

WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT: A discussion paper

Adopted by the Commission, November 1992

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FOREWORD

This report is presented to the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) and its members as an instrument for reflection, discussion and appropriate action. It is a study paper meant to raise some of the pertinent issues. As such, it is not intended to be a definitive document but a starting point.

The approach has been to start with particular problem areas that people in society face. It is up to the church and its members to explore and struggle through these issues, using their own experiences as a base point. Therefore, further questions will and must arise.

Next, an attempt has been made to place the issues into a social, economic and political framework, so that analysis might be possible on a broader scale. For example, it may be no use saying to unemployed youth that they should undertake other courses to improve their work chance if in reality there are no jobs.

Thirdly, the theological section provided is a basis to enable church members to consider how faith acts appropriately in their everyday working environment.

The final section explores possible responses, remembering that all believers are members of a particular society and of the church. No longer is it appropriate to ask, as is often done when problems arise: 'What is the Government going to do about it?', but rather as St Paul reminds us, 'faith must be active in love' (Gal 5:6). Therefore Christians must ask: How is my response of love to be demonstrated in the issues raised in this paper?

Work is one area which affects all people whether directly or indirectly. As Emil Brunner said, 'the problem of the meaning of work leads us right into the ultimate question of the meaning of life itself'.¹

For this reason the church can and should be a leader in this whole area.

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Secretary
Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions

November 1992

¹ Brunner, Emil, *Christianity and Civilization*. Vol II, p 57, Nisbet & Co, London, 1948

INTRODUCTION

What Is Meant By Work?

Various words are used to describe the human activity called 'work': labour, job, task, toil, calling, vocation, employment, etc. But each of these can have its own specific usage, and sometimes carry definite connotations describing a particular aspect of work.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives a primary definition of work as: 'expenditure of energy, striving, application of effort to some purpose'. This obviously can be applied to a whole range of human activity.

However, most people view 'work' and 'employment' as synonymous. The Australian Bureau of Statistics² defines 'employed persons' as all those aged 15 and over who, during the survey week:

- a) worked for one hour or more for pay, profit, commission or payment in kind in a job or business, or on a farm (including employees, employers and self-employed persons); or
- b) worked for one hour or more without pay in a family business or on a farm (ie unpaid family helpers); or
- c) were employees who had a job but were not at work and were on paid leave; on leave without pay for less than four weeks up to the end of the survey week; stood down without pay because of bad weather or plant breakdown at their place of employment for less than four weeks up to the end of the survey week; on strike or locked out; on worker's compensation and expected to be returning to their job; or receiving wages or salary while undertaking full-time study; or be returning to their job; or receiving wages or salary while undertaking full-time study; or
- d) were employers, self-employed persons or unpaid family helpers who had a job, business or farm, but were not at work.

Employment (being 'in work') is society's norm for all those not disqualified by reason of age or disability. Unpaid or voluntary work in the home or community is generally not regarded as 'real' work, and attitudes to the unemployed are still too often fixed in the stereotype of the 'dole-bludger'. Because of this, many people argue that a system which denies large sections of the community (eg up to forty per cent of youth, at present) the opportunity for paid employment needs urgent re-evaluation. Christians will also query an implicit identification of human worth and dignity with paid work, which relegates all other kinds of work to a second-class role in society. Clearly, we need to understand more fully the relationship between people, their work, and the perceptions of society at large.

Why Work?

Work arouses complex emotions and questions: Is it an inevitable part of the human experience — and if so, is it a blessing or a curse? Why does the most rewarding work sometimes sink to the level of sheer drudgery? How can

some people manage to find fulfilment in what to others are the most trivial of tasks? The answers lie in the nature of the world itself, of human creatures, and of the societies we create for ourselves.

The first chapters of the Bible present humans as co-workers with God in the maintenance of creation (Gen 1:26-30). This activity shares in the primal benediction: 'it was very good' (Gen 1:31). Adam assists God in the naming of the animals (Gen 2:19,20), and is given the task 'to till [the garden] and keep it' (Gen 2:15). Eve is designated Adam's co-worker (Gen 2:18). Only when the relationship with God is broken does work become a burden (Gen 3:17-19) — but even then it can retain a fundamentally positive role in human life (see, eg Eccl 5:18-20). For individuals in today's society, work is regarded as fulfilling several important functions:

- a) **Physical:** Labour, exercise and physical exertion is biologically necessary.
- b) **Economic:** Work provides the basic necessities of life and other material rewards. It is a means to attain certain ends.
- c) **Social:** In the performance of work people interact with others and develop relationships. There are opportunities for the expression and exchange of information, ideas, beliefs and attitudes. These react in turn with work factors to then influence the 'non-work' aspects of life. This cycle is a dynamic process.
- d) **Status:** Work, and in particular the type of work a person does, is accorded a level of worth by society in general. Some work then acquires more status (often with associated benefits) than others.
- e) **Psychological:** Work has an important role in the formation of a person's self-esteem, identity and satisfaction in life.
- f) **Structural:** Work demands a certain amount of time and energy, so imposes a sense of order, security and structure in people's lives.

All of these elements contribute to a sense of personal wholeness, and the links between material existence, health, and inner ('spiritual') well-being are widely recognised today.

There is no doubt that paid employment plays a significant part in meeting these human needs. However, we can also ask whether it should be the only consideration: what we are seeking is an understanding of everyday work which does justice to the whole range of activities undertaken by all members of society!

For the Christian, all human activity — our everyday lives, including the most common household tasks, no less than highly-paid employment — has become the stage on which a new relationship to God ('faith') and our fellow-creatures ('love') is now played out. The Christian's calling ('vocation' - Latin: *vocare*, to call) is a gift from God, and offers Christ's own dignity to all people, regardless of the specific occupation pursued.

How Do People View Work?

Despite these positive factors, there is no doubt that often attitudes in this area are ambivalent, ranging from work being a necessary evil to something

that gives life purpose and meaning. Many people undoubtedly experience their work as a curse (see Gen 3:19) and as oppression, at the same time as others endure the hardship and loss of dignity that being denied work brings. Personal identity ('who I am') — or lack of it — is all too often tied up in 'what I do', or in the status attached to a particular job.

Two approaches to the role of work and its relation to the worker should be borne in mind:

- a) The external, extrinsic or objective aspect of work. The worker is regarded chiefly as the agent of production, and the focus is on the significance of the end result — the value of the product of the worker's labour, and the reward (wages) received in return.
- b) The internal, intrinsic or subjective aspect of work. The focus is on the person of the worker, and on what the work does to or for her or him as a human being — the work (or its material reward) is not regarded as an end in itself.

A healthy society will function with both aspects of work in their proper balance. A regard for human dignity (based on either secular or religious values) insists that the second aspect is given at least equal weight with the first, especially in an age of 'economic rationalism'.

In summary, two ideas — the created dignity of the person as the subject of work, and the call ('vocation') to glorify God and serve our neighbour through all everyday activity — can help to form a Christian approach to many of the issues raised by our current concerns with questions of work and unemployment. Their practical application will be presented in the individual units of this study; a theological summary (with suggestions for further reading) is contained in Section Three, followed by suggested responses to be considered by the government and church.

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² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Labour Force, Australia*, ABS, Canberra, 1982, p1.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What makes work good or bad or indifferent?
2. What makes work meaningful for an individual?
3. What is meant by job satisfaction?
4. To what extent do our attitudes affect our work and work our attitudes?
5. Can the attitudes and beliefs we bring to our work make a difference?