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THE MARKETPLACE

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From the beginning, God created the cosmos that would reflect His glory and goodness (Ps 8:19). Although this creation has been marred by sin and its consequences (Gen 3), God continues a redemptive relationship with it through ongoing creativity and the sustaining of all things.

Man is to co-labour with God as seen in the first blessings and commandments given to Adam and Eve: “be fruitful”, “multiply”, “fill the earth” and “subdue it” (Gen 1:28). There is an implicit invitation to enjoy the creation as well as a responsibility to care for its wellbeing. God gives us the capacity to fulfil the task. Adam and Eve were to be involved in the process that would enhance the value of what God created. Work enables the translation of raw resources into food, goods and services for the benefit of mankind. As such, work is an activity of human co-creativity with God and therefore an act of worship—our consecration and giving back to God.

Business and the Cultural Mandate

The bible has much to say about ethical and fair dealing in work and business. It has instructional texts on what is pleasing to God in relation to business, employment, trading, using money, lending and so on. These timeless biblical instructions are applicable in the areas such as quality control, fair wages, good working conditions, reasonable return on investments, corporate social responsibility and the like.

Business provides opportunities for both the entrepreneurs and employees to use their particular gifts in service to others as unto the Lord. It sustains not only those who establish enterprises, but also those who are employed and those who benefit from the goods and/or services provided.

At the same time, work and business also give room for sinful practices such as exploitation of the poor, bribery, dishonest gain and greed. As a result of ill practices by a few, some may end up losing ability to support themselves and contribute to others

(family, community, etc.). In effect, it is a loss of individual dignity and is far from God's original design.

Christians are called to play a role in God's restoration process by helping to reclaim the inherent dignity and value of work and business. As ambassadors for God's kingdom in the marketplace, we are to be salt and light in and through business. We are to bless all peoples regardless of cultural background and countries through God-honouring business enterprises and reforming unjust economic systems. Therefore Christians are challenged to consider seriously the redemptive potential of business and employment as missions.

The Economic Model as God Intended

Historical Israel gives us insights into business practices, employment, God-given talents and skills.

In Genesis 37 – 50, Joseph experienced several “setbacks” in life: he was sold into slavery by his own brothers and was later imprisoned in Egypt due to false accusation. Nevertheless God overruled, Joseph became the head of government of Pharaoh's empire. His God-given ability to interpret Pharaoh's dream—seven years of bountiful harvest followed by seven years of scarcity—and his incomparable management skills saved both the nations of Israel and Egypt. Here we see one of God's major purposes highlighted: the resources of creation are to be harnessed to meet the needs of humanity.

God had set up an *economic model* for the wellbeing of the Jewish society. He established, among other things, the property rights, social responsibility, work and business ethics (Ex 21 – 23; Lev 25). For example, the Israelites were to keep the Sabbath as a holy day whereby they abstained from business pursuits in order to enjoy rest and restoration. (Hence, the concept of rest day in the labour law today has its origin in Scriptures.) Also, they should not “reap every corners” of their fields or “gather the gleanings” of their harvest so that the poor and foreigners could glean from the excess of an abundant harvest (Lev 19:9, 10). They should not hold back wages of their workers (v. 13b), neither should they take interest from the poor (25:35 – 36; Ex 22:25-27).

In short, God's people are to honour God in the midst of their labour and fruitfulness by obeying the limits and ordinances He has established. In so doing they will continue to enjoy His blessings and witness to the surrounding nations (Deut 26 – 28).

Underpinning these biblical legislations is the Jubilee (Lev 25; Deut 15). In the natural course of life, some people would become richer and some poorer. Poverty generally leads people to borrow money, even to the point of acquiring devastating debts for some. In certain countries, the poor, particularly the children and women, are vulnerable to human-trafficking; some are sold into modern-day slavery. But God has a radical solution to poverty.

Deuteronomy 15 explains in detail how godly values should be practised concerning labour, economics and relief for the poor. At the end of seven years, all debts should be cancelled and slaves set free. God promises Israel that “there will be no poor among you” (v. 4) if all Israel publicly and privately put into practice God’s principles of Jubilee.

To prevent extreme poverty and exhaustion of resources, God has declared every fiftieth year the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25). Not only the land should have a year of rest, properties sold should be returned to the original families and their descendants. Everyone would be given a fresh start. Redemption is to be demonstrated tangibly in the social and economic spheres of life.

God’s concern with economic justice and business practice is emphasized by the way He addressed the people through His prophets. Through Amos, He rebuked Israel for practising injustice and exploiting the poor. Workers had become so undervalued that poor were sold for a pair of shoes (2:6).

The overarching biblical idea of wellbeing is wholeness and peace in our relationship with God, with self, with each other and with the creation. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s promises of favour and restoration include both material and spiritual blessings. Justice and righteousness are closely linked to the wellbeing of an individual and the society as a whole. The primary application of the word justice (or righteousness) in the bible refers to corporate or social holiness in the form of business ethics, fair play, justice and the relief of oppression. The whole of creation is embraced, beyond personal responsibility and ethics.

The Marketplace Challenges

The 16th century Reformation recovered the doctrine of priesthood of all believers. It included labour as Christian calling to glorify God. The great revival movements of the 18th and 19th centuries promoted holiness and Christian service in all areas of life, including business and the workplace. The movement of God’s spirit during these last decades has reinforced the integration of evangelism, social concern, work and faith, thus emphasizing the redemptive potential of business as mission.

Nonetheless the Church today faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the Church is becoming irrelevant to the world not because Christians shun everything secular, but because they compartmentalize their lives, never letting their spiritual lives encroach upon their “secular” occupations and practices. On the other hand, “Christian occupations” and practices are being increasingly shaped or reshaped according to the world’s mould. For example, the number of church leaders attending management seminars on leadership and personality profiling is growing. Christian leaders continue to search for the best approach to do church. Some scholars, however, believe that the concept of the Kingdom of God has been gravely misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Dr Leong Tien Fock argues that our concept of God’s kingdom contradicts Christ’s explicit teaching.¹ But some may ask, did Jesus not say that the kingdom of God is “within you” (Luke 17:21), meaning “in your hearts”, and that it is “not of this world” (John 18:36)? Does this not mean that it is spiritual and internal (private/personal) rather than physical and external (public)? Howard Marshall in his commentary on Luke’s Gospel suggests, “Nowhere else is the kingdom regarded as something internal....Jesus speaks of men entering the kingdom, not of the kingdom entering men.”

Transformation of the Marketplace

Here lies the challenge of transforming the nation through the marketplace. The move from Private to Public and the role of faith in today’s society through work and business is ever more challenging. We will further examine the emerging roles for Malaysian Christians in the public square in the context of business as mission, transformational influence, Christian professionals, and faith-at-work movements.

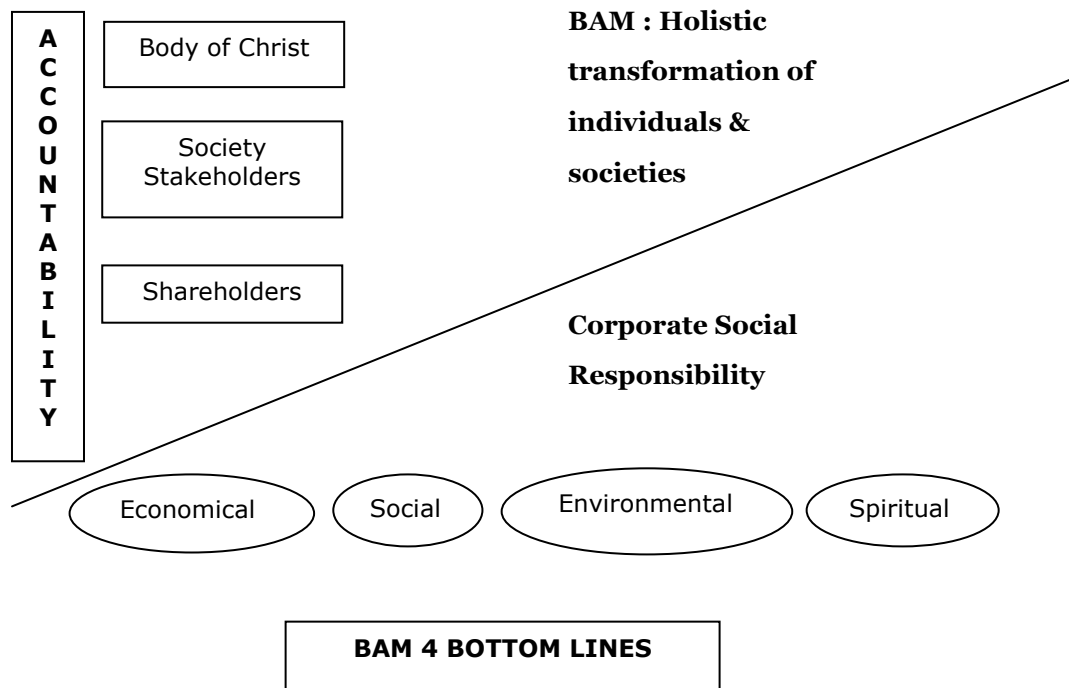
Business as Mission²

The story of Hans Nielsen Hauge, who was born in Norway in the late 1700s, is a classic example of societal transformation through business. Norway was a poor nation with no democracy. Religious freedom was limited. In response to God’s call, Hauge travelled throughout the country, establishing businesses as missionary initiatives and church planting. His work led to both spiritual awakening and entrepreneurship movement. His contribution to the development of modern Norway has been largely recognized and acknowledged even by the government of the day. The term “Business as Mission” (BAM) was coined during the period of Hauge movement.

A modern conceptual framework for BAM is based on “real, viable, sustainable and profitable businesses with a Kingdom-of-God purpose, perspective and impact, leading

to transformation of people and societies spiritually, economically and socially for the greater glory of God.”³ This can be shown graphically as follows:⁴

Business as Mission Graph (BAM)



BAM keeps four things in mind: (a) God is at the centre; (b) global is the scope; (c) people are the focus and (d) God’s glory is the outcome. Its bottom line is best expressed as AMDG or Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam – for the greater glory of God.

Transformational Influence

Business or employment in the marketplace can indeed be a transformational tool through the influence and persuasion elements it brings. This however must not be understated because Christians do bring with them the “aroma of Christ” (2 Cor 2:15) as salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13-14).

Body Shop founder, the late Anita Roddick,⁵ believed that business must regard “life as sacred and awe-inspiring,” and sought to combine business acumen and moral responsibility. Her workers took part in demonstrations and window displays publicized

campaigns on social issues. She herself spoke out vehemently against the purported evils of big businesses.

Donald E. Flow, owner and CEO of the Flow Automotive Companies in car dealerships in the United States, asks daily: "How is my service to Christ infused with the power of the Holy Spirit so that my life truly reflects the Kingdom of God?" Similarly, his daily prayer would be: "I pray that customers and employees might experience the aroma of Christ as we serve them, and that our service will be infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that we might have the discipline to look to others' needs before we look to our own. I pray for faithfulness to our mission as it relates to fulfilling our call to service. And I pray for forgiveness when we have failed to live faithfully to our calling."⁶

Closer to home in Malaysia, Tan Sri Dato' Francis Yeoh's achievements are remarkable. He was selected by Fortune Magazine Asia as one of the 25 Most Powerful Business Personalities in 2004, and appointed as member of Barclays Asia-Pacific Advisory Committee in 2005. Despite his successful business ventures, he has publicly and unashamedly declared his dependence on God. "It is sometimes tempting to believe that I deserve some of these awards but the truth is, God writes the script and is the author of my faith and my life and I'm just a humble, willing little pencil in His hand."⁷

There lies the sense of spirituality in everyday business—honouring God and honouring people. Admittedly, Roddick, Flow and Yeoh, being humans, have weaknesses and may not always be consistent in walking their talk. Yet, they have presented us some models of living out Christian faith in the corporate world.

The Christian Professionals

The number of those who desire to serve the Lord in ministry or in the marketplace (not necessarily in a pastoral role) is growing. Christian Graduate Schools with a mix of advanced academics and theology are in demand. Christian professionals such as lawyers, social workers, teachers, and businessmen are seeking help to relate their faith to their professions.

In October 2005, Malaysian CARE and Seminari Theologi Malaysia (STM) jointly pioneered a part-time programme on Graduate Diploma in Christian Studies in social ministry. In June 2006, a Certificate in Christian Ministry (Social Ministry) was introduced as a collaborative effort among STM, Bible College of Malaysia and Malaysian Care. The biblical based programmes cater for the social workers and caregivers at the grass-roots level as well as those interested in social work. As a social organization, Malaysian CARE recognizes the significance of formal education and training in biblical context, integrating faith and vocation.

Since the 1980s, the Graduates Christian Fellowship of Malaysia (GCF) has been conducting a series of Marketplace Education seminars, "Faith in the Marketplace."

Aiming to make the Sunday to Monday connection, a number of churches have taken the initiatives to spearhead similar programmes.

Faith-at-Work Movements

Mike McLoughlin believes that Christian fellowships in various economic sectors have a mandate to create a theology of work to reclaim the marketplace. Christians who are involved in the faith-at-work movement are encouraged to ask in their prayer: “Since you (God) came to seek and save that which was lost, how are you saving the work we do? Given that you want to reclaim our work to your economy, how then shall we work differently?”⁸ This involves thinking through the contemporary real-world situation of work and following Christ as He leads us in our work.

Os Hillman calls for bringing God to the “9 to 5 Window.”⁹ He believes that the workplace at our doorsteps is filled up with enormous potential for mission.

On 31 October 2004, the New York Times Magazine featured a cover story on Christianity in the workplace called “With God at Our Desks.” The article commented on a moral vacuum in the workplace because Christians had for too long practiced their faith on Sundays and left it behind during the workweek. This led to backstabbing careerism, empty routines for employees and CEOs pushing for profits at the expense of society, the environment and their fellow human beings, the article claimed.

Awareness on faith and work has gathered momentum in Malaysia as issues are increasingly being addressed. This emerging mission field—“9 to 5 Window”—has shown its presence in several strategic areas of the marketplace:

(a) Office Fellowships

In 1985, the Malaysian chapters of The Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship (FGBMF) decided to form a national body to coordinate activities and to develop its network. Its threefold ministry emphasizes (a) total Gospel for the total Man, (b) Christian Fellowship and (c) united spirit of harmony. The meetings are called the “Happiest Hour Meetings” because the late Founder President, Demos Shararian, claimed that the FGBMF people were the Happiest People on Earth.

Other office fellowships such as the Deloitte’s Office Fellowship in Damansara Uptown and the Heritage House Group (sponsored by GCF Malaysia) are only a few of the many in existence. Although the emphasis differs from one group to another, the fellowships serve the purpose of mutual encouragement in the office context and in the face of challenges at work.

One notable feature of such fellowships is that there tends to be visible unity among believers in the workplace. Divisive denominational issues pale in comparison to the common challenges Christians face in living out their faith at work. Common workplace

issues appear to foster unity, something which churches or denominations can take a cue from.

(b) Academia

The Fellowship of Evangelical Students (Malaysia and Singapore) has attempted to bring marketplace awareness to graduating students through its annual graduating students' retreats. Issues such as employer-employee relationship, business ethics and witnessing in the workplace are consistently discussed. This is also routinely carried out by overseas student movements such as the Overseas Christian Fellowship in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand where there is a large proportion of Malaysian students.

(c) Publishing

Whenever there is a move of God, people write about it. A number of publications, websites and email newsletters have been spawned, adding fuel to the marketplace movement. Amongst these are the NECF Research Commission Publications entitled the Watchmen Forum Series, Asian Beacon and Kairos magazines which regularly raise issues on leadership in the marketplace, workplace ethics and witnessing. In the mid 1990s, the GCF published a series of monographs on Christians in the marketplace with topics on (a) A Christian Ethical Framework, (b) Office Politics, (c) Being Witnesses in Our Workplace, (d) Sexual Harassment, and (e) Christians and Investments.^{10,11}

Of note is the Marketplace Ministry Paper co-written by Gordon Preece (Australia) and Wong Siew Li (Malaysia), edited by Timothy Liu (Singapore). It became the Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 40 for the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. The paper touches on (a) Spirituality at the Workplace, (b) Making Churches Market Friendly, (c) Re-envisioning Theological Education, (d) Witness in the World of work, and (e) Bridging the Gap between the Church and Marketplace Ministry.¹²

(d) Church

Several years ago, George Barna and Mark Hatch made the assessment that workplace ministry would be "one of the core future innovations in church ministry."¹³ It is in fact gaining momentum recently in Malaysia, but local churches appear to be slow in equipping their members. Many Christians are not prepared to apply biblical faith to work life. Worst still, pastors are not trained to disciple their congregation to become workplace ministers.

The California-based His Church at Work ministry is one of the newest pioneering efforts to equip the local church to focus on faith-at-work issues. The vision of its Founder and President Dough Spada is that churches will send out members to minister in the workplace, just as missionaries are sent to the foreign lands. "We help people

launch full-blown ministries with their church,” he explains. The reason behind Spada’s vision is this: “The spiritual renewal movements, particularly in Western culture, are almost always birthed and driven by all segments of a working society, not just the leaders.”

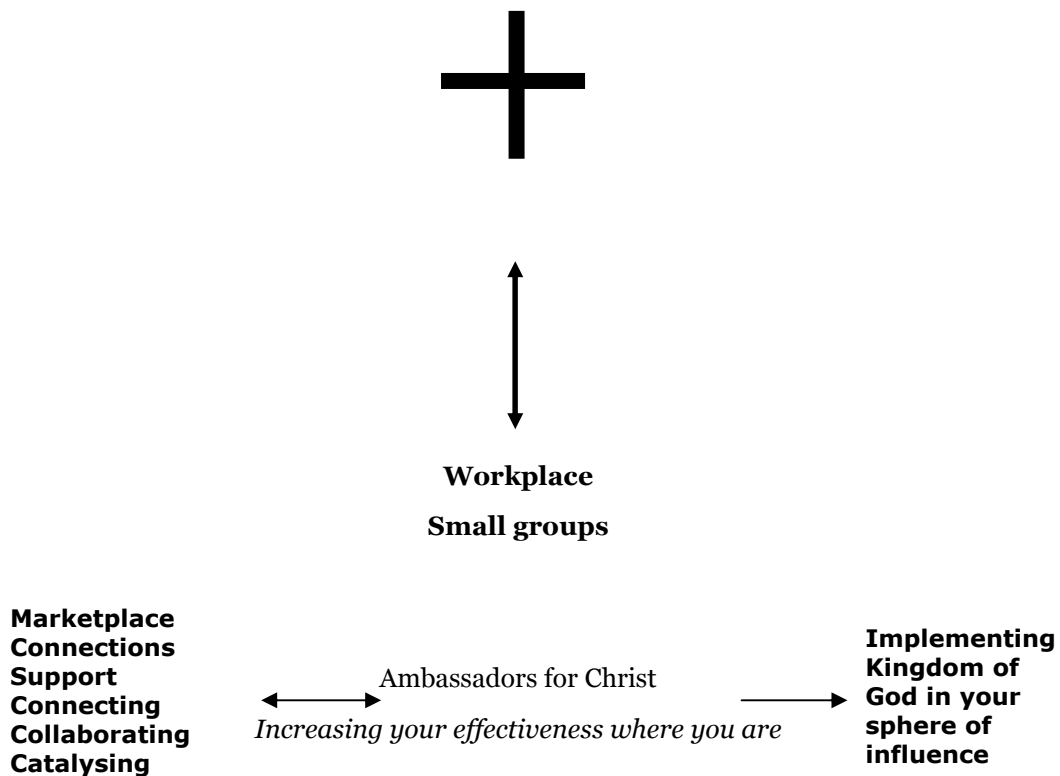
Dallas Willard notes, “There is truly no division between sacred and secular except what we have created. And that is why the division of the legitimate roles and functions of human life into the sacred and the secular does incalculable damage to our individual lives and the cause of Christ. Holy people must stop going into ‘church work’ as their natural course of action and take up holy orders in farming, industry, law, education, banking, and journalism with the same zeal previously given to evangelism or to pastoral and missionary work.”¹⁴

An added impetus to the challenges in Malaysia is found in initiating such movements in a Muslim dominated environment with the attendant sensitivities, legal restrictions, political mood and race relations.

Defining the Business of the Church

What then is the business of the church? Simply put, it is ministry in/to the marketplace. The church exists as a community of believers for three main reasons, namely, worship, discipleship and mission.

The mission of the church is to bring people to Christ, help them grow in discipleship and then send them out to bring the Kingdom of God into their personal spheres of influence. Therefore the business of the church is to build the Kingdom of God in the nine primary spheres of society: Business, Creative Arts, Education, Government/Politics, Health, Justice, Media, Religion and Sport. The effectiveness of these inter-relationships is best illustrated as follows:



However, it must be borne in mind that pride, fear of man and greed may become obstacles to the effective outworking of this business of the church. There are some successful businessmen or marketplace people who may not realise that they are in a spiritual warfare and hence, ill-equipped to fight the battle. What should be done is to disciple young businessmen and professionals to be marketplace ministers, just as we train and develop people to be pastors. Joseph is a good example. He was especially prepared to be the leader he was meant to be, an incorruptible prime minister in a secular world. What is urgently needed at present is intentional disciple where vocation is undergirded with spirituality. Ω

NOTES:

¹ Dr Leong Tien Fock, "In the World But Not of It", *Asian Beacon*, December 2005.

² Mats Tunehag, "Business as Mission: Holistic Transformation of People and Societies", *WEA Mission Commission Global Issues Summit*, February 2006.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Peter Heslam (Director of Transforming Business at Cambridge University), "Connecting with Culture : Anita Roddick", 28 September 2007, www.licc.org.uk/culture/anita-roddick

⁶ "The Business of the Church", *OnWatch, Australian Marketplace Connections, Bulletin 2005-07*, www.marketplaceconnections.com/archive/2005/business.htm

⁷ "Asian Business Leaders Award 2005 : Tan Sri Dato' (Dr) Francis Yeoh Sock Ping", www.cnbcasia.com/abla2005/finalist6.shtml

⁸ Mike McLoughlin, "Restoring the Marketplace to God's Economy by Transforming the Way We Work," http://www.icwm.net/articles_view.asp?articleid=12285&columnid=604, accessed 18/1/2008.

⁹ Os Hillman, *Bringing God to the 9 to 5 Window – How Faith Can Transform The Workplace* (Regal Books, 2005).

¹⁰ *Christians In the Marketplace, Volume 1* (Graduates Christian Fellowship Malaysia, January 1995).

¹¹ *Christians In the Marketplace, Volume 2* (Pustaka SUFES Sdn Bhd, September 1996).

¹² Gordon Preece & Wong Siew Li, "Marketplace Ministry", *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 40* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2005).

¹³ George Barna & Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point : Monitoring Cultural Shifts in the 21st Century* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), p.253.

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p.214.