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Bridging the Gulf (London)

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**INSTITUTE OF DIRECTORS
London, England
October 26, 1999
“BRIDGING THE GULF”**

**C. WILLIAM POLLARD, CHAIRMAN
THE SERVICEMASTER COMPANY
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS**

I am delighted to be with you tonight and share some thoughts with you about relating our faith with our work.

Who are we – and what do we really want out of this life of serving customers, making money, and satisfying our shareholders.

Work has been described as a curse by some, and as a calling or a gift from God by others. It can become addictive – people do become workaholics and for some it can be a drudgery to be avoided at all costs.

John Wesley once wrote that there was an inherent tension between productive work and religion. Religion, he said, encouraged productivity and frugality which in turn produced riches and wealth. But he then observed that, as wealth grew, the essence of what religion should be in the hearts and minds of people and in their relationship to God and others, typically diminished. His answer was a simple exhortation: gain all you can, save all you can and give all you can.

In his classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber concluded that the protestant reformation was one of the driving forces for the growth of capitalism. He also observed, however, that by the beginning of the 20th century, the growing bureaucracy of large business organizations had assumed control over the worker. The worker was part of a machine of production trapped in what Weber described as the iron cage, without hope of relating the specifics of a work task to the process of human development or glorifying God. The worker no longer had a choice to be “called”, work was now just a matter of survival.

So what is the role of work today as we approach the end of the 20th century? The forces of a free market economy are as pervasive as they have ever been and the work environment is changing daily. Work is being restructured and re-engineered. Technology is allowing us to bring work to where the worker is instead of bringing the worker to work. For some, any place where you can plug in a modem is a place of work.

In the middle of this century, we were predicting that by the year 2000, everyone would have the freedom of a 30-hour work week with added time for rest and leisure. But now that the millennium is upon us, it seems that many of us are working longer. Others retire earlier or are in some form of transition between jobs or are part of that group of over qualified and underemployed.

We use words like downsizing and rightsizing to mask the reality that people lose their jobs for reasons other than performance. In fact, it has been suggested by some that we now live in a post-job world. Serious issues are being

raised about what is the social contract between an employer and employee and what should it be for the 21st century.

But change is not limited to the work environment.

Some discuss our period of time not only in terms of a post-Christian era, but also one dominated by post-modernism - where everything is relative, including the meaning of words. Can a leader separate the ethic of his private life from that of his public life? When is a lie a lie? Are integrity and fidelity still relevant in defining leadership?

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, has described the resulting conflicts in our societies as a time of cultural wars - where the fundamental ideas of who we are and how we are to order our lives individually and together are now at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How are we to determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable? The division or gap, he concludes, is growing. People living and working in the same community are, in fact, worlds apart.

Now as one steps back from this overview of the changes and forces that are swirling around us, how does a person of faith, of the Christian faith, bridge the gulf – more specifically, is what we hear in our churches or places of worship relevant to what we do on Monday – in the workaday world – in the market place?

Recently the Wall Street Journal had a feature article describing how business people were searching for God again. The author noted that a growing

number of people in the workplace were seeking deeper meaning in life. But he also noted that most of them turn first to psychotherapy because they are embarrassed to talk about church or religion. The author concluded that although the needs may be more spiritual than psychological, people feel like they don't have a convenient or comfortable place to discuss them. It would be just too strange to talk about spiritual issues or needs in the work environment and the traditional places of worship just don't understand the culture and issues of the marketplace.

Do God and profit mix? Should the business firm of the 21st century serve merely as an efficient unit of production for quality goods and services, providing the customer or consumer with what they want, or can it also become a moral community to help shape human character and behavior? A community that is focused on the worth of the person as well as the production of goods and services? A community with a soul? A community where it is okay to talk about the spiritual issues of life?

I am a person of faith. I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It allows for order -- a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How then do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace? As a leader in business and one who is part of the leadership of a public company that employs and manages over 240,000 people, how do I integrate my faith with my work? Where do I go for the answers, as I seek to bridge this Gulf?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive, tolerant and acceptable – water it down so as not to be offensive?

Do I maintain the old separation between the sacred and the secular, live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion, business and politics just don't mix and keep my faith a very private matter?

Do I use my leadership to promote, propagate or impose my faith?

Or do I seek to live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and yes, even embraced by some, all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits?

Now as I ask these fundamental questions about the purpose of life and work, I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a business person. Someone who is seeking to lead a fast growing, dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster. We have experienced good growth, doubling in size every 3 - 4 years for over 25 years, with our system-wide revenues now in excess of 7 billion dollars, serving over 10 million customers. We are a public company with our shares listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange. And yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter and the shareholders that I am responsible to as leader vote every day on my leadership. They have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting here tonight is that my role as a business leader, and one committed to live and share my faith in a way that can be tested and examined by others – cannot be measured solely by calculation of return on investment or the profit we produce – the answer must come from the people I work with.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, located west of the city of Chicago, you will walk into a large two-story lobby. On your right on a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high, carved in stone letters 8 feet high, are four statements that constitute our company objectives – To honor God in all we do, To help people develop, To pursue excellence and To grow profitably. If you were to tour the rest of our building, you would notice that nearly all of the workspaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable just like the marketplaces we serve with their changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person, regardless of faith, choice or label, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals not just part of a protected group or classification.

We do not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It is in fact the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all

part of God's mix. And it does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that should be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation and a reference point for action. It becomes a living set of principles that allows us to confront life's difficulties and failures with the assurance that the starting point never changes. It causes us to think and re-think about who we are – why we work and what is the purpose and meaning of it all.

Few people find fault with our commitment to a set of principles. Quite frankly, it is the "God language" that raises eyebrows. "Aren't you walking on shaky ground when you try to mix God and profits?" ask the critics. "And what about employees who don't choose to believe the way you do? Aren't you forcing your beliefs on them?"

At a shareholders meeting, one of our stockholders, while commending us for our profit performance, made the following statement: "While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions and pursuits, I totally fail to appreciate the concept that ServiceMaster is in fact a vehicle, for the work of God; the multiple references to this effect, in my opinion, do not belong in the annual business report. To interpret a service for profit, which is what ServiceMaster does, as a work of God is an incredible presumption. Furthermore, to make profit is not a sin. I urge that next year's business report be confined to just that –

business.” How would you answer this shareholder? What is just business? Can we divorce business from people?

The link between God and profit, I believe, is people - all of whom have been created in God’s image – all of whom are part of the world God so loved. As a business firm, we are not a church, nor are we a Christian company, although many of the principles we follow are consistent with the Christian faith. We have people and leaders who are Christians, but we also have people and leaders who are Muslim, Jewish or of no professed faith.

We serve and work in a diverse and pluralistic world. At the same time, we believe the work environment need not be emasculated to a neutrality of no belief. A belief that God exists and is at work is not just some relic of the past. Or, as Steven Carter notes in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, “Like building model airplanes - just another hobby; something quiet, something private, something trivial and not really a fit activity for intelligent, public-spirited adults.”

As a business person, I want to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I don’t want to play by these rules, I don’t belong in the ball game. But I also believe that I can live and relate my faith in this environment so that the business firm I lead can achieve another purpose. It can be a community to help shape human character and behavior - an open community where the questions of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. The people of our firm are in fact the soul of the firm.

One of the current best sellers in the U.S. on business leadership is entitled *Leadership Engine* written by Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business. In his book he describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level of the organization. One of the companies he studied and reported on was ServiceMaster. At first he was concerned about whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives and makes these comments about what he found.

“For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value of ‘To honor God in all we do’ is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more ‘normal’ organizations. But the truth is that when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal other-worldliness about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. ‘Profit [to them] is a means in God’s world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts’.”

He goes on to say: “ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values. . . because everyone from [the top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of [their] twenty-one leadership principles says (No. 6), ‘If you don't live it, you don't believe it.’ And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company. And no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work.”

Tichy is confirming in his own way what many of us in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian to live his or her faith is in

service to others. We call it servant leadership and reflects the example set by Jesus as He took a towel and washed His disciples feet.

In so doing He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads, and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

Does this example fit in today's world, 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash, and towels are always available. It is in seeking to be a servant as I lead that I am able to live and share my faith in a way that it can be tested, examined and understood by my colleagues. The only limitation, if there is one, is self-imposed namely my ability to be on my hands and knees, to compromise my pride, to be involved, and to have a consistent compassion for those I lead and work with.

Let me share with you some very practical and real life examples of just how this has worked in my life.

At the time when I first joined ServiceMaster over twenty years ago, my predecessors, Ken Hansen who was then Chairman of the company, and Ken Wessner, who was President and CEO of the company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to come and head up the legal and financial affairs of the company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

In the selling of the job, they suggested that I, along with others, would be considered in the future for the CEO position of the company.

The interviewing process took several months and as we were coming to what I thought was the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided that I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could become CEO, Ken Hansen stood up and said the interview was over. Ken Wessner led me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster, I concluded that it was over – I had blown the opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to have breakfast with him to discuss what had happened in the interview. I accepted the offer and at breakfast he made clear to me his teachable point of view. He simply said: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent upon a title, position or ultimately the CEO position, then you will be disappointed. It is up to you.

The point was simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Leaders in ServiceMaster, to be successful, must have or develop a servant's heart. I took the job and Ken, in his own way, tested me at the front end. I spent the first six weeks in ServiceMaster out cleaning floors and doing maintenance work, which are all part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was – as a leader I needed to be a servant, and that I should never ask some one to do something I was not first willing to do myself.

Can the business firm be a moral community for shaping human character and behavior and also excel at making money? This continues to be the grand

experiment of ServiceMaster. By no means have we arrived. It is a daily challenge and there will continue to be skeptics and critics.

As I think about the great potential and opportunity we have to serve and to Bridge the Gulf within the diverse and global environment of the market, I am reminded of a letter received from a manager after she returned from one of our Management Skills Seminars. Shu Zhang was raised and educated in China, indoctrinated in communism, and has worked with us to help develop our business for this market. Listen to her letter.

“Dear Bill:

I felt so much need to talk to you since I came back from management seminar.

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and the communists taught us religion was superstition. Mao’s book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao’s quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood.

Mao said serve the people. Leaders should be public servants. This coincides with some of ServiceMaster’s moral standard. When I think deeply, I see the difference which makes one work so successfully and the other collapses fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God, and that every individual has been created in his image with dignity and worth.

Ten years ago in China, people were not allowed to think and speak freely. Those who held different opinions and views with the government were treated as

the enemy, and enemies were not treated as human beings any more. When people found out Mao was just another Chinese emperor, we lost our believing. This is a generation who had been brainwashed since we were born. When I went to Beijing last March with you and Ralph, I met with my high school classmates. They talked a lot about the consumer oriented Chinese young people. We have heard a lot of excitement about the big change in the Chinese economy which brought tremendous opportunities, but this also worried us about a generation without beliefs and moral standards.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing, and I am still searching."

Zhu is a thinking person. She has been confronted with choices in life that go beyond doing the job and earning a living. Choices that relate to who she is and how she will relate to God. She is different – she is still searching yet she has felt accepted. She is learning and growing.

What is a business without people? Who are the people we work with and why do they work? Can we begin to understand or answer these questions without a reference point of faith? And after all, what is the purpose of business – is it there just to produce things and profit or can it be a moral community for the development of human character?

I conclude my remarks tonight with some lines from T. S. Eliot's Choruses from the "Rock."

**What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road,
And a thousand lost golf balls.
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.
When the stranger says: "What is the meaning of this city?"
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
What will you answer? We all dwell together,
To make money from each other? This is a community?
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert. Oh my soul be
prepared for the coming of the stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.**

As Socrates once said - "An unexamined life is not worth living!"

**As we examine our lives as Christians, let us take this faith we so cherish
into the market place. Allow it to shine – be examined – tested and yes even be
embraced by some – and so to be builders of community within the business
firms we work for and lead – and so to Bridge the Gulf.**

Revised 11/99