

## Commissioning Our People for the Workplace

by David W. Gill    [dgill@gcts.edu](mailto:dgill@gcts.edu)    [www.mockler.org](http://www.mockler.org)    [www.davidwgill.org](http://www.davidwgill.org)

We believe and we say that Jesus Christ is Lord of the whole life, including that one-third or so of our lives we spend working (or preparing/studying for work --- or looking for work). Sometimes we need a visible way to emphasize and even celebrate a theological truth like that. Here is a simple but profound and far-reaching addition pastors can make to the worship service: publically recognize and commission your parishioners for their workplace callings. You don't need to go back to seminary or take a class or add anything to your work hours to do this! Let me reflect briefly on *why* this is a good thing to do --- then give three examples of *how* to do it. This is not just an academic theory or classroom idea so I will be sharing from my own pastoral experience.

Already we call forward our missions teams, short-term and otherwise, for commissioning and prayer. We call forward and commission our deacons and elders. And of course our pastoral installations are often powerful occasions of commissioning and joint prayer. Our marriage and baptismal ceremonies include a commissioning, commitment, and prayer. Joining a local church often is accompanied by a ceremony of the same kind. Away from church, graduation exercises, "commencement," is where we are often given congratulations and also a challenge and a prayer. Boy Scouts and other clubs, service organizations, and fraternities provide other examples. It's a widespread human tradition, sometimes only a forgettable ritual but other times a powerful life passage.

Recognizing and commissioning our parishioners for the work they do during the week is a powerful message that their work matters not just to them but to their brothers and sisters and, above all, to God himself. They are called to serve the Lord in and through their work, to be an ambassador of another way of life and work. It is too easy to slip back into an attitude that my work doesn't really matter except maybe for my paycheck and the tithes to God's *real* work it enables. But this is bad, unbiblical theology. Our work does matter to God. It is our arena of service and love to God and our neighbors. It is not just about money.

Recognizing and commissioning our parishioners for their workplace discipleship changes *them* first of all. It is a powerful affirmation from the church leadership and the congregation, hard to forget when you go off to work the next day. It is also a powerful message to our younger people looking on as they are thinking about the meaning and direction of their own education and future work. It can be a powerful message to onlookers in the neighborhood or those at work who hear about it: "these people worship a God who cares about their work! What an amazing and unusual thing." Finally, it is a powerful message to pastors and church staffs: we are not the only ones doing God's work full-time!

Introducing this kind of commissioning into your church life and worship is not some kind of "magic bullet" or automatic formula for renewal. But I am convinced that it really can have a renewing effect on congregations and their pastors. My suggestion is that maybe one Sunday worship every three months we carve out ten or fifteen minutes during the congregational prayer time to include this commissioning.

At Trinitarian Congregational Church in Wayland, Massachusetts, where I recently served as Interim Pastor for a year, I alerted the congregation two weeks in advance (by newsletter and announcements in the service) that we were going to call our health care workers forward and pray for them during the service. Few if any were surprised then when I walked to the front of our platform during our congregational prayer time on an October morning (repeated in our second service that morning) and began:

"This morning we would like to recognize, commission, and pray for the health care givers in our congregation. Would all of you who work in this field in any capacity, and all of you students preparing for such vocations, would you all come up and stand in front of the congregation this morning so we can pray for you? If you are a doctor or nurse, a chiropractor or massage therapist, dentist, dietician, hospital administrator or orderly, pharmaceutical researcher or manager --- if you work in any capacity in health care, would you come up here now? In fact if you are between jobs but health care is what you believe God has called you to do, you come forward also." *[Thirty people came forward; I had no idea it would be so many].*

"I am going to pass around this portable mike and could you just say quickly your name, where you work, and what you do in health care." *[This took a few minutes but it worked well: "I'm Joe Smith, pediatrician at Mass General." "Eleanor Mays, orderly at Lahey Clinic." "Joanne Adams, CEO of Cancer Research Pharmaceuticals," "Eddie Ibanez, medical student at Harvard," and so on. What an amazing and diverse group. What a team! (Names and companies changed here). I continued:*

"This morning my friends we want first of all to thank you: thank you for hearing God's call and being willing to serve our Lord in health care. Thank you for studying and preparing for your work in health care. We are so grateful for your service in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We all want to remember very clearly that our God is a healer. The mission of our Lord was to heal as well as to proclaim the gospel. The Apostles were sent out to heal as well as preach. Throughout the history of the church our greatest missionaries brought medicine and health care as well as the gospel to the ends of the earth. Health care is at the very heart of the way of Jesus Christ. So thank you for being our health care team out there in a needy world.

"Second we want to challenge and encourage you to carry on, to be the hands of Jesus Christ reaching out with a healing touch to those who suffer. We don't want to do our work just like everyone else but to find the redemptive difference Jesus and Scripture can provide. We want to bring some "salt" and "light" to health care today. We want to challenge you to anchor your health care thinking and practice in the values and insights of Jesus and Scripture.

So this morning I want to ask if you will pledge, to the best of your ability, to deepen your approach to health care in the perspective of Jesus and Scripture. If you will make that pledge would you say "I will"? *[Health care folk: "I will"]* And those of you in the congregation, would you pledge to pray for our health care team as God brings them to mind, that God would bless, strengthen, protect, and use them in their work? Could you say "We will"? *[Congregation": "We will"]*

And third, we want to join together in prayer for you this morning. I'd like to invite our elders and any others who would like to join them to step up to the front here and lay a hand on one of our health care workers as a sign of solidarity as we pray. *[Dozens of people came forward and surrounded our health care team]* "Our Father, we thank you for each of these your servants. We pray that you will work your healing and caring purposes through their hands, their minds, their skills, and their efforts, wherever they are working on the health care team. Lord, would you give them strength. Would you protect them from

danger and harm. Would you provide for them and supply them with the resources they need for their work. Would you keep them from temptation and discouragement? Work through them O God, just as you worked in Jesus Christ our Lord. Help their colleagues and their patients to see Jesus Christ in them each day. Bless these dear servants of yours, our brothers and sisters, for we pray in Jesus' name, Amen"

One interesting follow-up to this Sunday: a week later two immigrants working as orderlies in a big hospital came up to me after the service very concerned: "Pastor Gill, we couldn't be here last week because we have to work every other week and can't attend church on those days. But we don't want to miss the blessing! Could we have the blessing?" I was only too happy to share the challenge with them and get a nearby elder to join me as we laid hands on these two dear brothers and prayed for them.

Three months later I called up all the financial folk: I followed the same three-part approach (1) thank you for going into this line of work; tell us who you are and what you do; this is God's work you are doing; (2) we want to challenge you to deepen your understanding of how Jesus and Scripture can bring a difference to the way you do your work out there; your profession needs this salt and light; will you pledge to try? And will the rest of you congregants here pledge to pray for our financial team out there? (3) we want to lay hands on you and pray. Here is the financial introduction:

"This morning I want to invite all of our financial workers to come forward and let us pray for you. If you are a CFO, financial advisor, accountant, or treasurer, if you work at a bank or insurance company, if you are a tax preparer or bookkeeper for a home business --- if you work in any way managing money or are studying for one of these professions please come forward. In fact if you believe this work arena is where God has called you but you are between jobs, you come forward also.

"I am going to pass around this portable mike and could you just say quickly your name, where you work, and what you do in the financial world."

"First of all, this morning we want to thank you for going into this profession, for studying and learning, for all your hard work in an industry that has been so full of temptation and scandal as well as providing people with such essential service and help. Our Lord had more to say about money, property, and wealth than heaven and hell or most other subjects. He really cared about your field. So this morning we want, secondly, to challenge you to deepen your knowledge and understanding of what Jesus and Scripture have to say about money, debt, loans, and all those related subjects. If you will pledge to do this .....

Three months later, again, I called up all the engineers, techies, and builders. It went something like this:

"This morning I want to invite all of our engineers and techies and builders to come forward and let us pray for you. If you are in any kind of engineering or technology or work for such a company, if you are an architect, a contractor or builder, if you work in the building trades or are a handyman, if you are an apprentice or hope to get work in this arena, please come forward.

"I am going to pass around this portable mike and could you just say quickly your name, where you work, and what you do in the technology and building professions."

"First of all, this morning we want to thank you for going into this field of work, for all of your study and your hard work. You know the Bible doesn't begin by saying 'In the beginning God preached a sermon!' No, in the beginning God designed and built a beautiful, amazing world. And that's what you do! It is

God's work to design and build and support useful and beautiful things. So thank you for going into this field. There is a lot of corruption and temptation and challenge in your work area and we are so glad we have you out there to represent the Lord and his way of building something.

So this morning in addition to thanking you for going into your line of work we want to challenge you to make a real effort to deepen your understanding of how to honor God and follow Jesus and Scripture in your work so you will be true salt and light. If you are willing to pledge to work on this will you say "I will"?

Three months later I called up all the teachers. You can easily imagine how to affirm teachers (college professors, public and private school teachers, administrators, coaches, home-schoolers, online educators, the whole team!) in light of Jesus' role as a teacher. I then finished off my one year interim term and the new pastor arrived. I am not sure whether he continued what I started (interim pastors must not meddle!). Had I continued I certainly would have had all the arts folk (painters, singers, poets, thespians, dancers, et al) come forward. I would have loved to call forward the food service folk (grocery store employees, farmers, chefs, waiters, et al). Infant and child care givers and parents could easily have their day (recognizing the true labor of bringing children into the world and caring for them!). Whenever I did these commissionings I tried to be inclusive so students and apprentices and the out of work were part of it. It might make sense some time to invite all those who are unemployed or underemployed to come forward for special prayer.

In a small congregation, there may be only three health care workers, one attorney, and five engineer/builders. I would still do the commissioning but maybe have these folk come up on the platform to be briefly interviewed by me before the commissioning and prayer. In a very large megachurch, the list of folk might need to be (with their permission) in the church newsletter (not announced live on the spot) and the people might need to stand in place around the sanctuary and be touched on the shoulder by those seated around them during the prayer. I don't see any reason why any church couldn't do this every three months indefinitely, eventually repeating and renewing the vocational focus from two or three years earlier.

Of course, all of this will acquire a great deal more impact if (a) the sermons note the marketplace implications and allusions of the biblical texts being preached on, (b) the Christian education program at all levels includes some basic attention to the biblical theology of work, money, calling, and related topics, (c) the pastors actually visit their parishioners in their workplaces once in a while, (d) not just our work crises but our work potential achieves a significant place in our private and congregational prayer life, and (e) the church newsletter regular features brief interviews or articles about the faith and work link.