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Vocation as Parish: The Missional Possibilities of Inhabiting Your Workplace

by Andy Campbell

When I hear someone talk about being more “missional” or “incarnational” in my faith, I wonder where I’m supposed to get all that time to hang out with people and build relationships with my neighbors. I don’t have a job that is ministry related, affording me the flexibility to hang out in coffee shops or on my neighbor’s porch.

I spend nearly half my waking hours each week working, sometimes dreaming about how to create more opportunities to be “missional.” Add in time with my family, the commitments of the kids, church on the weekend, time sleeping and eating, and I’m lucky if I can squeeze in an episode of The Walking Dead each week. For me, finding the time to be more missional isn’t a matter of desire, it’s a matter of math.

Do you resonate with my frustration? If you do, perhaps it is because we’ve been looking at the call to be missional too narrowly. We often think of missional as another program or initiative that we need to find a way to schedule into our already saturated lives. Such thinking misses the point, entirely. The call to be missional is a call to deepen and enrich our relationships, not merely start more of them.

John Wesley once wrote in his journal,

“I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it” (The Journal of John Wesley, chapter 3)

By this he did not mean to say that the Anglican parish structure was rubbish or that his assigned parish was of no consequence to him. Quite the opposite. Wesley deepened his understanding of parish to include in it whatever place God saw fit to place him. We might do well to understand our call to be missional as a call to find our own parish wherever God sees fit to place us, starting with our place of work.

On most days, we spend more time around our coworkers than we do our family members or neighbors. Yet we often overlook our coworkers when we think about becoming more missional in our faith. What might it look like to adopt a missional/parish view of the workplace?

First, it would involve changing the way we view and categorize our coworkers. We default into seeing our coworkers as little more than their job title or job description. There’s the IT guy, the maintenance guy, the finance gal, the boss, and others. I’m sure that you would be the first to let me know that you are more than just what you do at work. So are your coworkers. We normally only glimpse a small fraction of someone’s life when we work alongside them. A more missional posture toward your workplace starts by seeking to know your coworkers deeper than what they do for the organization.

Second, becoming more missional where we work means to become more multidimensional ourselves. If we want to get to know our coworkers as more than just the sum of the tasks they perform, we need to let others know us in the same manner. This means opening up to talk about things in life that happen beyond the office. Sure, we exchange pleasantries on Monday about the weekend, but that’s often little
more than niceties. Be willing to be known by your coworkers and find opportunities to let them glimpse into your life outside of work.

Finally, inhabiting our workplace as a parish must mean that we work for the health of our organization’s community life. A business or organization exists to deliver goods or services, often in order to make money, and each of us has a defined role in achieving that goal. But it also should exist to serve the common good for the benefit of some people group. We all have some amount of influence and we can promote a culture of care and service rather than merely the bottom line. The health of an organization is crucial for the goals of the company and the well-being of all involved. Morale in the workplace, the mutual care and respect for the whole person, a shared sense of purpose, all these contribute to organizational health. The responsibility for the health of your workplace need not rest at the top of the org chart. Advocate for and with your coworkers for a healthy work community.

Moving into a more missional view of the workplace means that you must see your job as more than just a job. The work you do is part of the “missio Dei”—the mission of God—and as such, it is a calling not just a career. The responsibility of the called is to live fully into the place the Caller has put them, with the people who inhabit that space. Finding meaning and purpose in your work is more than hitting the right metrics and numbers as required by your boss. It is understanding that the work you’ve been given is Kingdom work, that you labor for One whose aims and ways are higher than yours.

I’m sure you have a lot of ideas about what it might mean to inhabit your workplace as a response to the call to be missional in your faith. Maybe these suggestions hit on it for you, maybe they missed entirely. What do you think? How might your workplace be your “parish”? What would it mean to be missional at work?