

1-1-2004

## All of Life is Ministry: Reflections on Ministry in the marketplace

Dean Collins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Collins, Dean (2004) "All of Life is Ministry: Reflections on Ministry in the marketplace," *Leaven*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol12/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# All of Life Is Ministry: Reflections on Ministry in the Marketplace

DEAN COLLINS

---

I never felt I was *in* the ministry until I left the ministry.

From an early age I had resisted going into the “professional” ministry because I had seen some of the things my dad had gone through as a preacher. However, when I was just out of high school, an elder in the church gave me an article by Carl Ketcherside. Reading that article was my first experience with the idea of the “priesthood of all believers.” Ketcherside’s words connected with me, and I was captivated by the idea that every Christian is a minister. I knew I did not want to be a minister in the professional sense, yet I knew that scripture called for all Christians to be ministers.

I committed myself to ministry but not to a specific professional ministry. When I graduated from high school, I attended a small Christian college. However, I was adamant all the way through college that I would not become a “ministry major.” I majored in education yet still felt a compelling call to some kind of ministry outside of the formal ministry.

I served as a youth minister while I was in school. However, I felt drawn to becoming a schoolteacher so I could minister through public education. I think part of it was that I did not want to be paid to do the things that all Christians should be doing. After college, I became a campus minister. That helped me because I was able to minister in a thoroughly secular environment, a university.

During the 10 years in campus ministry, I kept feeling drawn to business. I left campus ministry and started a counseling center in the Atlanta area. As I got into that, I realized there were ways to use my vocation as a doorway into the business community. I decided to provide training, conflict resolution, team-building, and other services that would be useful to corporate managers.

However, I still felt some tension about what I was doing. I had worked for four years as a youth minister, 10 years as a campus minister, and six years as a counselor. I realized that to be faithful to my call I had to get completely into the business world. Even though I was running a small business through the counseling center (a service that some would have said was not “the ministry” in the formal sense), I still felt that I was working in “the ministry.” I served churches and was the primary referral point for a lot of preachers.

When I accepted my first job in the corporate setting, there was nothing that announced I was “a minister.” Ironically, that was the first time in my life when I felt that I was completely a minister. Now, having worked in the corporate setting for nine years, I feel more like a minister than I did when I was in the professional ministry.

For me, there is “purity” in each interaction that I have in the business world. I feel that God is bringing those interactions and that I am meeting people in the business community on equal terms. It does not



matter what I am being paid to do or what my assignment is, I always feel that my reason for being there is to build relationships with each person and share in the best ways I can. Almost always, those relationships lead to opportunities to talk about spiritual things—who I am in my relationship with God—and to introduce the idea that relationship with God is the central part of who we all are. The opportunities to minister emerge in many forms.

### **THE MINISTRY OF ENCOURAGEMENT**

*Sometimes my ministry in the corporate setting is to encourage fellow believers to be themselves in Christ.* I remember stopping by the office of a general counsel in one company. I stuck my head in the door to say hello and noticed he held his Bible in his lap. Judging from the expression on his face, one would have thought I had caught him looking at pornography on the job. He closed the Bible and put it aside. I made some comment about his Bible and asked him what he was reading. I shared what I had been reading, and we were able to open a significant conversation about matters of faith. He told me about his spiritual search and his desire to find a church. At the conclusion of our conversation, we both felt encouraged to be a stronger Christian presence in the workplace. We were strengthened by the fact that we had discovered each other as brothers in Christ.

Christians in the marketplace have a wonderful opportunity to seek out other believers and to encourage one another in living the faith in the workplace.

### **THE MINISTRY OF COMFORT**

*Opportunities also emerge when God brings someone along who is in distress.* Someone has pointed out that when people go to work they take themselves with them. Many contemporary observers of workplace practices have noted the ways in which people bring their family and personal struggles with them into the Workplace. The growth of employee assistance programs and other family-friendly initiatives demonstrate companies' awareness of how the work of their employees is affected by difficulties in the life of their employees.

I went to interview a customer of one of my clients in a large corporate setting. I had never worked with this particular customer, a senior vice president in a very large company, so he inquired about my work experience. He was intrigued by my counseling background and sought me out later in the day to talk to me about a book he was reading on marriage. A door opened for me to talk to him about his marriage and the struggle he had to keep it together. I told him that I would pray for him and offered him suggestions about some things he could do. He seemed a bit taken aback that I, a consultant, would say that I would pray for him. Later that day, he came back to tell me that he had called a pastor to set up an appointment to talk about how he could save his marriage.

I believe that interaction was the reason I was in that city on that day. I did the job and interviewed my client's customers, but the satisfaction I had that day came from that one encounter. I believe opportunities like that occur at God's appointed time. I believe God nudged this person toward himself. I was the one available to help the process along. Because I am in such settings and able to form relationships with my clients, customers, and associates, many people talk to me about distressing concerns in their lives. Before long, they begin to talk about their values and even larger spiritual concerns.

As Christians become aware that their work is their ministry, they can begin to see these opportunities to provide comfort to people in distress all around them. God puts people in our path who need to be encouraged by a word of hope and the presence of a trustworthy friend.

### **THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER**

*God has allowed me to make prayer a central feature of my "value offering."* Praying with and for others has played a major role in my business. I have prayed with many clients when they have shared some



struggle—whether personal or business-related. I do not hesitate to tell any of them that I will pray and have prayed with regard to any situation they present.

I am transparent with my clients. I tell them when I do not have the answers. I often ask them if they would mind if I prayed about the issue before I offered any suggestions or advice. I also encourage them to pray to the One who will have the answer or the direction they need to go. That may sound like an odd practice for a consultant who works in very large corporate settings. However, I have never been laughed at. The practice of prayer is always accepted by both Christians and non-Christians. I have never had anyone tell me that it is a bad idea to pray about a business problem or that I was a bad consultant because I did not have the answer. The truth is that executives often face problems that seem insurmountable, problems that affect the lives of hundreds if not thousands of people. To me, and many of them, praying seems like a reasonable thing to do in the face of those concerns!

Christians in the workplace have a wonderful opportunity to pray for their employers as well as for their coworkers. God is as concerned for us in our business struggles as much as in our personal struggles. The opportunities to pray for and with people present themselves everyday.

### **THE MINISTRY OF OUTREACH**

*Opportunities for ministry also come along as a result of how God has helped me see other people.*

Although I am sure there are people who will disagree with me on this particular issue, I believe one of the reasons I have so many opportunities to minister in the corporate setting is because I have stopped drawing extremely sharp distinctions between Christians and non-Christians.

In my experience, most of the people with whom I work have had at least some exposure to church. They may attend a church. They may have grown up in a church or had relatives for whom church was an important part of life. They have at least some vague notions about God.

Most of the people I meet in corporate settings are good people who are trying to do good work. They want to serve the company and their customers. They want to live moral and ethical lives.

Therefore, I find it helpful to see people on what I call a “spiritual continuum.” Each of them is searching for something larger than themselves, some sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. They may not use the word “God” or think that God has anything to do with their lives. However, they are hungry for something to claim them so that their lives can be about more than collecting green pieces of paper containing pictures of presidents.

I work in corporate environments all over the country, and I seldom meet anyone who says she or he does not believe in God. They may not attend a church. They may not think that God matters. However, something of God is always in them, some spiritual awareness that I am able to tap. I look at people as searching and moving in some direction. They may be at a different place on the continuum and moving at a different pace, but more often than not they are on that continuum with me.

I have come to know well an administrative assistant for one of the executives with whom I consult. She knows I am a Christian. At times, she has been adamant about “not being into God.” However, she has e-mailed me or called me many times when things were not going well. She was diagnosed with cancer, has had several troubled relationships, and big financial crises. She calls me and says, “You’ve got the connections with God. Would you mind praying for me?” She is a person who takes the position that God is not for her, and yet in times of crisis turns to me and asks me to pray.

Over time, I have seen this woman become more and more open to God and how God could be a part of her life. She is farther along in her spiritual growth than she has ever been. I think that some of it is because she sees something solid in my life. I think one day she will get there, and it will not be because she was forced or because I saw her as the “bad non-Christian” that had to be saved. It will be because I accepted her for who she was and where she was at the time.



Christians can broaden their opportunities for witness and ministry if they will see people as spiritual searchers. While those searchers may think they are only looking for more meaning and purpose, as Christians, we can see those yearnings as yearnings for God.

### **MINISTRY TO THE WORLD**

*Opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-religious ministry have also emerged in my work life.* The workplace has grown more diverse over the past several years. Helping employees become more aware of diversity and sensitive to the hard differences between people has become a central policy and training issue in many companies. The corporate workplace is the world writ small.

I have a very good relationship with a couple of Iranian clients who are Muslims. They know I am a Christian. After the United States went to war with Iraq, I asked them how the war and the terror attacks affected them. I asked them about their families in Iran. I asked them about what it was like being Muslim after the terror attacks. Before long we were discussing the finer points of the Muslim and Christian faith. We opened discussions about our common heritage as people who esteem the Old Testament. We ended up looking for common ground. We had rich conversations about what we each believed. We exchanged articles and book suggestions.

Christians who see their life and work as ministry have those kinds of opportunities. We may not always see the fruit of our labors, but we can plant seeds and leave the hard work to God. As a result of my desire to be a servant in the corporate setting, I have grown in my understanding that I do not save people but that God does. I have gotten clear that my responsibility is to live a life before God that is transparent to the people around me. I want them to see through me to God. I may open a path or nudge them a bit by offering a passage of scripture or a prayer, but then the Holy Spirit works to bring them to salvation.

### **THE MINISTRY OF RESPECT**

*Opportunities to display unexpected aspects of the Christian life have also emerged in my workplace ministry.* For example, as a Christian I have many opportunities to display and model appropriate respect for authority. I see this as a valid ministry in itself. Christians in the workplace can gain important inroads to ministry by demonstrating respect toward those in authority, even when they may not completely agree with the authority. Of course, Christians must be careful to not sacrifice their faith or their morality in deference to authority. However, in matters of corporate policy and practice, Christians can model moral leadership in terms of how they respond to authority.

When I accepted my first job in the corporate world, I reported to a non-Christian CEO. His company purchased a company for whom I had served as a kind of chaplain. I had held Bible studies in that company because it was a company that publicly displayed its Christian commitments. They featured scripture verses in some of their material. They used a scripture verse as a company motto and displayed it in the lobby of the corporate headquarters. Christian art was prominently displayed.

After the CEO's company purchased the business, he told me about his discomfort with having the Christian symbols in his place of business. He did not have a problem with people being Christians, but he had a problem with displaying the symbols so prominently in his business, especially since his company had become a publicly traded company. He had hired me as his vice president of human resources. I shocked him when I volunteered to remove the Christian symbols. I was the known Christian who had led company Bible studies in the previous incarnation of the business.

I believe that act solidified our relationship, one that endures to this day. He knew that I respected him and that I was going to operate within his boundaries, which were not repressive.

Christians must be respectful of their employers. Sometimes Christians push too hard to "market" their Christianity in the workplace. I don't think they have to do that. We need to live as Christians in the workplace. We must learn to be discreet without hiding who we are. We must learn to be as "wise as serpents and



harmless as doves.” We can accomplish much if we live less as billboards and more as lights in the workplace.

### **ABUNDANT OPPORTUNITY**

The opportunities for ministry in the workplace abound. As Christians give themselves over to living the faith in courageous and imaginative ways, they see that the workplace is filled with people who are searching for something larger than themselves, something that will claim them and fill their lives with hope.

Executives may present themselves as only interested in building a company. They may act as if their biggest concern is how to get a \$40-million company to become a \$400-million company. However, those same people go home and wrestle with questions of identity, purpose, and significance. They want to know who they are, where they are going, and what difference their lives make in the larger scheme of things. Once they have some reasonable success, they often begin to think about the larger questions of life. Whether they are Christian or not, they want to live a meaningful, purposeful, and significant life. If a Christian is there when they begin to ask those hard questions, he or she has a great opportunity to help them find an answer.

Co-workers may act as if their only concerns are getting the job done, collecting a check, and going home as quickly as possible. However, they may be going home to far more chaos than they ever experience on the job. They go home to marriages and challenging children. They go home and wonder about the same thing as the executives and question themselves about whether the kind of work they do is all there is to life.

As Christians, we must learn to look beyond the surfaces, to see with renewed eyes and to listen with attentive ears. We can encourage fellow believers who feel constrained by the workplace or beaten down by the workload. We can reach out to co-workers who carry huge personal and familial burdens. We can become hope to those who feel that they have no hope. We can see the office as the crossroads of the world. We can demonstrate leadership by modeling respect for authority and exemplifying faith-filled courage and imagination in the face of the demands and drives of the workplace.

### **THE CENTRAL ROLE FOR PREACHERS**

Professional, knowledgeable, Christian preachers and other “professional” ministers play a significant role in all of this. As Ketcherside used to say, the minister’s job is to “build up, stir up, and cheer up.” The minister is there to build us up, stir us to action, grow our faith, and apply it in real situations. Preachers and other ministers bring special insight, knowledge, and wisdom to those of us who sit in the pews and challenge us to see how the faith must affect daily life and witness in the workplace.

Preachers and teachers play an extremely important role in helping young people who are entering the business field. Our ministers and teachers can help young people learn to be genuine in their walk with the Lord. They can evoke courage in them to resist fear and to let people know that they are Christians. They can teach them to pray that God will direct their paths, encourage them to be sensitive to the opportunities that emerge, and lead them to become people of Christian influence in every sphere of life. They can teach the young to pray for solutions in life and in work and to share—in the right way and at the right time—the power of prayer in every area of life.

As for me, I want my pastor to be with me in friendship and remind me that all of my gifts are to be used in Kingdom ways within and beyond the walls of the church. I want my minister to remind me that all life is ministry.

DEAN COLLINS

Mr. Collins is the owner of D.C. Consulting and works in some of the nation’s largest financial services companies.