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## Honoring God and Developing People: ServiceMaster, Bill Pollard and the Heart of the Corporation

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**Honoring God and Developing People  
ServiceMaster, Bill Pollard and the Heart of a Corporation**

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*Abstract: This study examines the model of faith-business integration developed at ServiceMaster, and relatedly Bill Pollard's role in developing and implementing it. My argument is that ServiceMaster's celebrated 4 corporate goals functioned both as a mission statement defining the core of the business, but at the same time also as "philosophy of Christian ministry" infusing their core business with the Christian faith. As used, the 4 goals functioned as a faith-business integration model in its own right, deserving a place alongside other models and thereby deserving reflective analysis and evaluation. To that end, this study examines how the model came to be and how it functioned. Further, attention is drawn to how well within the model the two dimensions (Christian faith and business mission) coinhere under the real-world business pressures encountered at ServiceMaster. Particularly here the study will mention the strategic business choices made by Pollard's predecessors, Pollard himself, and to a lesser degree, the board. My purpose with the study is to show the model's promises and potential shortcomings to assist students and Christians in business seeking ways to integrate their faith with their business.*

In *Thank You for Being Late* Thomas Friedman investigates the wholesale disruption to work and the economy that today's leaders find themselves navigating. The accelerating and exponential pace of technological growth has created what Friedman describes as a "supernova" resulting in our work, the economy, and society itself entering a state of perpetual change and "creative destruction." Work, businesses, the wider culture, and indeed all of life are being radically transformed.

From an interview with Dov Siedman CEO of LRN Friedman quotes:

The world is not just rapidly changing, it is being dramatically reshaped – it is starting to operate differently [in many realms all at once.] And this reshaping is happening faster than we have been able to reshape ourselves, our leadership, our institutions, our societies and our ethical choices (Friedman 40).

Leaders today have an awesome responsibility. Yet, C. William (Bill) Pollard, former CEO and board chair of the former Fortune 500 company ServiceMaster has been singing this refrain for decades. Yet while always the case, today's changing world of work exponentially increases the challenges that organizational and business leaders face. When businesses fail, financially, socially and morally, not only shareholders suffer. Lives across society are disrupted and whole communities often decimated.

Business leaders today face profoundly human, moral, and we may say spiritual challenges. Their responsibilities include but must go beyond simply making a profit or creating wealth. The values they embody, positive or negative, shape their business and business culture, but also increasingly the whole society.

ServiceMaster and Bill Pollard, the focus of this study, were ahead of the curve understanding that leaders and their organizations have wider, human responsibilities, and that their challenges are both moral and spiritual in nature. Pollard grasped that his actions as a

leader shaped people's lives for better or worse. For him therefore, it was important that his strategic institutional choices as well as those made daily at a more mundane level be shaped by values. These values in turn grew out of his fundamental beliefs about human nature, people's needs, and ultimately his beliefs about God. Looking forward, in a 1997 speech titled "Leadership in a World of Change," Pollard prophetically set forth a vision of values driven success that resonates for many in today's post-2008 world. He argued that the "measure of my success as a leader and as a Christian cannot be limited to the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the soul of the business firm that is the people I work with." (Pollard 1997)

Pollard knew he must take seriously the complexity of the human condition, including the person's need to find meaning, purpose and dignity in their work. Following Peter Drucker, Pollard believed therefore, that business leadership is in fact, a liberal art. Likewise we will see that for him, it is also spiritual, a theological art. Businesses shape people and culture both within and outside the organization, and with globalization, increasingly the world. Pollard was correct. Leaders have an awesome responsibility, but they also have an awesome opportunity.

### **The Purpose and Process of This Study**

This study examines the integration of Christian faith and business at ServiceMaster, and relatedly Bill Pollard's leadership and role within that process. As with each of leader of the firm before him, Pollard sought to integrate faith and business on a personal level. Yet at ServiceMaster, faith was more than an individual matter. In what follows I explore how Christian faith was structurally designed into the organizational DNA and mission of the business itself, including its approach to profit. Growing out of its previous manifestation, from its founding as ServiceMaster in 1947 to the beginning of the twenty-first century when Pollard's leadership ended, the firm did more than encourage and make room for a person's faith commitments. ServiceMaster was more than a faith-friendly firm. From the start, the uncompromising commitment of its leadership was that the company itself would belong to God and serve God's greater purposes in the marketplace. This, we shall see was accomplished primarily through holistically developing its people.

In examining ServiceMaster's and Pollard's approach to faith integration, we probe the strategies pursued for keeping God central to the business plan. Particularly important is how the company's rapid expansion allowed Pollard to creatively re-appropriate the company's four primary objectives, in a way that eventually created what I believe became a model for faith and business integration that may be, with creative adaptation, of use to leaders today.

The crux of this study becomes an analysis of how this innovative and integrative model was successful by and large in furthering ServiceMaster's business and faith mission, but also, it seems to me, how structurally the model in the context of real-world business constraints became pushed toward a breaking point. This tension left open the possibility that, in other less adept hands, ServiceMaster's core business and faith mission could become compromised and even lost. For after Pollard left the organization, ServiceMaster at a corporate level relativized, even sidelined its God directed orientation, softened its people development focus and changed the ethos primarily toward profitability. At the very least, I will point out a few back-door-hacks that ServiceMaster's approach left open toward that possibility. I believe that it is important for today's leaders hoping to adapt this or a similar model to recognize these

potential “hacks,” or I suggest by way of analogy, “coding problems.” The point is to show how a feature, under certain real-world conditions, can become a bug, and then to consider whether those potential hacks can be eliminated, or at least worked around.

For leaders seeking help discerning a model for faith and business integration through this study, these conceptual questions should frame their reflections:

- In the wider marketplace, should faith integration primarily be located on the level of the individual exercising faith within the workplace (a faith-friendly model), or can Christian business leaders seek faith integration at the deeper level of the business model itself? What if it is a publicly traded company?
- If on the level of the business model, how might Christians go about a deeply transformational approach to the integration of faith, work and business that shapes the organization’s objectives, shapes people through the institutional culture, and lends itself to business sustainability?<sup>1</sup>
- How might an approach to faith-business integration further both the mission of the business and the mission of God in the world seamlessly?
- What might be some unintended side effects and pitfalls leaders must anticipate with the particular approach adopted to faith-business integration?

### **The Leadership Challenge – Pollard on Integrating Faith and Business**

Reflecting his own business context and the particulars at ServiceMaster, Pollard’s thinking as reflected in his papers, speeches and books generally coalesce around the following questions:

- How might leaders infuse values and shape their organizations in God honoring ways that enable people to discover and navigate a personal sense of vocation toward finding dignity, meaning and purpose in their work?
- How can leaders help those in their organizations also develop spiritually within and through their work in a non-imposing and business appropriate way?
- How can Christian leaders in a pluralistic marketplace integrate their own faith with their business model organically and in a way non-coercive to others?
- How can a company (especially a public company) honor God in all that it does?

The average Christian business leader might find it mystifying to know where to begin when seeking answers to questions like these. Likewise, pursuing and maintaining faith and business integration, in times of rapid change and disruption is an especially daunting task. Genuine faith integration is complex. For the sake of integrity, faith must align with the product or service offered as well as working processes and be good for the people and the surrounding culture. The gospel seeks holistic transformation of people and culture. The integration must also be theologically robust. Shallow approaches to integration distort and pervert the faith, especially in the public’s eye, as well as potentially undermining the business by disillusioning the workers and presenting a poor witness in public.

Pollard knew that simplistic approaches offering motivational spiritual clichés or bible-verse strap lines will ring hollow and co-workers and customers will see such attempts for what they

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise, important would be how the chosen model, through its products and services effect the wider culture and society and also its environmental impact.

are, shallow and potentially manipulative. The same results when trying to apply biblical principles as a kind of guaranteed “steps to success” financially.

But even at a more sophisticated level, an approach to integration based primarily on applying biblical ethical principles, while undoubtedly part of the integrative process, is insufficient on its own. Ethical codes and rules do not lead to workers finding a deep and meaningful sense of vocation. Nor do they lead to a deep levels of employee commitment to the organization’s mission. A “rules ethics” approach certainly does not transform a workplace, a society or a culture.

What is needed I believe, and what we will find at ServiceMaster especially through Pollard’s leadership is a more systemic and organic approach. True integration must grow from the specifics of the business as well as the theological character of the Christian faith / gospel itself. It also must emerge from the unique “voice” of the leader both to ring authentic and penetrate the corporate culture deeply. To that end, business leaders and theologians would do well to work together. A synergy is required between the experience and wisdom of the business leader seeking intentionally to integrate Christian faith, and, the specific skills of constructive theologians who understand deeply and know precisely how to use the tools that faith offers and requires for the task. Christian leaders in business might even consider hiring skilled theological consultants and coaches. No two leaders or organizations are exactly the same. No single integrative model can serve as a one-size-fits-all or off the shelf solution. Interestingly, ServiceMaster had a CEO prior to Pollard with some ministry and theological training. While not wanting to overstate this, we will see that he was central to developing the company’s four objectives as a kind of mission statement, including a direct reference to God therein.

### **Pollard’s Spiritual Concerns**

In *The Tides of Life: Learning to Lead and Serve as You Navigate the Currents of Life* Pollard relates how a cancer diagnosis prompted him to write a book charting the course of his life and reflecting on the choices he made. Framing the book in this way raises the spiritual questions about life’s meaning and how we choose to live. “So what is this life all about? What is the purpose and meaning of our lives and of our work?” (Pollard 2014, 18) “We have the freedom to make choices about the way we live, but we are not always in control of the circumstances or decisions that may limit the scope or quality of those choices.” (Pollard 2014, 18) We cannot personally control the choices of others, change economic tides or powerful technological currents. Our choice lies, Pollard suggests, in how we navigate these and related life altering events. Pollard’s way of integrating faith at ServiceMaster is a case study in navigating life and culture altering events.

Pollard draws upon sailing as a metaphor for recounting his life and leadership journey. A sea going sailor needs to know, read and navigate the tides. “But a sailor also needs some wind to fill his sails – another force he experiences but does not see or control.” (Pollard 2014, 22) “A luff in the sails – that is a flapping of the sails in the wind – is not a sound of confusion but of hope and opportunity.” (Pollard 2014, 22)

The metaphor, as he uses it, builds from the philosophical and existential questions he raises about life’s meaning, and is at its core spiritual – the “dimension that calls for the

development of character and a conscience that encourages us to respond to the needs of others.” (Pollard 2014, 18) This in turn raises the question of God.

“We have choices to make about how to respond to this spiritual side of our humanity that are in our control and will determine who we are becoming and where we are going.” (Pollard 2014, 19) Another way to talk about this spiritual aspect of our human existence, especially in the context of our work is to discuss a sense of personal vocation. Used by both religious and non-religious people, vocation or calling is a much larger concept than the job we do, our profession or career, although it includes these things. Calling/vocation raises a deeper question of who we are, who or what is calling or drawing us and the meaning and value of life holistically, including the projects we undertake. It suggests that a worker and a leader is uniquely drawn or called to some deeper purpose and, through their own personal distinctiveness, to make some contribution beyond themselves to the world and to others.

In his memoirs, Pollard skillfully raises these spiritual issues of calling and vocation using a poem by Gordon MacDonald to contrast two different calls, or ways of living. (Pollard 2014, 23-29) One way focuses on finding our meaning in power, the things we control and the things we own. The other finds meaning in our relationships, what we give, and in our obligations to others – our sense of responsibility and of being owned by God. Spirituality for Pollard is people finding purpose in connection to and serving others, and primarily in relationship with and serving God.

These two principles, serving God and others, are central to Pollard’s spiritual vision, and his approach to business leadership. For him business and spiritual vision are inseparable and ultimately the source for ServiceMaster’s faith integration model. Business leadership therefore, is about developing people because we are committed to honoring God. Profit makes this possible but is not an end in itself.

### **ServiceMaster’s Integration of Faith and Business**

After recovering from a serious work-related accident in 1944 and having spent time during recovery in focused spiritual reflection, Marion Wade, (a Baptist) developed a deep resolve to integrate his faith with his business. He wanted to be a Christian ministering in the marketplace by means of his business. Sensing God leading him to expand the moth-proofing and carpet cleaning company he had started in 1929, in 1947 Wade invited the preacher Ken Hansen (a Wheaton college religion major and also a Baptist) and salesman Bob Wenger to join him, founding the company that became ServiceMaster. Wade had been personally encouraging Hansen for some time to consider redirecting his leadership and ministry into the marketplace.

According to Pollard, Wade “had the vision not only to start and grow and a successful service business, but also to bring his faith out of the pew on Sunday to his work on Monday.” (Pollard 2014, 43) Wade believed his new company belonged to God and wanted to build it to last far beyond his lifetime. To this end, Wade sought to incorporate his faith into all aspects of his business. He believed that “if you don’t live it, you don’t believe it.” It was likewise Wade himself who determined to hire non-Christians at ServiceMaster, hoping to influence them toward Christ through the business itself and how it was run.

In 1954 Ken Wessner (a Presbyterian) joined the leadership team. He expanded the company significantly and in the late 1950’s took ServiceMaster public. This was an interesting

move for leadership that also wanted to keep honoring God central to the business's purpose. The leadership team knew that going public would mean that the ownership and ultimate direction of the organization was no longer totally in their hands. Going public meant that ServiceMaster was up for sale every year. Interestingly, it was Wessner who placed the first Muslim in leadership with the company's expansion into Saudi Arabia.

As the company grew, to keep it on course Wessner and Hansen found it necessary to make explicit the company's mission and formalize thereby its commitment to God. Together they formed a statement that would reflect and direct the company's mission and purpose. There is no doubt that the personal Christian faith commitments of the company's leaders Wade, Hansen and Wessner had already molded the identity of the organization. In this respect, Hansen and Wessner were not establishing as much as codifying the company's values, distinctiveness and goals.

As good leaders do, they encouraged suggestions from workers in the company. Together the shared values of the organization shaped ServiceMaster's mission statement:

- To honor God in all we do
- To help people develop
- To pursue excellence
- To grow profitably.

These four goals were engraved in stone 8 feet high on a 90-foot long and 18-foot high marble wall at the company's headquarters in suburban Chicago.

In 1977 Bill Pollard (a Plymouth Brethren) joined ServiceMaster and embraced and came to embody these the four objectives, as he was already committed to the values they represented. In this way, his leadership was an authentic synergy between both who he and the organization where. As the new leader, he spent considerable time with both Wessner and Hansen learning from as well as gaining valuable advice from them that helped to preserve the corporate culture and ethos. As Pollard later reflects, "I witnessed the integration of faith and the work of ServiceMaster firsthand. For twenty-five years, I had the privilege to participate in the leadership of the company and to inherit and build on the objectives and culture that my three predecessors has established." (Pollard 2014, 43) Under Pollard's leadership (and continuing afterward under Carlos Cantu a Roman Catholic) ServiceMaster made several large and significant acquisitions, seeking to bring additional already established companies into the ServiceMaster team. Pollard spent considerable effort throughout this time with Wessner and Hansen, from whom he sought continued wisdom and council) helping them get on board with the strategy for expanding the business.

While not academically trained in religion like Hansen, Pollard (also from Wheaton College) nevertheless was quite adept and creative both as a business leader and as a person of faith in the way he came to elaborate and use the four corporate objectives. How he understood and interconnected the four objectives would serve well both the mission of the business and of their shared Christian faith. Both became seamlessly interwoven into the tapestry of ServiceMaster particularly through Pollard's creative leadership. As we will observe, it is no stretch to construe Pollard's development of the company's mission as a theologically shaped business model.

According to Pollard, the four objectives represented the values that were to shape the culture and drive all business decisions. He often said that "they provide a foundation, a



reference point for action.” They likewise provide the “assurance that our common starting point never changes.” (Pollard 1998) That starting point was honoring God.

To honor God in all that we do is of course, a broad and rather non-descript goal that to be meaningful and useful requires some definition, both in terms of who or what we mean by God and how God, who or whatever one understands God to be, is to be honored. As we will see in more detail shortly, eventually this goal would be required to do some heavy lifting to specify the heart of the company’s business, but also require a bit of elasticity as to who one understands God to be. Given ServiceMaster’s founding and history the reference to God obviously meant the God the Christian faith – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All CEO’s (though not all leaders) up to and including Pollard held this view personally. As the company grew and expanded internationally and acquired more companies, Pollard received a lot of pressure to remove or downplay this objective and its historic Christian meaning. How did a reference to God fit in a publicly traded company? For operating in Israel, Saudi Arabia, China and even England this became a genuine pressure point.

As ServiceMaster expanded, Pollard began to emphasize that this first objective served conceptually as the basis for all they did and particularly for their commitment to the second objective of developing people, which was understood to be the essence of the business. In this respect, honoring God, in whatever way new leaders and employees thought about God, became the rationale for the company’s commitment to developing the whole person and not simply the person as a “pair of hands.” Honoring God Pollard said, leads to the “dignity and worth and potential of every person” made in God’s image. (Pollard 1998) Furthermore, retaining the first objective opened up and quite naturally led to the “question of God” and allowed Pollard to unobtrusively share his understanding of God, personal faith and himself as a whole person, giving the ServiceMaster culture its distinctive ethos. According to Pollard

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a public company’s purpose statement... the principle that can be embraced by all is where it leads us, and that is to the dignity and worth of and potential of every person. For us this is fundamental to the purpose of the firm. For me as a Christian, it provides not just an opportunity to talk about my faith, but to live my faith. (Pollard 1998)

As was vitally important to Pollard also, the first objective used in this way allowed him and ServiceMaster to “affirm the role of faith without imposing it while doing business.” (Pollard 2014, 43)

To help people develop meant that the person was more than just the job they did at ServiceMaster. People mattered as whole persons and ServiceMaster played a role in affirming their humanity and helping them grow in every area of their lives. As Pollard stated on many occasions, the company’s responsibility was to develop the whole person “and not just a pair of hands.” (Pollard 2014, 41) Pollard says: “Frankly when you view the person as only a production unit or something that can be defined solely in economic terms, motivational or even incentive schemes have a tendency to become mechanical or manipulative.” (Pollard 1998) “It was about treating people as the subject of work – not just the object of work – about recognizing their dignity and worth – as created in the image and likeness of God and so to raise the question of God and His role in their life.” (Pollard 2011)

Training and developing people included helping workers find personal meaning and purpose in their work, thus giving them dignity and a sense of personal vocation. This was especially important given the nature of the work at ServiceMaster. Cleaning personnel are often invisible, ignored while they work. Janitorial employment is often treated as amongst the lowest and least meaningful forms of labor. A deep sense of purpose and personal dignity in such jobs are often hard to find. At ServiceMaster however, hospital cleaners were not there just to clean floors. Through their work they played a vital role personally and professionally in establishing a context of cleanliness needed for patients to get well. ServiceMaster employees, through cleaning, came to be treated as integral to the medical profession, as vital to the healing process. They were fundamentally a part of the medical vocation. To provide an excellent service/produce and for the worker's own sense of dignity and purpose, it was essential that this be internalized.

Pursuing excellence then, the third objective, meant that the services that these workers and that the company provided would need to be of the highest quality. Obviously, this is good business, meeting the needs of the customers in the best possible way. Equally, or even more importantly, it served the main purpose of the company, as a means to develop its workers. Excellence led to a sense of worker pride and satisfaction, and ultimately to dignity. Workers could take pride in the work that they did, knowing that done with excellence actually served the genuine needs of others and made a difference. And in serving others, workers honored God. The first three objectives, honoring God, developing people and pursuing excellence are therefore interdependent, each leading from and to the other.

The Fourth objective, to grow in profitability was likewise interdependent. ServiceMaster took a different approach to profit than many other companies, especially Fortune 500 and public ones. Profit was important and necessary for shareholders and for the sustainability of the business of course. More importantly however, for the business's mission, it was necessary for growing the company so that they could develop greater numbers of people in more locations. Profit was not the sole or even primary purpose of the business, as the four objectives made clear. In fact, while indispensable, it wasn't even an end goal of the company.

In the vast majority of his speeches Pollard explained how ServiceMaster's business model worked, explaining the company's identity, and particularly its approach to profit. He relentlessly preached that the "first two objectives are end's goals. The second two are means goals."

This consequence and meaning of ranking the goals in this way cannot be overstated. It focused ServiceMaster's organizational priorities and became the actual business plan, clarifying the core business of the company. So construed, this "means to ends prioritizing" was the heart of Pollard's model of faith and business integration and encapsulates his leadership philosophy. Developing people was the primary, though not only way to honor God, and honoring God was the basis and rationale for developing people.

Profit and excellence were essential to ServiceMaster but not as ends in themselves. They matter for what they made possible, growing the business. And the purpose of growing the business was to develop increasing numbers of people, thus and thereby increasingly honoring God. Shareholders matter, but as a means to an end of developing people holistically

both professionally and spiritually – in terms of their work and personal skills, their vocational sense of meaning and purpose, and ultimately in terms of their eternal worth.

Pollard wanted everyone associated with ServiceMaster and especially every worker and leader to have the opportunity to reflect upon the question of God and their own eternal value. The first objective was not “simply an expression of American evangelical thought, a reflection of a denominational belief, or advocacy of the free-enterprise system wrapped in a religious blanket. It was, instead, a response to the fundamental question of life... is there a God and, if so, what is my relationship to Him.” (Pollard 2014, 95-96) Throughout his speeches and writings Pollard quoted C.S. Lewis. “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.” (Pollard 1998)

The objectives thus, according to Pollard, “provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong... They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals...” (Pollard 1998) Pollard was clear that this creative prioritizing of the goals, ultimately leading to honoring God, was not “a standard that can be used as a simplistic reason for financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation, a reference point for action. It is a living set of principles that allow us to confront the difficulties and failures that are all part of running a business, with the assurance that our starting point never changes.” (Pollard 1998)

### **ServiceMaster – A Values and Faith-Based Company**

During the years of Pollard’s leadership, ServiceMaster as a company was criticized on many counts and not surprisingly from opposite directions. Some, as mentioned, complained that ServiceMaster a public, Fortune 500 company referred to God in its objectives. Some Christians on the other hand criticized ServiceMaster for not being Christian enough, for example, for not being more explicitly Christian in their hiring and partnerships (which by the way the law forbade.) Criticisms like these can create a straight-jacket for Christian leaders seeking to integrate faith into an organization in the public square seeking to be more than simply generically “faith-friendly.”

Of course, Pollard, was unquestionably Christian as was each leader that preceded him. Likewise, the values that these leaders’ both embodied and espoused grew for each out of their Christian faith. Interestingly the CEO’s up until and including Pollard had been a part of the evangelical tradition and associated with the faith-based Wheaton College in Illinois. While this trajectory was to change with the appointment of the chief executive following Pollard, Carlos Cantu who was Roman Catholic, the values and faith basis driving the four goals up to and including Pollard persisted even when transitioning through four leaders. Was the Wheaton styled evangelical ethos a contributing factor? It is hard to know how deeply Cantu imbibed the ethos for his illness cut short his leadership. Either way, it was a remarkable achievement for a public company and a company that hired non-Christians as both workers and leaders to have retained the four goals and distinctive ethos for as long as it did.

When Marion Wade said that his company belonged to God there was no doubt that he was making a bigger commitment than simply saying his company would be values based, faith-friendly or seek to espouse generic Christian moral principles (that even non-Christians might

share) in the company's operations. Dedicating or committing an object, including a company, to God means sanctifying it, specifying it for God's use. It means that the company become not just a values-based company, but a certain kind of values-based company. It becomes a faith-based company. Its values derive from its faith orientation. It is "set aside" to use the biblical and theological language. That is what dedication does. Wade "gave" his company to God. Going public complicated but did not change this commitment, though it did mean that it belonged to others (investors) as well, even others who were not Christian, committed to a faith basis or the values derived therefrom. Though belonging to God, the company was they realized when making the decision to go public, was up for sale every year.

Of course, given this reality, under Pollard's leadership a more careful and creative approach to the objectives became required. The company continued to expand rapidly through increased acquisitions and expand overseas. The challenge came when newly acquired employees, mid-level managers, board members and C-level leaders came under the umbrella of the company while not necessarily sharing the same beliefs as Pollard and the previous leaders. Or if they did more or less believe in "God," they may not have understood those commitments or their application in exactly the same way. How was ServiceMaster to stay focused on both the unique faith-based corporate mission with rapid and diverse growth? How was it to keep God central in pluralistic contexts without imposing faith?

This becomes increasingly complicated when your partners begin to come from contexts where, for example, the very word "God" is understood through different eyes; with a Muslim understanding of God as in the middle east, or where atheism is official public policy as in China. How then do you keep your business on task (developing people) and your faith-based mission and identity intact? How do you insure as Pollard intended, "that our starting point never changes?"

Strategically, Pollard responded to these needs and pressures by drawing upon and emphasizing an important strand within his evangelical faith tradition. That is, encouraging people to reflect on "the question of God." Yet how could he do this in an unimposing manner and within the context of a publicly traded corporation? The tactical innovation within the four goals was to allow the specific referent to which the word God pointed in goal number one become an open "question." Pollard and other senior leaders remained clear about their own Christian faith. When asked about the company's mission and objectives, and particularly the reference to honoring God, Pollard always took the opportunity to explain his own personal faith and was clear that by God he meant the God of the Christian faith. For others, who God is and one's relationship to that God became an open question, an opportunity for personal reflection and even decision. It became an invitation to explore the spiritual dimension of one's own life and to ask ultimate faith related questions.

Did this tactic compromise the organization's values? While Pollard was consistent, did this tactic alter the corporate ethos or brand, changing the company's historic identity in relation to the Christian faith? ServiceMaster, of course, was not a church or a Christian missionary or NGO. organization. Nor was Pollard comfortable referring to it as a "Christian company." Christian as an adjective for a corporation like ServiceMaster was inappropriate, he believed. Nevertheless, the question remains, did the essence of ServiceMaster change when the first goal of honoring God became tactically broadened into an opportunity for spiritual reflection, functioning as a personal question soliciting a personal response?

One could argue that in an important sense honoring God by means of a personal invitation forced the company to press deeper into its Christian faith-based DNA. When your first corporate goal becomes an invitation for others to consider their life and work in relation to God and ultimate/eternal questions, that clearly indicates a stronger faith push and not a retreat. And strategically, as an open question alongside Pollard's own faith story, ServiceMaster became evangelistic, and arguably did so without being intrusive. What this tactical move did, we can observe through how ServiceMaster operated in practice, was enable Pollard to keep God as foundational to the business plan in and for increasingly pluralistic contexts. It also allowed him personally both to proclaim constantly the company's mission and purpose (in order to explain the objective), and subtly to invite people to consider their own lives in light of eternity. We find here a creative integration of faith informing the essence of the company as well as emphasizing an opportunity for exploring faith at a personal level.

At its essence, at the very level of its DNA, ServiceMaster sought to embody values and pursue a business model grounded in the Christian faith while also making substantial profits for both sustainability and growth. It is hard to imagine the organization being ServiceMaster without its Christian history, faith-based essence and structural identity through the four objectives. Indeed, after Pollard's leadership ended for the second time, having assumed leadership again following the untimely death of Carlos Cantu, ServiceMaster as a corporation progressively sidelined references to God and removed it from its fundamental objectives.<sup>2</sup> ServiceMaster's ethos and mission was thus altered by the mid 2000's and it ceased to be the company it was. The potential "hacks" that could have opened the door and made space for this unraveling to occur will be considered shortly.

There were few Christian leaders seeking to do something as nuanced as ServiceMaster during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pollard, intentionally or simply as a matter of course in responding to changing situations and needs proved to be a trailblazer, effectively building a model of faith-business integration from four existing goals that reflected and guided the actual company he led. This is not to say there were no other Christians seeking to integrate faith, work and business at the time. There were. But there were not many approaches as sophisticated as ServiceMaster's. Nor were there the host of networks and conferences like have today to draw upon to help Christians in business integrate faith so deeply. ServiceMaster's model of faith-work and faith-business integration stands out, and in many respects set a standard.

### **Developing People ServiceMaster's Mission**

Pollard's use of the company's four objectives was intentionally both the commitment to develop people - treating them as ends in themselves rather than means or machines to generate profit – and simultaneously a commitment to open up the space for personal reflection and conversations about God. As seen, the commitment to develop people holistically, including their spiritual dimension, was the second of the firm's two interwoven end goals. Pollard came to see and emphasize emphatically that the second objective was

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<sup>2</sup> Even though vestiges of the four objectives remained in places, for example on its website, for all practical purposes reference to God ceased to be a part of the ethos, the corporate culture and the operational priorities.

dependent upon and necessarily grounded in the first, to honor God. This move was both theologically creative and strategically innovative.

In itself, it is not theologically or morally groundbreaking to believe that people, made to be in God's image, should be treated as ends in themselves rather than means to the ends by others.<sup>3</sup> However, using a Christian doctrine in the business context specifically to shape the business purpose and ethos of a for-profit public company was, on the other hand, innovative.

Firstly, for ServiceMaster it meant that neither cleaning (the service) nor profit (the result) were the primary business. As Peter Drucker pointed out once in an executive board meeting, ServiceMaster's primary business was not making money, or even cleaning hospitals. It was developing people and doing so through its services and related products which were made continually possible through growing profits. Secondly, grounding this people-focused business mission in Christian faith, a theological anthropology (the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*) provided a coherent rationale for the company's holistic focus (including peoples spiritual development) within the working process such that the working itself was the point and not simply an instrument of some external end. As such, God / theology needed to be the starting point. Thirdly, the expanding contexts for the business internationally and growing numbers of acquisitions required Pollard to defend why God was in the goals and elaborate how the goals together functioned to create the mission and establish the required corporate culture to achieve those goals. This obligated Pollard, as a leader nurturing the company's culture and values, to talk openly about and explain his faith as bound up with his work, but most importantly, to do so without imposing it awkwardly upon others. His faith gave him his view of human nature, others needed to reflect on that which transcends the business (God and spirituality) for this purpose. To accomplish this, Pollard offered for God to become a question for each in the corporation to ponder for themselves. This of course, required the God referent in the goals to be non-prescribed for others (non-imposed). This was an extremely creative approach and arguably required both for keeping the firm true its God oriented identity and mission, and for being a public corporation that was welcomed overseas in pluralistic or other religious settings. It was also, as I have shown, a creative approach to Christian witness and evangelism.

Christian faith in this way was integral to the corporate mission but not forced upon others, while the shared value for all remained that one be committed to developing people. Pollard's theology/beliefs committed him and others at ServiceMaster to developing people (regardless of their religious beliefs) for the common good. Likewise, in accordance with Christian belief in common grace, by developing people ServiceMaster's franchises, subsidiaries and overseas corporate affiliates would, in fact be honoring God. Regardless of what one concludes about God, when in practice people are valued and developed, God is honored. God is sovereign over all creation in this respect and honored broadly when people are treated as ends and not just means, are fully developed and flourish.

Pollard's faith integration model thus allowed the company to take root, enculturate and endure in pluralistic settings, in contexts where Christian faith is in the minority and even

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<sup>3</sup> Nor is this an exclusively Christian observation. Jewish faith likewise concurs. Likewise, seeing people as the subject of their work and not objects, a view Pollard echoes, was foundational to Marx's anthropology and concept of alienation.

restricted. The model remains grounded in a practical Christian faith, and also importantly, offers a rationale for the Christian faith to those outside it for consideration. As a model for faith and business integration this is profoundly sophisticated. It is missional both in business terms (developing people and sustainability) and with regard to the deepest ethos of Christian faith itself. Missiologists exploring strategies for contextualization or Business as Mission (BAM) leaders seeking models should consider seriously this non-imposing and values-faith-based approach to Christian presence and business operation. The model concurrently serves the greater public good by developing people, creating wealth for workers, shareholders and societies and by providing a needed and important service to clients – all while naturally raising the question of God.

### **Choices Creating Back-Door Hacks?**

Its numerous positive features notwithstanding, Pollard's / ServiceMaster's faith integration model operating within the complex contexts of real-world business and changing social and economic conditions, shows, as any model does, a few inherent vulnerabilities that are potentially open to a back door "hack." Here it seems to me, the law of unintended consequences comes into play. While no one of the choices listed below would on its own necessarily constitute a pressure beyond what the model itself could tolerate, when coalescing, the combined strains may have proven too much. The purpose here is not to argue for causes, any definitive or even ancillary reason for ServiceMaster's ultimate shift away from its faith-based roots. Rather, it is to explore the model itself more closely. By here highlighting the choices made by leadership we are able to identify and frame question (listed at the end of the study) that business students and business leaders may want to consider when seeking to learn from the ServiceMaster experience.

By employing the concept of "hacks" I am suggesting that positive *features* of ServiceMaster's faith-business model can become *bugs* when changing circumstances lead to choices that stress the model. These stresses expose some inherent vulnerabilities within the model itself. By *features*, I mean the brilliant synthesis and use of corporate goals that Pollard, building upon his predecessors, had achieved. These offered a delicate fusion of faith and business integrating faith in a non-imposing way. Yet these same features it seems to me, when competing real-world business pressures impinged, called for choices to be made. The choices taken expose inherent tensions or *bugs* within the model itself. I am arguing that these bugs opened a backdoor to potential hacks threatening the structural integrity of the model itself, and thus the very nature of ServiceMaster's business.

What I perceive to be the most consequential choices I list here. These are potentially corporate culture changing strategic moves made by the board and executive leadership throughout the company's history (many preceding Pollard's leadership) to grow and operate the business.

These choices include:

- 1) Hiring non-Christians as workers and developing and promoting them to leadership from within the company – ServiceMaster's foundational leadership and personal development model.
- 2) Taking the company public and thus placing the company "up for sale" each year to whomever chooses to invest, Christian or not.

- 3) Expanding the company through acquisitions and bringing within its fold these well-established companies with different corporate cultures, goals, and values – companies not structured explicitly to honor God or that approached or understood profit and people development in exactly the same way.
- 4) Expanding overseas into contexts where the Christian faith-based values and rationales’ might be either misunderstood or unwelcome, and appointing leaders in those contexts who understood God differently or not at all.
- 5) Leadership succession decisions and choices made by the board, specifically those made following Carlos Cantu’s his untimely death. (Here the challenge is finding the next CEO whose personal values and personal ethos aligned deeply with the corporation’s and not simply someone who agrees to maintain them.)

These choices in themselves and in the abstract are neither bugs nor hacks. Yet these same choices in the context of and when operating within and upon ServiceMaster’s faith-business integration model can become so. Notice here I am making some rather sharp distinctions – distinctions between the model itself and the strategic decisions that ServiceMaster made when employing the model in real-world contexts, and, a distinction between the model in the abstract and the model when facing the particular real-world conditions encountered at ServiceMaster. To be clear, I am suggesting that the choices made by ServiceMaster’s leadership expose inherent tensions or *bugs* within the model itself. These bugs opened a backdoor to potential hacks threatening the structural integrity of the model itself, and thus the very nature of ServiceMaster’s business.

These observations are not a criticism of Pollard or his predecessors’ leadership choices. Rather, my theological observations to follow concern the relationship between the model and choices made to highlight the potential structural or coding challenges inherent within the model. The role of a theologian in this context is not to be an armchair critic of leaders making complex and consequential business choices beyond the theologian’s grasp. Rather, it is to help other and future business leaders explore this faith-business integration model making them aware of its vulnerabilities under certain conditions. That the coding challenge involves a theological feature becoming a bug when pressed multi-directionally by real-world choices is simply to acknowledge that no model works perfectly under all conditions. A bug, therefore, does not imply a bad, broken or unworkable model. Rather, bugs show us that particular coding accomplishes specific tasks that under other conditions may impede other important functions.

### **A Bug: A Theological Coding Challenge**

As we have seen, Pollard liked to raise the question of God. He likewise believed strongly in the “dignity and worth and potential of every person” as made in God’s image. (Pollard 1998) Following on, a person is an end in themselves rather than simply a means to an end. People are thus worth developing holistically to their full potential. In this respect God is not functioning as a question to consider but rather as a premise upon which to build a vital core business value and consequently the value that spawned ServiceMaster’s actual business of developing people.

Notice the difference between God as premise and God as an open question. In the first instance God and the specified theological construct of the *Imago Dei* function as a



foundational principle. In the second, God functions more loosely within the goals/model as an unspecified question and invitation. Yet, when presented as a question, the notion of God can only accomplish the heavy lifting required by the Image of God doctrine when and if one either presupposes or comes to a common or similar conclusion to Pollard and his predecessors about that God.<sup>4</sup> The goal of honoring God as the basis for developing people bounces between an interrogative and an imperative. But when needing to do the heavy lifting, how can they? Of course, both must cohere equally for the model to function coherently. Yet, how can God provide the specified foundational premise for the corporate mission of developing people and be unspecified at the same time? God left as an open question lacks the “content” to do the heavy lifting required in the first instance.

Now, as long as these two strategies within the model are not pressed, and for whatever reasons a common view of human worth and dignity is shared, both uses of “God” seem to coalesce as a function and not become a bug. As long as they are not pressed, I say, for theologically and methodologically this tactic hangs together rather tenuously.

If these different uses of the first goal are pressed however, the features of the model itself become bugs and leave an open back-door hack.<sup>5</sup> This coding tension within the model itself, when pressed not just by questions of internal coherence but additionally by ServiceMaster’s choices as outlined above, highlights how even the most innovative models for faith-business integration like this one, can become problematic. The delicate balance, and some less sympathetic might suggest “sleight of hand” involved is hard to maintain even in the most able hands. In the hands of leaders less skillful than Pollard, or leaders who don’t fully embody theologically the dual ethos at an intuitive level it is doubtful that the model can sustain the intended balance and integration.

What we find, is that faith-business integration is complex and probably more dependent on the person of the leader than on any model per se. Models cannot simply be taken off the shelf and applied simplistically as if one size fits all. Nor do circumstances in real-world business lend themselves to using a model as a “technique” or formulaic approach. ServiceMaster worked under leadership like Pollard’s, it seems to me, because a model and the zeitgeist of the leader and other leadership aligned deeply. Pollard and other leaders did the best they could in their contexts while shaped and limited in significant ways by their own strategic choices and circumstances beyond their control.

### **The Pressure of Profit over People**

In turbulent and unstable times when growth slows, a business’s tendency will be to focus on profit, the bottom line of sustainability. At these times, profit will threaten even at a company like ServiceMaster to become the ultimate goal of the business. In today’s unstable world, pressures of survival push in this way. In the case of ServiceMaster, survival and profit

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<sup>4</sup> In cultural contests where classic monotheism prevails (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) there may be enough common ground theologically to sustain ServiceMaster’s theological anthropology and particular commitment to developing people the way that it did. Nevertheless, monotheistic religions differ in their conceptions of God and thus ultimately differ to some degree in their concepts of human nature created in that image.

<sup>5</sup> Theologically, as well, the notion of the meaning of image of God and how it promotes human dignity is both rich but fraught with complexity. Exploring this and how theologically ServiceMaster’s may have been untenable in the long run is the subject for another forthcoming future study.

had never been primarily for the sake of shareholder profitability. Rather it was to make possible the business of developing increasing numbers of people. Valuing people Pollard argued is primarily what made the company what it was, including profitable, and therefore served shareholders best. Amid disruption however, whether economic slowdowns or even conversely rapid growth, the pressure on a company is to begin to view the work/person primarily as a means to their own survival or means to growth for growth's sake (profit). Thus, a person becomes primarily a means to an end economically. This tendency is something Pollard himself understood full well and sought tenaciously and always to avoid. Having God as the starting point was his anchor to guarantee that a person never becomes "just a pair of hands."

In pressured times though, people can cease being the subject of work and become an object of work construed primarily in terms of their utility value, especially for shareholders.<sup>6</sup> This dehumanizing tendency is in every way antithetical to Pollard's leadership philosophy and what was ServiceMaster's integrative faith and business model.

It can be argued that the reversal of the means and ends goals is exactly what ultimately happened at ServiceMaster once Pollard was no longer in leadership or on the board. This did not happen during Pollard's leadership, for though the door had been unlocked by the tensions within the model itself, Pollard did not open it. Why not? Was it that Pollard like his predecessors came from a particular ethos within evangelical Christianity? Was it Pollard's depth and intuition growing from his own personal faith that held together the conceptual tension within the model in such a way as to keep the organization's primary goals and values in focus and in correct order – thus keeping the company on course?

After Pollard's exit from ServiceMaster God functionally became a much vaguer concept, and ultimately irrelevant to the business goals. While a worker's personal faith might still be acceptable in the corporate context, and possibly even justified as making the worker a better person from the perspective of their character, institutionally Christian faith was no longer foundational to the corporation's DNA. Thus, it no longer was obvious why at the level of institutional identity reference to God or faith was necessary, or indeed where it might fit. While it may be economically advantageous and socially desirable within a corporate culture to have workers developed to their full potential (including spiritually), there was no longer any structurally necessary reason, Christian or otherwise for doing so. Utility then trumps principle or values.

When utility reigns supreme, it is not a huge leap to conclude that profit really is the ultimate end goal, and people as well as God/faith can be a part of the means to that end pragmatically, even if optionally. This however is a complete undoing of the entire history, ethos and institutional identity of ServiceMaster. It reverses the order of the objectives as Pollard came to use them and makes what use to be the end goals subservient at best and at worst purely optional. Whatever business this becomes, it is not the same business as ServiceMaster.

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<sup>6</sup> Theologically, this same concern that people remain the subject rather than object of work is shared and unpacked quite effectively by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on human work *Laborem Exercens*.

### **Back Door Hacks: Questions to Consider**

Framed with these considerations, we close this study by returning to questions raised by the business choices made in relation to the business goals and model. That is, we return to questions pertaining to the back door open to hacks and offer an extrapolated list to ponder. Which single or combination of issues seems most decisive for transforming the positive features of ServiceMaster's model of faith integration into bugs? Which possible conditions or choices may have pressed the model's inherent tensions most decisively? Which choices in relation to the model seems to have become the most consequential serving as hacks? Was it...?

1. The conceptual tensions within the model itself?
2. Marion Wade deciding to hire non-Christians?
3. Ken Hansen taking the company public?
4. Ken Wessner putting non-Christians into leadership?
5. Bill Pollard acquiring companies that had not grown up in the four objectives?
6. Carlos Cantu whose Catholic background might not have allowed him to fully grasp or maneuver with the "evangelical" nuance that Pollard embodied?
7. Was it the cancer that took Carlos Cantu out of leadership before another leader was ready to be promoted from within?
8. Was it a 1964 government ruling that made it illegal to discriminate in hiring and promotions?
9. Was it the fact that even if none of these were decisive, it would simply have come apart at some point, as was the case in scripture with the succession of kings, when the Kings over God's people failed to correct previous mistakes or make needed changes?
10. Was it a miracle that ServiceMaster lasted "on course" as long as it did or just good leadership, or both?

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