



Working One's Faith

by Jonathan Aitken

NAPLES, FLORIDA AND ABERDEEN, SCOTLAND are a long way apart geographically if you are speaking in these cities on consecutive weekends. Yet they can be theologically close, as my two recent conferences demonstrated, since they were both focused on the calling of lay Christians in corporate and community life.

The conference in Florida, titled "The High Calling of Our Daily Work," is a biennial forum organized by the Howard E. Butt Foundation. I have not missed it for the past decade because it is far and away the finest Christian weekend I get invited to owing to its interesting participants, profound discussions, and superlative hospitality.

Over the years at Laity Lodge, I have met a galaxy of senators, congressmen, ambassadors, CEOs, investment bankers, network TV commentators, best-selling authors, and other fascinating leaders from all walks of life. They are united in their shared faith, their willingness to be transparent about it, and their admiration for Howard E. Butt. He is the co-owner of the Texas supermarket chain HEB Stores. In his philanthropic life he has been the pioneer and patriarch of vocational leadership among the laity for more than half a century.

The transparency of the Laity Lodge Leadership Forum has to remain confined to its location, far from uncomfortable surroundings of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, because the event is conducted under the Chatham House Rule ordaining that nothing said at the conference may be attributed to the speakers and discussants. Yet even under these understandable restrictions it is possible to report the flavor of the Laity Lodge message.

The basic idea Howard Butt champions is that it is possible to be just as influential a Christian leader in the workplace as in the pulpit. Indeed a certain chafing against the boundaries of church simmered

below the surface at our last forum, although its Bible teaching sessions, conducted by the legendary Seattle preacher Earl Palmer, were about the most stirring combination of theology and humor I have ever heard.

During the plenary sessions at this year's Forum, we listened to speakers such as James Brown, the three-time Emmy Award winner for Outstanding Studio Host for NFL coverage on both the CBS and Fox networks; Howard Dahl, CEO of Amity Technology, the North Dakota agricultural machinery company that has broken all records for exports to Russia; Bonnie Wurzbacher, senior executive vice president of Coca Cola; and Timothy P. Shriver, chairman and CEO of the Special Olympics. At previous Laity Lodge weekends, memorable addresses were given by South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Harvard psychiatrist Armand M. Nicholi, PepsiCo CEO Steven S. Reinemund, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Head of Policy Advice at No. 10 Downing Street, Lord Brian Griffiths.

What all these big-name speakers had in common was a willingness to talk openly about how they applied their faith to their daily work. In today's corporate climate, in which the rising tides of secular political correctness too often silence Christian voices, responses to this challenge are a mixture of the inspiring and the inventive. This year I most enjoyed the talk by Joel Manby, CEO of the theme park and holiday homes group Herschend Entertainment. He described how he hands out commitment cards to all his 3,000 employees, urging them to live their lives by the Christian virtues so eloquently listed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13.

If this sounds like Christian witness at its cheesiest I am giving a wrong impression of Laity Lodge, for it is actually Christian communication at its most stylish and thoughtful.

One of the key ingredients of style is the music provided by two gifted artists—Stephen Clapp, who teaches violin and chamber music at the Juilliard School, where he was dean for many years, and William Phemister, professor emeritus of piano at Wheaton College. This duo's astonishing repertoire of short pieces, which they perform before each session, sets a tone of such excellence that I always start to wonder if the speakers can possibly match it. Yet mostly they do, and so does the quality of the discussions in the small groups that meet after the plenary sessions.

THE STRONGEST LINK between the Laity Lodge and Aberdeen conferences was the search for answers to the practical question: *how should we live our faith in the workplace?* In Aberdeen, the Houston of the Scottish oil industry, an outstanding response came from the region's police chief, or chief constable, Colin McKerracher. Besides chairing the conference, he offered the unusual vision that a police department's duty is not just to catch criminals but also to rehabilitate them—often with the help of local Christian volunteers. Since most churchgoers, let alone cops, are none too assiduous at getting down to the gritty tasks of turning released prisoners into law-abiding citizens, you might have thought that the McKerracher message would be equivalent to seed falling on stony ground. Not so.

Aberdeen is an isolated city on the northeast coast of Scotland whose new wealth from North Sea oil is ameliorated by an old-fashioned ethos of civic values and Presbyterian virtues. It also has a crime, drugs, and homelessness problem of which only half the answers are provided by the professionals such as the local authority's social services, the probation and prison officers, or the police. As a result there are serious gaps in the system. The worst of these gaps is that out of every 100 prisoners released from the area's three jails, 60-plus reoffend and are usually back behind bars within two years. This revolving door of crime has not been slowed by a creaking criminal justice system that is under severe financial pressure these days from cutbacks in government expenditure.

Against this apparently dark background a beacon has been lit by Chief Constable McKerracher and his allies. They believe that shortage of government funding may be the friend and not the enemy of rehabilitating offenders and preventing crime. The conference I attended was groundbreaking because it

was the first time any UK city had pulled together its community leaders, its police and prison chiefs, and its faith-based voluntary organizations to coordinate a local strategy for the rehabilitation of offenders.

Some of this strategy draws its inspiration from the pre- and post-release mentoring schemes first devised in Sugarland Penitentiary Texas by Charles

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W. Colson of Prison Fellowship and the then state governor, George W. Bush, in 1997. Known as the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (IFI), it has now been replicated in several jails across the U.S. and the world. In all of them reoffending among their released prisoners has fallen between 20 and 50 percent. And who does most of the work inside these institutions and during the subsequent months of mentoring and caring for ex-offenders? Committed Christian volunteers from the laity—exactly the kind of people who attended both the Howard E. Butt conference and the Chief Constable Colin McKerracher conference. Perhaps Naples and Aberdeen are much closer than they look when it comes to getting real results from the high calling of our daily work. ✪

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