Square Mile.' Their Harvest Festival service for the business community, held on a Tuesday lunchtime in early October, begins with the presentation of symbols. The priest says:

We have come together to worship God, who is present with us in all that we do. In thanksgiving we each offer him our daily lives, and especially in this place, our work.

The congregation will remain standing while representatives from the business community bring to the altar symbols of the harvest of our working life.

These offerings are presented to God as our thanksgiving for his creative presence in our lives and work.

²² Studs Terkel, *Working*, New York and London: The New Press, 1972,1974,2004

Amongst the symbols placed on the altar at such a festival service held in the mid-1990s were: sweets and *petit fours* brought by a hotel; a model of the US Space Shuttle Discovery brought by a company that worked for the space industry; a bag of sugar brought by a representative of Tate & Lyle; and canvas money bags brought by a finance company.

All Hallows has a remarkable ministry in the heart of the City of London, which includes in its area the business and financial community, the tourists who visit the Tower of London, and arts centres.

In our regular weekly services the connection between our worship and work might be made through intercessory prayer. Prayers for the community and the lives of the people who make up the community would be normal for most churches, but this could be extended through a focus on a particular area of work. For example a teacher or shoe worker, a nurse or manager could share something of their work and the particular issues and concerns that they faced each day. The congregation could then enter into prayer with their brother or sister in Christ for their work, for those who work with them, and for the impact that that place of work has within the community.

Have you got similar stories of services which engage work with worship?

Our worship will be reflected in prayer and practical discipleship; humility before God and before people; recognition that God is present in the world; holding onto Kingdom values in the face of the world's values; involvement with others who are seeking those values in our society; and an openness to work wherever God is working, and to do so in his power.

Making connections between work and worship:

The group is invited to respond to the reflections above by considering some questions and/or using a model process for reflecting on specific issues:

How can we challenge the divide that often exists between the worship life of the congregation and their lives beyond the church building, and examine a holistic approach to life and faith?

What are the questions that faith poses for our working life? What are the questions which the world of work raises about our faith? How can we consider and address these?

Mike West (Industrial Mission in South Yorkshire) outlined a model developed by Ian Fraser in the 1970s. It is a process to enable a group to work through a case study, which may be a major issue in a particular firm or industry.²³ The outline of the process for a group to work through is:

- i) Identify the most significant themes in the situation
- ii) Select a manageable number of these themes
- iii) For each theme list:
 - a) the powers at work in it
 - b) the human consequences
- iv) Identify Biblical and theological resources relevant to the most significant 'powers' and 'human consequences'
- v) Apply this material to the original situation

In his evaluation of this model West states that the primary question will always be: can we return to the problem with new ways of seeing it and new possibilities for resolving it? We might want to push the consideration further and ask whether or not such new possibilities are consistent with the Lordship of Christ and do they allow us to deepen our understanding of the ways in which God acts in the world.

In the analysis of an industrial employment or management concern and the community in which it is set, we should make sure that we consider:

- I. **historical overview** - how have we got to where we are now? This may indicate where it may be going or what might be possible for the future.

²³ Mike West, 'Doing Theology - a Model Examined', in John W. Rogerson (Editor) *Industrial Mission in a Changing World*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, p.45

II. **geographical** - what does the area look like? What are the factors that exercise control on future development?

III. **social** - who holds power and who makes decisions? How do the people involved relate to each other?

IV. **economic** - where is the wealth located and what is the influence of money?

V. **culture** - what are the cultural and ethnic mixes? What religious influences can be identified?

The results of this analysis will inform further discussions of the identified issue and will serve as a control as we seek to reflect biblically and theologically. Our reflection will often point us toward the appropriate action.

We begin to recognise that if a church group is to address issues relating to the nature of work, for workers, managers or the community as a whole, it needs to devote time to researching the background and for discussion of the various aspects involved. The fact that this may seem a difficult task should not lead us to ignore it - work, or the lack of it, takes up the major part of many people's lives.

Questions to consider:

1. How do the worship services of the church address the mission and ministry of workers, carers and managers?
2. How can we develop an understanding of daily work as an essential part of the ministry and mission of the church?
3. How do you react to the suggestion that church services and programmes fit into the 'leisure-time' activity of church members?
4. Would it help to explore the Eucharist/Lord's Supper as a central aspect of relating worship to life and work: the church gathered, sharing the body of Christ, sent out as the scattered body of Christ?