

# Work Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

*Originally posted to the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission website, May 25, 2020.*

*In this article we focus on the tragic toll the COVID-19 crisis is having on businesses and workers. Whether affected by infection or isolation, only the very privileged few are able to work through the pandemic in many parts of the world. Where lock-downs were attempted in high-population nations, they appear to have had a limited effect on arresting the virus, but a devastating effect on the livelihoods and wellbeing of millions of people. In this crisis there remains a huge opportunity for followers of Christ to innovate employment solutions and glorify God through our work activities.*

**I**n 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 the Apostle Paul gets serious with the Thessalonian faithful... *And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from all believers who live idle lives and don't follow the tradition they received from us. For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you. We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you. We certainly had the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to give you an example to follow. Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."* Yet we hear that some of you are living idle lives, refusing to work and meddling in other people's business. We command such people and urge them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and work to earn their own living. As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.

## 1. Introduction

We are living through a period of time where an idealised concept of work is emerging—from necessary drudgery to meaning and purpose, with positive social and environmental outcomes. While this is a welcome aspiration, it is still a far cry from reality for many people around the world.

## 2. Work Recovered

Within the realms of Church and missions, the sacredness of work has been, for some time, promoted as valid and good, with even a 'witness to the world' orientation to it. We work because God works, and our capacity to work is rooted in our creation in the image of God. This kind of work is creative work. It is an investment of our human capacity to craft good out of the material world we have been gifted from the Creator. Work is an opportunity for Divine inspiration to flow through us, for something unique and beautiful to emerge from our talents and the wisdom of God granted to us (see Isaiah 28:23-29). The outcomes of such activities ought to be for the sustenance of ourselves and our families, our neighbours and our society, the creation around us and for the glory of God who provides for and sustains us by grace.

We also labour and toil. This is a direct inheritance of the corruption of creation that we trace back to what we know as "the fall". At that point of disobedience, our ancestors' determination to judge right from wrong, good from evil, burdened us with resistance to our investments of energy. The material world no longer yields so easily to our efforts to craft good, to make a living, to find peace and joy in our activities. Yet labour we must, to perpetuate our existence.

After the resurrection of the carpenter from Nazareth, who experienced a brutal death nailed to slabs of wood like those He used to craft with, we now find rich meaning in our earthly labours. When we act, we do so in and for our resurrected Lord (Eph 6:7-8, Colossians 3:23-24, 1 Timothy 5:18). In this way, our efforts are transformed from toil to testimony. In-Christ, we once again discover the joy of creative work, for our own dignity, the dignity of our families, the benefit of our society, the wellbeing of our environment and the glory of God in all the earth. We work because it is an act of worship. Idleness, therefore, is idolatry—a misdirected devotion to something other than God's right ways.

## 3. Work Interrupted

Paul chastised the Thessalonians with a strong word: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat." There is

inference here that some among them may have been living off the generosity of a community of faith that was sharing its wealth. Paul was criticising them for not contributing to the wellbeing of that community. This suggests that some work within that community may not have been directly remunerated. Yet an investment of time and energy to the benefit of the community was still expected in order to receive a portion of the fruits of the communities' activities as a whole.

Viv Grigg, a missions-oriented social entrepreneur and professor of Urban Leadership at William Carey International University, suggests these Biblical examples of sharing communities were operating out of a cooperative economic mindset (see his book, *Kiwinomics*, available on Amazon). In a cooperative, capital is shared and assets are communal, then the benefits are enjoyed by all. It is a bit more complex than it sounds and the principles are by no means exclusive to Christians, but cooperative economics can be powerfully applied by believers for the benefit of mutual flourishing, wealth creation and wellbeing.

That is all very well, but what if the entire community cannot work? What if creativity is hindered by Government-level injunctions to cease activities outside of the home? How then does a family survive unless they have the accumulated spare resources to do so—for as long as is required? For most in the industrialised world, governments have provided temporary incomes in some form, either as welfare, wage subsidies or business hardship packages. For those who are able, work has continued from the home, travelling the umbilical cord of the internet to deliver products and services that can still be traded in the marketplace. For the vast majority of people on earth, however, this is not an option; because the vast majority of people on earth live a subsistence existence and they are starving.

## 4. Work Impossible

The COVID-19 response has been predominantly one-size-fits-all, following the most popular option to mandate physical distancing and close the marketplace to do so. This took consumers of anything other than “essential items” off the streets. Suddenly the clientele of most retailers, their suppliers and the manufacturers, disappeared. No doubt we have all heard of the plight of those in impoverished nations who live day to day and hand to mouth from street selling. We have seen the long walks to home villages and heard of the devastation a copy-cat isolation strategy is causing throughout the high-density low-income populations of the world.

On May 16 2020, Mats Tunehag, Chairman of the Business As Mission (BAM) Global Think Tank, noted that,

United Nations, World Food Program, International Labour Organization, International Food Policy Research Institute, Business Sweden, and others are painting horrifying scenarios on a macro-scale: Around 50 million children could fall into extreme poverty. Hundreds of millions of jobs may be lost. 260 million face starvation, and three dozen countries risk famine. 2.7 billion workers are affected by the lockdown measures. Most vulnerable are people in the informal sector, and in India alone 400 million workers now face greater impoverishment. 50–70 percent of the population in 20 countries in Africa will run out of money and food after a 14-day quarantine.

[Source: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/health-wealth-how-do-we-respond-effects-coronavirus-lockdown-tunehag/>]

Another impact lost on the media is that of the livelihood of religious workers in the Majority World. When you are ministering in a society that relies on presence and cash (or other material offering), isolation immediately shuts off a lifeline. Ministers have not stopped working. They are still praying, studying, listening and teaching, and their phones will be running hot as they comfort and counsel their flock. But their income supply has been cut off. The ox has been muzzled (see 1 Timothy 5:18) by the edict to remain at home. As one example of solidarity, the World Evangelical Alliance is responding to the plight of the pastors by fundraising for them and distributing collections via national evangelical alliances. You can find out more and contribute to this initial pilot project here: <https://covid19.worldea.org/donate-nl/>.

Nations that could afford to keep their economic engine running and risk a very high load on their healthcare systems are not faring much better than nations that locked-down. People have still opted to remain home and the direct death toll from COVID-19, particularly among the elderly, is drawing stern criticism—but it is far from over and the total impact, whether from infection or isolation, will take years to determine. By then it will be just an historic curiosity.

## 5. Work Assistance

It is a no-win situation. Everyone will lose something, some much more than others. Those most acutely impacted will require financial assistance. The McKinsey consultancy company reports that philanthropic enterprises released “US\$10.3 billion globally in May 2020, according to Candid, which is

tracking major grants.” [Source: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/a-transformative-moment-for-philanthropy>] Aid of this magnitude (and much more) is certainly needed for the desperate, but it is often not distributed equitably, if it is distributed at all in places. Regardless, human dignity does not thrive in dependency. Dignity is found in creativity and contribution.

For most of the world, the problem is not refusing work in favour of idleness, it is the inability to find work. In parts of the industrialised world this has suddenly become an overwhelming new reality. For example, at the time of writing, the unemployment rate in the United States of America is the highest it has been since the Great Depression and is set to get worse. India’s unemployment rate, in contrast, had “stabilised” at an unfathomable 24% (compared to 6.5-7% in May 2019)—an estimated 120 million people are jobless and 80 million jobs have disappeared completely, let alone the hundreds of millions otherwise negatively impacted [Source: <https://www.indiaspend.com/govts-stimulus-package-would-increase-indebtedness-not-the-wisest-solution/>]. Offering job welfare and stimulus packages is going to create an enormous debt for India (as it is for all nations) and delivering stimulus funding is a very complex economic exercise not to be treated lightly.

## 6. Work Adapting

Where businesses and businesspeople have the capacity to continue operating in the current crisis, some are responding wonderfully well, contributing solutions for the benefit of their employees and communities.

A company developed by Christian innovators in New Zealand usually makes sturdy plywood road cases for event equipment. As the inevitability of a lock-down loomed, they saw the need for work-from-home desks [Source: <https://www.workfromhomedesks.co.nz>], so they pulled out an old design and quickly refined it. Within days they started producing a flatpack fully-adjustable workstation kitset out of their road case material that is durable, strong and requires no tools to assemble. The business continued to thrive as an employer and essential services provider. The WEA MC purchased one of these desks for our virtual-HQ set-up when it became apparent that travel would not be an option for a long while yet. It works brilliantly.

Dr. João Mordomo, co-founder and vice-chair of Crossover Global tells of a Business As Mission enterprise in Brazil called LivFul,

an international BAM business with a growing presence in Brazil. They are driven by an Isaiah 61

(and Luke 4) vision “to proclaim good news to the poor... to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” One of the ways they do this is by producing world-class (and world-beating!) insect repellent. That alone is enough to save thousands, if not millions, of lives annually. But what about right now, in the midst of a global pandemic that is not related to mosquitos and other insects? LivFul immediately mobilized, by way of a joint venture with another BAM company, to offer PPEs (personal protective equipment) such as masks and rapid-testing kits to governments, hospitals and NGOs at special low prices. They willingly forsook some of their financial bottom line in favour of the social and spiritual bottom lines. They looked around, saw an opportunity in the midst of the need, and jumped into action.

[Source: <https://businessasmission.com/bam-vs-covid-stories-of-innovation-and-our-unique-contribution/>]

Stories abound of businesses from established companies to micro-enterprises repurposing their activities to supply ventilators, protective screens, personal protection equipment, masks, sanitizer, handwash stations, and all manner of innovative devices to accommodate the low-touch requirements of our present and future. What they all have in common is a sensitivity to the needs around them and the ability to create solutions with the resources/assets they have on hand. This kind of service-orientation is core to what it means to make the most of our God-given gift of work.

## 7. Work On Mission

For followers of Jesus, we are to use our creativity for the benefit of others as if working for the Lord, as an act of worship. The global reality is that those of us who have some resources and are less impacted, have a wide-open missions opportunity to live out our faith by praying for inspiration that will enable us to create employment opportunities.

God has not abandoned us to this crisis. The Holy Spirit has positioned us for it. The hope we profess is not void of power. We operate by the laws of a different reality and have assets that are out of this world. Through prayer, with our mustard seed-sized faith, we can see unemployment and debt and need mountains move. We can imagine a better future because Jesus has proven that there is one.

Now is not the time to tire of doing good—we need to increase our investment, to be part of a whole-of-life

gospel solution. We need to be known as feeders of the hungry and carers of the sick and resourcers of the willing. We need to be lovers of the lost, hope-givers and, by our example, trainers of those who put their hope in Christ. And we need to permeate whatever level of society we work in with the fragrance of the living God, the perfume of faith, hope and love. To draw people previously untouched by the gospel into the fellowship we enjoy with the Prince of Peace.

Mats Tunehag concludes his article (previously mentioned) by projecting into the near future...

The need for God-honouring and people-serving businesses will increase during and after the pandemic. Thus, we must continue to affirm, equip and deploy men and women, young and old, on all continents, to grow, shape and reshape businesses with God and for the common good. We also need to build an eco-system of (Christ-honouring) leaders from business, government and civil society, so different kinds of wealth can be created, and health restored. And we must include the Church. To that end, let me conclude with the appeal from the Wealth Creation Manifesto [See: <http://matstunehag.com/wealth-creation/>]: "We call the Church to embrace wealth creation as central to our mission of holistic transformation of peoples and societies."

Potentially more potent and possible than autonomous business initiatives, especially for urban people in poverty, is for Christians to lead in collective enterprises based on a cooperative economics model such as that mentioned above. Viv Grigg clarifies,

Among the poor there is money. But there is not access to capital for starting of small businesses that will generate money. The solution to this is the development of cooperative savings schemes. When a group of people put their small amounts week by week into a common fund it grows to a significant amount of capital which can then be given to one of

the members of the group to start a small business. This person then can repay that loan week by week, while the continued process of group savings continues till the next person can be given a capital loan, and so on till the whole group have had access to the capital. At that point, they are all earning more, so the amount of loans moves up a step to the next level of capitalisation. [Grigg, Viv. *Kiwinomics: Conversations with New Zealand's Economic Soul* (pp. 75-76). Urban Leadership Foundation]

In light of the COVID-19 crisis, Viv's opening sentence may no longer be valid. People in poverty may have consumed what funding they had. Nevertheless, cooperatives can be developed with strategic injections of capital alongside training for the collective on how to develop a flourishing cooperative. Missions could lead the way, helping local churches to develop a cooperative economic mindset for the benefit of a congregation's mutual wellbeing and witness to the world—but first, missions would need to adopt a cooperative mindset.

We are hearing much talk about increasing collaboration within missions circles in this crisis moment. Some are calling for a new era of "radical collaboration", but there is a danger that collaboration will remain little more than a trendy new way of speaking of 'partnership'—the working together of autonomous bodies for mutually agreed outcomes. For cooperatives to work effectively, an assumption of autonomy must be surrendered. The early church had a deep sense of unity, a mutuality in-Christ that built sufficient trust for their cooperatives to work, such that many were added to their numbers daily because of their witness. If we are to bear full witness to the promise of our Lord, that He came to fulfil "the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:19), perhaps we need churches and missions to start living out a selfless common-good cooperative jubilee around the world as evidence of our salvation and as *actionable* good news to the poor.

## Work Faithfully

In 2 Thessalonians 4:3-5 Paul declares, *...the Lord is faithful; He will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. And we are confident in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we commanded you. May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.*

— in other words, #stayonmission.