

Your life in the balance

First Appeared in ICF Newsletter December 2005



The theme of work/life balance is certainly not a new one, in fact it is one of the more prominent issues on the agenda of many responsible employers and employees representatives. Legislation covering such issues as paternity leave, working time directives etc. has placed this firmly in our consciousness.

When properly understood and articulated, the Christian faith has always expressed a concern for the “whole person”, but the reality for many will be that membership of a local congregation simply adds another element to the equation. The busy programme of an active church can bring its own raft of expectations and demands on our time, leaving many Christians juggling not simply with the work/life balance, but the work/life/church balance. Paul Pearce, member of ICF’s executive shared his own experience of this reality, raising issues not only for working Christians but also for clergy and church leaders as they reflect on the expectations that church life can place upon people. . .

“ICF is about Christian faith and our daily work. As individuals, we are very fortunate if we not only have to work to live but also live to work. But like all charity (meaning love of one’s neighbour) Christian charity begins at home. All work and no play... as the saying goes. So we have to strike a balance, for our own well-being, for that of our family if we have one, and to ensure the sustainable performance of our work. I am not an expert in work-life balance. That is why I’m writing this – because I don’t think I have ever got it quite right.

I believe that faith and work are both all-pervading aspects of life. Real faith goes with you to work but doesn’t make you holier-than-thou. The work you love can go home with you without intruding inappropriately into the lives of the people you love. I grew up in a family which had a very strong protestant work ethic. As a schoolboy and as a young undergraduate living at home in London, I was never, ever, told to put my books away and go to bed. Work took priority over everything, even sleep. As an adult breadwinner, much as I loved my family, work came first. At the age of three, my daughter told a neighbour, “My Daddy doesn’t come home at night.” I did come home every night, but it was generally not before her bedtime. Fifteen years later, with serious misgivings, I flew to the far east for a critical business meeting on the day before my mother-in-law’s funeral.

In my early thirties, I decided that I really needed to do something to ensure that work did not fill my whole life. I’d seen the light. But what did I do? I embarked upon a lifetime of spare-time voluntary management and administration for the Church and the community. More work! At least this was work in areas where the other members of the family shared my deep commitment. We have each found reward. But each of us has paid a price.

I was escaping into an all-enveloping life of work. What I was escaping from, we cannot be sure. We each had our coping mechanism. Our deeply shared interests in church and community created a bond which may have been difficult to create in any other way. And whatever our motivation, we certainly contributed to the life of the communities we sought to serve. But the imbalance caused by dedication to work and to the service of others, while not taking proper care of ourselves, took its toll.

What is work? What is life? We tried to strike our own balance and didn't always get it right. But there is a balance which must be struck. And the time to stop to reflect, and to consider the balance, is before the event and not with hindsight. Work-life balance is a very individual matter. We must decide it for ourselves; and if we truly love our neighbour, we must make sure that we do not seek to impose our own imperfect balance on others."

Paul Pearce