
The Butcher, The Baker, The Candlestick Maker . . . Or Better Yet, The Pastor

Dana O'Brien, Pastor

Cross of Glory Lutheran Church, Homer Glen, Illinois

I have been a Lutheran all my life.¹ However, I have been a pastor for only the last eight years. For the twenty-two years before seminary, I was an attorney working for a corporate law firm in Milwaukee and specializing in retirement plan law.

I mention this because, since becoming a pastor, I have found many congregation members who seem to think “religious” work is somehow more pleasing and valuable to God than “non-religious” work.² Moreover, many also believe that ministry can be done only by religious workers and/or only in religious settings. What a regular person does in daily life may be helpful to others—it may even be very meaningful to the one doing it—but it is not ministry. I see these lines of thought as symptomatic of a deeper issue: the huge disconnect between what we do on Sunday mornings and what we do the rest of the week. As leaders in the church, we are called to do everything possible to bridge that divide.

Ironically, for most of my life I failed to see the connection between my faith and my work. During my twenty-two-year legal career, I very seldom understood my work as any type of ministry. I did not really connect worship on Sunday with my life during the week.³ Only after becoming a pastor did I realize that I had missed numerous opportunities to live my faith at work because I had not linked my call to live as a follower of Jesus to my job.

Do not get me wrong. Throughout my years in the law firm, I made every effort to be both a good attorney and a good person, treating my coworkers and clients with respect and honesty. Those with whom I worked knew I was a practicing Christian, and my co-workers and I would periodically engage in faith conversations.⁴

1. In my adult years I inadvertently switched from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod to the ELCA, but the basics of my Lutheran faith remained unchanged until seminary.

2. My personal experience runs counter to Barna’s conclusion, based on survey research, that: “Most Christian workers don’t see a strict spiritual hierarchy of professions or a divide between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ jobs. Two-thirds agree on some level that it’s clear to them how their own work serves God.” See Barna Group, *Christians at Work: Examining the Intersection of Calling & Career* (Ventura, California: Barna Group, 2018), 14.

3. On occasion, I would do something at the firm that seemed more “ministerial,” like participating in a Bible study or providing free legal assistance to a nonprofit or religious institution. I did see those things as ministry.

4. I found it somewhat disconcerting that all my coworkers were

Since becoming a pastor, I have found many congregation members who seem to think “religious” work is somehow more pleasing and valuable to God than “non-religious” work.

But while I tried to live my entire life by following Jesus’ commands to love God and neighbor, I still never explicitly tied what I was doing during the week to furthering God’s kingdom in our world. Indeed, like many, I functionally separated the religious part of my life, which occurred on Sunday mornings, with the remainder of my life during the week. On Sunday mornings, I was spiritually filled up, and that sustained me throughout the week until I could return the following Sunday for more God.⁵

I suspect there are others like me out there, people who see God only on Sunday mornings in worship. Such people, if they want to experience God more frequently, come to mid-week worship and/or take advantage of other church-centered activities. These are people who believe that in order to be called to God’s service, one has to work in the institutional church, because that is where God is.

Admittedly, somewhere along the line, I had heard of Martin Luther’s concept of the “priesthood of all believers.” But that too was limited to the context of Sunday morning worship. The “priesthood of all believers” meant that I could read scripture at worship, assist in distributing communion, and do those things that contributed to our congregation’s worship experience. However, the concept did not extend to what I did after I left the church

surprised when I told them I had decided to quit the practice of law and go to seminary. Apparently, I had not communicated the importance of my faith as well as I had previously thought.

5. Somewhere I had heard and taken to heart the analogy of Sunday worship as a gas station. We are like cars with gas tanks and at Sunday morning worship our tanks are filled up. We use up our supply of gas as we move through our daily week, and are near empty by the following Sunday. But worship fills us up again, allowing us to make it through another week.

building, and it certainly never applied to my job during the week.

My first few years in seminary did little to change this understanding. It was only when I stumbled upon what is now a pretty mainstream understanding of the missional church that my views of God and church were radically altered.⁶

For some time in seminary, I had felt I was missing something—that there had to be more to being a pastor than only taking care of the congregation to which one was called. But it was not until June 18, 2008, in a class taught by Kelly Fryer at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, that it hit me. A PowerPoint presentation on the missional versus the maintenance church introduced me to the idea of a very big God on the move out in the world. It sounds a bit ridiculous looking back on it now—and it is very possible that these concepts were being taught throughout my entire seminary career and I just was not picking them up—but on that day I began to realize both that my job as a pastor would be very different from what I had earlier contemplated and that my job as a lawyer was much more of a ministry than I had previously thought.

For me, the understanding that God is working in the world and inviting us to partner in that work was an entirely new way of thinking. No longer was God confined to a building on Sunday morning. No longer did I go to worship to “fuel up” for the week ahead. Instead, the challenge became one of training myself (and the congregations I have been a part of since) to look for God working out in the world, usually in surprising and unexpected places. I now seek to discover God bringing together little pieces of God’s kingdom all over the place by freeing, blessing, and making people whole in big and little ways. The most exciting thing I have learned is that this God, who certainly could do all this work by God’s self, invites us to help! Like a parent who loves to work with her kids, even when their participation will probably make the project go more slowly and make it a lot messier, God wants to work with God’s children simply because God loves to be with us.

Coupled with this new missional view of God came a corresponding change in my understanding of “church.” I no longer saw church as a building (a place) or as a worship experience. Instead, consistent with Paul’s many New Testament references, I began to see the church as people,⁷ which, of course, is a much more challenging definition. If the church is not a building or a worship service, then I do not “go” to church and correspondingly cannot “leave” church. Instead, I am church all the time, wherever I happen to be and whatever I happen to be doing. It becomes a question of what type of church I am going to be and how well I

6. See Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church – and What We Should Do Instead* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2015) for a good summary of missional theology as I understand and attempt to practice it.

7. This understanding of church is fairly well-delineated nowadays. But it was revolutionary to me back in 2008. I have since learned that Paul never used the word *ekklesia* to refer to a place or worship service. Instead, it always referenced a group of people. Moreover, one could replace “church” with “the priesthood of all believers” and arrive at the same meaning.

On that day I began to realize both that my job as a pastor would be very different from what I had earlier contemplated and that my job as a lawyer was much more of a ministry than I had previously thought.

will reflect the Jesus I claim to follow.⁸

If God is currently on a redemptive mission to bring pieces of God’s kingdom to earth (which God is!), and if we are church 24/7 (which we are!), then it follows that all that we do with our time is important to God and can contribute to God’s mission. At work, at the grocery store, when we attend our kids’ soccer games, and when we go for pizza afterward—each of these involves opportunities to see God working and to jump into the action.

Moreover, I now see the “priesthood of all believers” with a much more expansive lens, which is the lens I suspect Luther intended all along. The concept extends to all parts of our lives, since God is constantly inviting us to partner in all that God is doing in the world. Everything we do can be ministry; all of our actions give glory to God and bless others.

Ironically, it took becoming a pastor for me to realize that the dichotomy I had drawn between my faith and my work in the law firm was false. Fortunately, since becoming a pastor, I have met several congregants who understand much better than I how the priesthood of all believers applies broadly to all we do. I talked to two of them recently and learned how both see a clear connection between their faith and their daily work in very specific and concrete ways.

Scott owns a company that manufactures rubber and polyurethane parts for other industries. When asked about how his faith and job connect, Scott will tell you that God is involved in every aspect of his work. In essence, Scott sees his business as a resource entrusted to him by God to make a positive difference in the lives of others. He often prays over both his machines and the products he makes, asking God to help make the best parts possible and to bless those who use his products. In fact, I was blown away by Scott’s awareness of how what he produces can enhance the well-being of those who use what he makes.⁹

Scott also sees God’s hand in the people who walk through his door. On a number of occasions, he has hired someone primarily

8. Kelly Fryer, *Reclaiming the “C” Word: Daring to be Church Again* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 34–36.

9. Scott realizes that the better his products are, the more they can increase the productivity of the workers who use them, thereby making their jobs easier. He sees a direct link between the quality of his own products and God’s ability to bless others through them.

because that person needs a little help getting back on his/her feet. In addition, because he understands that one of the purposes of his business is to benefit others, Scott has even loaned his machines and space to other people to make their own products, and mentored them as they got things up and running.

Scott knows that God is also involved in the location of Scott's business and those who live in the immediate neighborhood. A few years ago, he considered moving the business, because the area was becoming less safe. After prayerful discernment, however, Scott concluded his business was needed right where it was. So instead of moving, he took steps to make the neighborhood more secure.

The close connection between Scott's faith and work reflects the way Scott lives his entire life. God works in him and through him to bless others. For example, when Scott bought a new truck, he was very intentional about getting one large enough to pull cars out of ditches during heavy snowfalls. He also buys extra blankets to keep in the truck for those situations. Scott sees himself as called to use the resources with which God has entrusted him to bless those around him. And he is thereby blessed as well.

While Scott sees God working through his business and the products he makes to benefit others, Carol understands her job as a series of opportunities to help others by building relationships. Working in a management position in the fast food industry, Carol passionately lives out God's call to make a positive difference in the lives of her co-workers and customers. She is very intentional about mentoring employees, many of whom are young people still in or just out of high school, who could use a stable adult in their corner. Not only does Carol help them with their work skills, but she also mentors them in life skills; she has assisted a number of them to advance both educationally and in their workplaces.

Carol also establishes relationships with customers who are regulars, working to make a positive difference in their lives. In addition, she preaches love of neighbor to those in upper management, as she endeavors to make them aware of how they, whether individually or as corporate decision-makers, can make a positive difference in their communities.

Like Scott, Carol's understanding of God's call extends to the whole of her life. What she does in business, she also does socially and through a number of charitable organizations at which she volunteers. For her, it is all about reflecting God's love through the relationships she can build with those around her.

While Scott and Carol understand differently how God is using them in their work, both share a strong desire to speak about the role God plays in their lives. Neither is pushy about their faith, but they are both more than willing to share stories of where they see God working and to credit God as the reason behind all they do. In addition, both Carol and Scott regularly pray about their work and for the people they encounter at work. They seek God's guidance in all aspects of their jobs and trust God to work through them to bless others.

When I look back at more than twenty years as an attorney, both in light of what I have learned since seminary and what I am learning by talking to others whose faith is integral to their

While Scott sees God working through his business and the products he makes to benefit others, Carol understands her job as a series of opportunities to help others by building relationships.

work lives, I realize that my own legal occupation was filled with many kingdom possibilities, some of which I received unwittingly and many I completely missed. Looking back, I wish I knew then what I know now: that God's call in our lives encompasses all we do, not just what we do on Sunday mornings.

As a pastor, I now understand my role as one called to empower others to look for how God works through us and with us, not only on Sundays but every day of the week. As such, I want my preaching, and the worship service as a whole, to communicate an expectation of seeing God working out in the world all the time, not just at worship on Sunday mornings. Coupled with that expectation is the recognition that we are all invited, called, and privileged to work with God in God's kingdom mission. As such, everything we do on Sunday should in some way prepare us to live as the missional church when we leave the building.

While helping congregations live out God's missional call through every arena of our daily lives is key for me, a big part of that includes how we understand God's involvement in our work lives. This involves trying better to connect Sunday with Monday, for example, in the following ways.

First, the congregation I serve periodically celebrates different vocations during worship. Like many congregations, we acknowledge farmers and those who work in agricultural occupations in the spring. In the fall we have a back-to-school Sunday, when we bless teachers and all those who work in educational settings. Recently we have expanded this type of recognition to additional occupations, such as accountants and financial workers before tax time and people working in the retail industry as they gear up for the Christmas holidays. One can creatively combine various occupations, so that at some point throughout the year, virtually everyone is invited forward to have their work blessed during worship.

Second, I am very aware of the language I use during worship and elsewhere. I try to never use the word "church" to refer to a building or worship service. And I try to avoid speaking in ways that emphasize the special or sacred nature of the church building or a religious vocation at the expense of all the other places and other vocations through which God is also working.

Third, in sermons and throughout the liturgy, I regularly focus on how God is involved in all we do in our daily lives. Periodically, I devote one or more sermons to the connection between our faith and our work. Occasionally, I also invite someone from

the congregation to speak about how they see God in their work or in other aspects of their lives.

Finally, I intend to start visiting my congregants at their places of work. I have always preferred to meet with people in their homes rather than in the church building, but I am now concentrating on workplace visits as well.

To help people become whole-life disciples of Jesus, it is key that we be able to integrate our faith and work. Such integration is not only theologically sound, but also gives purpose and meaning to our Monday through Saturday lives, deepening our relationship with the God who cares about all our waking moments.

As a pastor, I now understand my role as one called to empower others to look for how God works through us and with us, not only on Sundays but every day of the week.
