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Business as a Mission; Business as a Calling (Long Version)

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Recommended Citation

Pollard, C. William, "Business as a Mission; Business as a Calling (Long Version)" (2006). *C. William Pollard Papers*. 162.
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Open for Business Conference

St. Louis, MO

December 28, 2006

“Business as a Mission; Business as a Calling”

We are open for business today, business as a mission, and yes, business as a calling. As I look out at your faces this afternoon, I realize that for many of you, there is more than one generation of time that separates us. As I look back today and share some thoughts about how God has worked in my life, you are looking forward.

I am sure that many of you, as I did when I was your age, are somewhat weary with those questions like “What are you going to do when you get out of school?” or “What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

As I say this, I am reminded of a friend of mine who put this message on his voicemail at work and his answering machine at home: Hello? This is not an answering device. It is a questioning device. There are only two questions that are relevant: “Who are you?” and “What do you want?” Please give your answer after the tone.

Who are we? Every one of us is a special creation of God with the freedom to make choices about how we will live our lives. God has a purpose for our life. He is

calling us both to do and to be. In so doing, He will not override our will, but instead, in exercising His sovereignty, will provide opportunities for us to make a choice for His way. He calls us to a way of life that has both a temporal and an eternal purpose. A calling that is sacred in its significance and involves the secular in its application.

So in answering the question, who are we, we realize that the quest of life is not so much what we want, but instead what God wants. He wants a relationship with us. He wants to be our friend. He wants us to follow in the steps of His son Jesus Christ and to be ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors of His love with a message of salvation and hope. And yes, for some of us, this has meant the world of business, the marketplace; where money is made, wealth is created, and where people who are lost and needy are spending most of their waking hours.

My beginning point in this journey of faith started as a young boy by my mother's knee when I made that turning point decision of accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior and there has followed a life of understanding and growing in the knowledge of His grace and forgiveness.

There have been times of doubt and despair, especially for me through those difficult teenage years and the sudden death of my father when I was 18. There followed the challenges of college, law school and seeking to establish a home, support a family, and finance an education. At times, there were those feelings of inadequacy and concerns about whether I would measure up. Then there was a drive for success which allowed my

law profession to become a jealous mistress, only to be stopped by God's intervention with a serious healthcare condition. There followed a dramatic change in my life with the recognition that God, not me, was in control. I left the practice of law to serve as a senior officer and faculty member at Wheaton College. It was during this phase of my life that God taught me some lessons of knowing and understanding His way.

My career took another turn in the fall of 1977 when I joined the management team of ServiceMaster. There I found a group of people committed to growing a business, developing people, and seeking to honor God in the process.

The company was on a fast track and I was soon asked to assume greater responsibilities and then to become the CEO. Over the next 20 years, the growth and expansion of ServiceMaster would extend to serving over 12 million customers in the US and 45 foreign countries, with over 250,000 people who were in our employ or managed by us.

It became a big business. A darling of Wall Street. Our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. They were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

It required of a leader to be concerned not only about what people did or how they did it, but also to ask the deeper question of why people did their work and what they were becoming in the process. Our humanity is defined by more than its physical or rational nature. It is unique in that it also has a moral and spiritual side. It is the spiritual side of our humanity that influences character – our ability to determine right and wrong – to recognize good and evil and to make moral judgments – to love or to hate.

Henry Ford once said: Why do I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands? Often, that is the way we look at people in business. We talk about people being units of production or the cost of labor in a P & L. As we downsize or re-engineer an organization, can we downsize or re-engineer people? In fact, people do not come to us as just a pair of hands. They come to us as whole people and they must be understood and led as such.

Now for me as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, this environment provided an opportunity for me to live my faith in such a way so that it was not imposed upon my colleagues and fellow workers, but instead could be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, embraced by them as they sought not only to do things right but also to do the right thing.

One of the best ways that I found to lead in the development of our firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet - that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did. My ethic would become a reality as I was able to serve those I led.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of

those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster team and I will close my remarks today with a story of that learning experience.

My predecessors in the business, Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of the Company, and Ken Wessner, who was then President and CEO of the Company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company. In the selling of the job, it was 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 of as 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 told me the interview was over. Ken Wessner then ushered me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster that morning, 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 his office. When we sat down for breakfast, 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 on a title or

position or ultimately the CEO's position, then you will be disappointed. To be successful at ServiceMaster, you will have to learn to put the interest of others ahead of your own.

His point was very simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Determine at the front end whether the leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first. Know whether he or she can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

I took the job and Ken in his own way tested my commitment and understanding of what he had told me. I spent the first six weeks of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

Later on in my career the faces of our service workers would flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon. A result that

would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Early on in my role as CEO, I also realized that the job was more demanding than anything I had ever experienced. I was struggling with issues of balance in my life.

During this same period, I also realized that I needed to make some major changes in the business in order to move it forward and I sought the advice of an old friend, Peter Drucker. As he listened to me summarize the issues and opportunities in the business, he reminded me that the decision before me was not one of sorting out the priorities, but instead was really a decision of determining the priority. He then gave me a history lesson involving the use of the word priority. It came into the English language in the 14th Century and wasn't pluralized until the 20th Century. Bill, he said, identify the priority and do it.

That night, in my hotel room, I was reflecting on his advice and also some issues of "priorities" and balance in my own life including some tension I was feeling between time spent with family, time spent with the church and time spent in business. As I read once again from Matthew 25, I realized in a new way there could be only one priority in my life and that was to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness". That meant, first, if God wasn't in it, there was no time for it. Second, I could do a better job of disciplining and scheduling my time and third, if God was in it, it was not so much the

quantity of time I spent, but instead the quality of time. So a balance in life, by its very nature, would always be a work in process.

One thing was clear; however, there was no room for a bifurcated life – God on Sunday; work on Monday; and time for my family whenever I could get around to it. My business became a channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith. A channel that has reached from the janitor’s closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

My family also has become incorporated into this priority of life. It is God’s standard and His way that I love and cherish my wife; I am not the superior, she is not the subordinate. It is not my checkbook, my house, my way; we have become a partnership that is based upon mutual love and trust. A partnership that has now lasted over 47 years. Judy and I are committed to each other and to continue the work of joining together our separate and distinct personalities. This requires a constant attention to the smoothing of the rough edges.

The single most important product of this partnership is the children God has given us. Our role has been to provide a home for their development, spiritual nurture and admonition. Though each child is different and our role has changed with their

maturity, we have a continuing responsibility for their development and for the acceptance and love of their choice of a life partner and now for the expanded love for our 15 grandchildren.

God has called each of us to be in the world but not part of it. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession or ministry, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, businessperson, minister or educator, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. However, when we proclaim our faith and do not live it, we sow seeds of cynicism and rejection.

So for me, business has not been just a game of manipulation that accomplishes a series of tasks for profit with the gain going to a few. People are not just economic animals or non-personal production units nor, as far as my faith is concerned, can it simply be lumped into theological or devotional categories. Every person has been created in the image of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. As a leader in the workplace, it became my responsibility to provide an environment that would unlock this potential, and as a Christian, to share and live my faith in a way that would invite others to seek and embrace the same Lord that I loved.

The leadership of people is a soul craft that involves both the moral and spiritual dimension of the leader and the people being led.

People's minds and hearts need to be touched and, in some cases, transformed. Jesus provides us a living example. His message of love and forgiveness to all those who would believe and follow Him is a message of transformation and hope – a hope that extends beyond this life – a hope that provides an eternal acceptance and life with God.

As I close, I am reminded of C. S. Lewis' words when he said: "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 whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit."

Now, as I have shared with you from my life experiences, I realize that the clarity of a call is better understood when one is able to look back. But that the reality of life is that it is lived looking forward and our choices are always for the future. Our faith is in a God that is not in the business of playing hide and seek. He does show the way.

So you can see, my life has not been a simple, logical, predictable sequence of events. God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold, and develop me, and the most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. There are not answers to every question. In fact, I have found that in my growing relationship with God there are always some unknowns.

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December 28, 2006

