

Impacting the Workplace: A New Conceptual Framework Where Vocational Calling Meets Missional Competencies

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Abstract

While some Christians work in specifically Christian workplaces or contexts, the majority of Christians work in environments that would not be described as Christian or that might even be characterized as hostile toward Christian morals and values. No matter the environment, Christians can embrace a vocational mindset and recognize ways they are able to serve others in both left-hand and right-hand kingdom opportunities as they present in mundane as well as miraculous moments. Yet it is often the opportunities to explicitly share about one's faith that go unnoticed or even ignored due to feelings of inadequacy, apprehension, or unpreparedness. This is where the concept of missional competencies can be utilized for training, supporting, and encouraging Christians working in secular fields and workplaces. The authors of the current paper suggest a new conceptual framework where vocational calling meets missional competencies and discuss the impact on individuals, churches, schools, and institutions of higher education. Suggestions for future research are also provided regarding ways to measure, analyze, and continue the discussion on how best to apply and study the benefits of this new framework of support for Christians working in but not of the world.



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One way that Christians engage in society is through their workplaces. Within their vocations, Christians are called to be faithful to the Gospel by working diligently as unto the Lord and taking opportunities to share the Gospel. Secular environments pose unique challenges to this pursuit of Christian faithfulness, but this does not negate the responsibility to live and work faithfully. Having a vocational mindset is to recognize opportunities to serve others in any role, any environment, and any moment as the masks of God.¹

Understanding and recognizing personal missional competencies can allow believers to participate in evangelism even in public or secular spaces. While God calls people to serve through *all* of their various roles, relationships, and responsibilities, many believers spend a majority of their daily lives at work. The authors of the current article posit a new conceptual approach to workplace thriving based on the combination of a vocational mindset and areas of personal missional competency. While this approach can be applied to any of life's vocations, this paper is primarily focused on impacting the workplace. Applications for individuals, the Church, schools, and institutions of higher education will be discussed regarding ways to prepare and support those who are currently in the workforce and those who are thinking about and being trained to enter a professional sphere. Suggestions for future research will provide pathways for continuing the work of measuring and analyzing the new conceptual framework suggested in this paper.

Context

Many Christians do not know or understand whether their work is important, especially if they are not directly working in ministry. A recent post by a corporate-turned-ministry-employed product manager emphasizes this feeling: "I have been on my career journey in big and small organizations for 35 years. I have witnessed different organizational culture models and shifts along the way. In each of those places, my heart desired to find myself at the intersection of where my gifts and strengths met my passion for impacting eternal souls."² While every Christian has been commissioned to care about eternal souls (Matt 28:19), not every Christian has an opportunity to work in ministry.

"God is the first worker and humans are called to imitate God. You see a human at work? You see the image of God."³ The Lutheran understanding of vocation is that God is sovereign and at work in left-hand and right-hand reigns. God's Spirit moves in the right-hand reign to create faith and sanctify, whereas His imagers work in the left-hand reign to serve others in His place and by His design.⁴ Human imagers, even those indwelt by the Holy Spirit (i.e., Christians), cannot bring about salvation for others, but they are God's co-workers bringing order, beauty, and care from which we and others benefit.⁵ "The purpose of God's call is for the people of God to worship

God, and to participate in God's creative and redemptive purpose for the world."⁶ Of course, sin has entangled our work as it has with every aspect of our fallen world, but our vocations have an intrinsic purpose in serving our neighbors. As Schuurman describes, "the freedom of the gospel deepens the motive and enhances the effectiveness of love for God and neighbor."⁷ As Paul exhorts, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13). While a secular understanding of vocation refers only to one's paid work, a Christian understanding includes all roles, relationships, and responsibilities that allow a person to deliver God's gifts to their neighbors.⁸ Since some Christians have described feeling unable to make an impact at their workplaces, this paper is primarily concerned with the importance of workplace vocations.

Many works on vocation have gone to great lengths to impart an understanding that vocation has meaning even for those who are not clergy or otherwise working in fields tied to right-hand reign matters. This is important because many Christians have been called into occupations that are entirely secular or even undervalued in modern society: the custodian, the garbage collector, the childcare worker, the nursing assistant, the public school teacher, and so many more. These callings are vitally important to society at large, as well as in-and-of-themselves as so many have argued.⁹ This paper affirms the importance of secular vocations and also extends the importance to include their presentation as a vast mission field.

Problem

Many protestants enjoy a nuanced understanding of vocation as the presence of God in ordinary life. Yet in teaching the doctrine of vocation, there is a gap in identifying the missional aspects that can be cultivated in everyday work. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by investigating the development of missional competencies for any worker and to suggest a conceptual framework that combines the best of both workplace approaches. The suggestion is for Christians working in secular workplaces to first understand and view their work with a vocational mindset, yet be prepared to confidently engage in evangelism by way of specific and proactively determined areas of missional competency. By employing this conceptual framework, the left-hand tasks associated with serving one's neighbor are elevated and the fears surrounding evangelism in the workplace are diminished.

The need is great for sharing the Gospel, and this need presents even more prominently in secular workplaces. A vocational mindset means to see all workplaces, including secular ones, as places where God is at work in the lives of people. However, Christian employees often hesitate to testify about their faith out of fear of retaliation or because they do not feel equipped or prepared when an opportunity presents itself. There is a temptation for Christians to try to blend in or disappear into the secular landscape or find contentment in simply waiting for others to approach them and ask about their faith or good works (Matt 5:16).

There are many workplace environments and many ways to witness; therefore, it is not logical to suggest that approaches to sharing the Gospel are one-size-fits-all or congruent with a ten-step process. One solution is to encourage an outlook that

embraces the workplace as a mission field rather than a neutral environment. Helping Christian employees proactively think about the gifts and abilities they have and how those can be leveraged for the good of the Gospel can be a helpful step in preparing their hearts and minds for the mission set before them. Discovering and embracing missional competencies is one way for Christians working in secular fields or workplaces to be bold yet wise about the contexts and opportunities unique to their sphere of influence. A Christian worker who understands their secular position as one of their many vocational callings can contemplate their missional competencies to find ways to witness while also remaining gainfully employed.

Theoretical Framework

Christians work in all facets of society. Some workplaces can be described as conducive to or even established as Christian working environments, but most are not inherently organized around this understanding. In fact, some workplaces can even feel hostile toward Christian values and a biblical worldview. Yet, as Loy reminds us, “having a vocation does not mean that we are called out of the spaces we inhabit in common with unbelievers.”¹⁰ The theoretical workplace frameworks of vocational calling and missional competencies can be embraced and even combined to help Christian employees in any field work with integrity and shine brightly through good works to the glory of God (Matt 5:16).

Vocational Calling

There is a spiritual dimension to work¹¹ and the lens of vocational calling adds meaning to the labors of life.¹² This truth can be applied to the work of everyday life and any facet of one’s existence within a community. The doctrine of vocation considers how a Christian lives faithfully in the world—as a citizen, as a human, and a worker. Veith confirms the great deal of confusion that exists around the concept of vocation and the role of Christians in society.¹³ Keller emphasizes biblical wisdom as integral regarding an accurate and helpful understanding of what it means to work.¹⁴ Following Luther’s teaching, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod puts it like this: “On the surface, we see an ordinary human face—our mother, the doctor, the teacher, the waitress, our pastor—but, beneath the appearances, God is ministering to us through them. God is hidden in human vocations.”¹⁵

Missional Competencies

An evangelical missional mindset is one based in the Great Commission and a desire to bring Jesus to “the unknown, unreached, and uncomfortable areas” in society and the world.¹⁶ The mission of the Church is to “confess and proclaim the forgiveness of sins for Jesus’ sake . . . by the daily *witness* of the baptized children of God, His royal priesthood.”¹⁷ Kuhlman articulates it this way:

Evangelism finds its origin in an incarnational, sending God. Scripture is filled with prophets *sent* with messages to give, ordinary men and women *sent* with divinely mandated tasks to perform, disciples *sent* with ministry to perform, and even God’s own Son is *sent* with a purpose to complete. Sending is at the heart of what the Lord does.¹⁸

In the Lutheran context, historically, “mission-mindedness largely involved sending professional clergymen to some other countries . . . We were not sufficiently concerned about telling our neighbor about Jesus Christ or sharing the Gospel in our own community.”¹⁹ This awareness led to the addition of evangelism to the dimensions of mission-mindedness, which added both lay witness and local witnessing to church body goals. Even in 1979, Lutherans acknowledged the following:

A third aspect of adding evangelism to missions is the adding of the personal to the objective. This addition is difficult for Lutherans, who have always emphasized the objective truth of the Scripture. We have stressed the intellectual aspects of faith, understanding the catechism and accepting it with our mind. But when we witness to our friends and neighbors, we need to say not only, ‘This is what the Bible says,’ but also, ‘This is what I believe’; ‘This is what Jesus has done in my life.’²⁰

The personal aspect of evangelism is that it is a competency or set of competencies that need development, which is not of itself a brand-new idea. This concept is supported through theologians and organizations with a focus on the need for evangelism in missional fields that include one’s own personal sphere of influence. For example, the idea of *missional competency* and related skills is unpacked by the mission-minded, church-planting movement, Acts 29, founded in 1998. Acts 29 is a trans-denominational network that “plant[s] churches worldwide by recruiting, assessing, training, and supporting church planters.”²¹ The organization has identified eleven competencies needed for church plant leaders with specific learnable skills within each of those competencies. While some of the competencies apply more pointedly to the process of church planting, many can be extended to also apply to the individual planting of seeds that accompanies any act of evangelistic labor. The areas of missional competency from the Acts 29 list that apply most readily to workplace evangelism are shown in Table 1 and are each accompanied with an example of a micro skill for that competency.

TABLE 1. *Acts 29 Missional Competencies with related micro skills.*

Competency	Example (one of many micro skills for each competency)
Spiritual Vitality	“Knows the importance of prayer, not only as a means to the end of gospel ministry but also as an expression of an intimate & dependent relationship (Colossians 1:3–5; Philippians 1:3–8).”
Theological	“Possesses a clear understanding of sound doctrine (Acts

Clarity	20:28–31; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; Titus 1:5–9; 2:1, 15; Jude 3).”
Conviction & Commendation	“Communicates a compelling personal conviction (Acts 16:6–10) and a clear strategy (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 2:41–47; 16:9, 12; Titus 1:5).”
Relationships	“Establishes & maintains, as far as is possible, healthy relationships with Christians & non-Christians (Romans 12:18; Colossians 4:5–6; 1 Timothy 3:7; 2 Timothy 2:24–25; 1 Peter 2:12).”
Missional Lifestyle	“Demonstrates a passion to reach others through relationships & evangelism (Matthew 9:37–38; 28:18–20; Romans 1:16; 10:10–17; 2 Timothy 4:5) and consistently & effectively shares faith in a manner understood by non-Christians (Acts 17:16–34).”
Disciple Making	“Effective plan for discipleship and is skilled in establishing & multiplying small groups (Acts 14:21–23).”
Ability to Teach	“Demonstrates exegetical & expositional competency (2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2–4; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and able to teach the Bible into specific contexts & audiences (Acts 20:20–21; Romans 1:14–15; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23).”

Source: “Competencies,” Acts 29, accessed October 8, 2023, <https://www.acts29.com/competencies/>.

Note: This table contains some of the competencies and is a partial list. The competencies more specific to church planting were purposely not included for the sake of clarity. The authors focus on and highlight the competencies with direct application to evangelism in the workplace.

Other church-planting organizations such as the late Timothy Keller’s City Church also identify particular competencies which Keller first outlined in 2001 and are as follows: speak in the vernacular, enter and retell the culture’s stories with the Gospel, theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation, create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive, and practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level. Of great relevance to the current study is the third skill to train laypeople for their vocations. Specifically, Keller notes, “the laity needs theological education to ‘think Christianly’ about everything and to work with Christian distinctiveness” while at the same time “demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square toward those with whom we deeply differ.”²²

While not every believer is called to the vocation of church planting and may or may not need to be trained in every micro skill, every believer is called to the Great Commission and the planting of seeds. In his book on Christian mission, John Dickson delivers this point by indicating a distinction between one whose calling is the specific role of evangelist versus the callings of all believers to the Great Commission. He argues that there are six practical ways that scripture shows how even non-evangelist believers can be missionally competent in promoting the Gospel: with prayer, with finances, through the works of their church, through Christian behavior, through public praise, and in daily conversations.²³ Indeed, Jillson discovered that Christians in public education actually possess some of those certain competencies which are discernable through their specific behaviors.²⁴ For example, “Christian teachers in K-12 public schools pray, read the Bible, [and] attend corporate worship,”²⁵ which are markers of the “spiritual vitality” competency, and even show evidence of all tested competencies. Beyond simply having an “apt reply”²⁶ ready for every conversation, having these specific aptitudes enables Christians in secular spaces to live intentional Christian lives. Even though mission-mindedness in the Lutheran Church was historically discussed regarding global missions and later by acknowledging the need for adding the personal to the objective, it can and should also be applied to all areas of personal and daily influence, the workplace being one such place where this can and should happen. Because missional skills and aptitudes are teachable and have been appropriated for use in research, they have a place to be considered alongside the concept of vocation and can be apportioned where suitable for vocational application.

A New Conceptual Framework

Based on the existing foundations of vocation and missional competencies, the authors of this paper suggest a conceptual framework that combines the inherent aspects of vocation with the skills-based elements of missional competencies. Together, this conceptual approach elevates every workplace as ripe with opportunities to serve others and to go further by recognizing specific opportunities to take a missional approach to service through purposeful evangelism in the workplace. A vocation mindset elevates every moment to a place of importance regarding the call to love one another, and a missional-competencies mindset encourages Christians working in secular spaces to capitalize on specific moments in time for right-hand kingdom work. The conceptual framework being suggested does not downplay the need for having a vocational mindset nor does it diminish the role of understanding missional competencies. Rather, these should always be woven together.

When describing the workplace in terms of vocation, Wingren declares it to be the place where workers can bring God’s gifts to others,²⁷ and Taylor describes this as loving others by providing what is needed.²⁸ Those same workers can think on and even practice using missional competencies when an opportunity presents for lovingly addressing someone’s need to know about Jesus.

Perhaps one pitfall associated with only applying a vocational mindset regarding the secular workplace is the possibility of giving so much importance to left-hand kingdom service and concern that opportunities to think right-handedly in the

workplace get glossed over or even missed. On the other hand, a stance that one is only serving in the workplace during right-hand kingdom moments of missional evangelism is to overlook the significance of the mundane.²⁹ When the concepts of vocation and missional competency are combined, the approach means recognizing that everyone is body, mind, and spirit and then being open and ready to lovingly work to address the root of someone else's need. Possibly, a person's need is in body or mind and a left-hand act of service is most loving. However, the need might present in the spiritual realm and require right-hand evangelism.

The vocational-missional framework and approach can be exemplified when a Christian public school teacher hears a colleague complain about being worn down by a challenging student who continues to act out and disrupt the class. Offering to bring them their favorite vanilla latte the next day is to serve in body and fulfill the vocational calling to meet the needs of others in body and mind. But the same concerned colleague can also serve by using the moment to describe how it is helpful for them to think of challenging students as fearfully and wonderfully made and loved by God (Psalm 139:14). This colleague has applied the missional competency of conviction and commendation by sharing a Bible-based strategy for working with challenging students, and by doing so in a non-threatening way, has potentially avoided the pitfall of sounding judgmental or accusatory toward the disgruntled colleague.

The concept of proactively pondering areas of missional competency is rooted in the fact that moments to share or speak right-handedly, or serve others in spirit, are often overlooked or dismissed out of fear or a lack of confidence. The Christian co-worker might have easily missed the opportunity, might have worded the commendation differently, or might have stopped at filling a physical need. Rather, the workplace evangelist capitalized on an earlier recognition of missional competency in the area of conviction and was ready with the micro skill of communicating a compelling personal conviction as a way of sharing a Biblical truth. Important to communicate here is that there are times when meeting a physical need is the necessary or best way to serve one's workplace neighbor. However, a worker who combines a vocational mindset with a proactive understanding of missional competencies is equipped to move between left-hand and right-hand service with greater confidence and less apprehension.

Applications

Christians "are called to faithful, transformative participation in the life of this world."³⁰ To avoid bias toward one direction on the spectrum of witness in secular workplaces, from quiet service to overt evangelism, it can be helpful to consider the ways in which a vocational-missional framework can be applied. In a work context and as a research construct, "callings and vocations can be pursued within all occupations."³¹ In the context of workplaces, a focus on vocation reminds the worker that "the proximity of the needs of those nearby combines with the availability of resources to place priority on service to those close at hand."³² A missional approach

to vocation has applications in several avenues, including, but not limited to, the individual, the Church, schools, and institutions of higher education.

On the individual level, it is important to look at one's areas of competence and identify the areas of growth needed as well as ways in which vocation and skill intersect in order to leverage those skills for missional opportunity. As Keaton indicates, employees who have influence over whatever space they are in "can use cognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies to help them increase job performance [and] self-leadership to aid them in becoming more missionally competent at an earlier . . . point in their career."³³ Most adults spend a large percentage of their time—whether in a physical or virtual work space—creating, maintaining, or establishing relationships with others as a direct result of the work environment. For this reason, Christians working in any setting, but especially those in a secular work environment, can benefit from combining a strong awareness of vocation, which includes recognizing the daily opportunities to serve others, as well as confidence that comes from understanding personal missional competencies, for those times when service presents as an opportunity to evangelize.

Churches can assist with this by developing classes or training programs targeted for parishioners in secular workplaces. The classes would focus both on doctrinal training in vocation as well as on missional micro skill development. For example, a church might hold a Bible class to improve the theological clarity competency, or teach a course using Youth for Christ's (formerly YoungLife) three-story evangelism approach³⁴ to give participants the confidence and skills needed to evangelize through storytelling in the workplace, contributing to competency in a missional lifestyle. Even in regard to church worship, Tiefel argues that a commitment to Lutheran liturgical worship has contributed to evangelism, outreach, and the growth of disciples because "the Liturgy showcases that which the Holy Spirit used to make disciples: Word and Sacrament."³⁵

Schools, both public and private, are also ripe for evangelistic purposes. In one example from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), their 2022 School Statistics Analysis Report noted there are 1,855 LCMS schools with 21,191 educators serving over 162,000 pupils; of the pupils, only 38,000 (27%) report themselves as LCMS members.³⁶ Likewise, in 2017 only 5,523 of 40,283 enrolled in Lutheran Education Australia's Schools (LEA) self-disclosed as Lutheran by religion.³⁷ This represents a mission field which is in need of outreach. As Valleskey notes, "it is only natural that the Lutheran elementary school, which is a part of the congregation, should see the purpose of the congregation as its purpose also."³⁸ Steinberg³⁹ identifies best practices by which to serve this purpose, including having a staff member dedicated to outreach, having the pastor(s) serve visibly in the school, and having a consistent invitation to discipleship. Additionally, an important consideration for career development professionals in the context of both public and private schools is "the extent to which a calling or sense of vocation can be encouraged or instilled in individuals with career-related concerns."⁴⁰ Keaton furthermore notes the importance for public and private school teachers to use self-leadership strategies to become more missionally competent.⁴¹

At the university and seminary levels, institutions have tended to focus more on one or the other in terms of vocation and missiology. Rather than leaving one out, it is

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important for educational programs to assign importance to both and to remain “acutely aware of the need for creative fusions of Christian beliefs and practices with the cultural contexts in which the church finds itself.”⁴² Overall, there are many areas in which the intersection of vocation and mission form a praxis for Christian living. Higher education program developers and professors can consider the proposed vocational-missional framework as one approach rather than two distinct or stand-alone approaches to training future workers in any field for the work of recognizing opportunities to serve one’s neighbor in body, mind, and spirit.

Future Research

The current paper is focused primarily on establishing a new conceptual framework for how Christians can work with integrity in secular workplaces. While data on the topics of vocation and missional competencies were not collected or analyzed to determine empirical results, there are ways to extend the conceptual framework through qualitative and or quantitative methods. For example, qualitative research questions can be written to investigate workers’ perceptions of vocation and or their personal areas of missional competency. To investigate the framework using quantitative methods, survey scales can be used to discover correlations between aspects of vocation and missional competencies. The authors of this paper suggest a new framework for investigating the mindset and role of Christians working in secular spaces and suggest there is room for research studies that apply a narrow focus on associated and related variables and phenomena.

Conclusions

Rooted in the gap of identifying the evangelistic aspects that can be cultivated in everyday work, the authors of this study suggest a new conceptual framework for the study of Christians in secular workplaces that combines the doctrine of vocation with the practice of missional competency. Implications are discussed regarding ways for individuals, churches, schools, and institutions of higher education to respond and apply the vocational-missional framework and suggestions for future research extensions are provided as pathways to collecting and analyzing data to further extend the framework empirically. As Schuurman rhetorically considers, “who can measure the degree to which Christendom . . . expressed the leavening influences of the gospel? The gospel must take shape in language, music, story, the arts, forms of community, and more. This process necessarily involves a creative fusion of the gospel with elements of the surrounding civilization.”⁴³ The current authors suggest that “creative fusion” in the secular workplace should be based on the coalescence of vocation and mission in order to impact the world with grace and truth.

Endnotes

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