

Good Work and Its Future: Toward Respect, Engagement, and Meaning

**2020-21 Community Conversations
Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work
Concordia College
Moorhead, Minnesota**

Work today and its future

Work provides the means by which society produces many and various goods and by which people pursue livelihood and personal flourishing. Livelihood provides economic subsistence through earned income from paid work, self-employment, business ownership, and accumulated wealth. Livelihood can also come from family supports, community networks, and government assistance. Arguably, people able to provide for themselves ought to work in fairness to others for the goods they receive from society. They ought to work diligently to the best of their abilities. Beyond individual livelihood and value rendered to society, work can enable life-long growth and development of the whole self and even religious meaning as a calling to serve others or improve the world. Work, then, is basic to the human condition and latent with social and personal benefit.

Unfortunately, the benefits of work are not widely experienced today. Only one third of workers in the United States (and even fewer abroad) report being engaged with their work. They lack opportunity to do their best, to develop talents and skills, and to participate in workplace decisions. Most U.S. workers today are not engaged, and some are even actively disengaged. For these persons, work involves a “job” that provides monetary compensation for rented labor and little more. Such persons, by choice or necessity, typically look outside work to fulfill personal and social needs.

Are high rates of work disengagement a problem? Why do they exist, and what can be done to make work better, even good? Can we assume most workers—perhaps all—want something more than pay for their labor? What should society do to respect and enhance human work—for all? How should society begin to organize work so its future will be more productive and fulfilling than most workers report today? Is good work for all a moral imperative?

2020-21 program of the Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work

Consistent with “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,” the social statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on economic life, Concordia College calls our community to offer learning that supports responsible engagement in the world. A responsibility ethic calls Christians and all persons of good will to consider the future in matters of moral understanding and response. This outlook enjoins reflection on the long-term

consequences of personal and collective human action today. Human work is changing, for better or worse. Engagement with the future of work and the goods it creates raises many complex, urgent, and demanding questions.

The 2020-21 program of the Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work will enable participants to understand and engage key questions about good work and its future. It will explore Christian perspectives that respect and enhance the life of work and thereby serve social and personal wellbeing. It will allow participants to practice community of moral deliberation to enrich personal integrity and conscience and to support human flourishing. Through 2020-21 events, Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work will host a sustained conversation driven by key questions toward practical ethical reflection for a future where work fulfills and gladdens all human life.

Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work invites anyone interested in moral and religious reflection upon work to join this conversation. The center serves students, faculty, and alumni of Concordia College as well as business and religious leaders in the Red River Valley. The 2020-21 program seeks to be accessible and attractive to these stakeholders. It will serve strategic discussion about student work and student learning at Concordia College while seeking to expand awareness and interest in the mission of Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work. The questions explored in 2020-21 invite further attention in years to come.

Resources and approach

Christian thought provides abundant ideas and commitments to reflect normatively about good work. The social teaching of the ELCA will be a principal resource for the 2020-21 program. Recent books by various social thinkers and the publications of civil society organizations provide further insight into the future of work—as well as resource persons for the program.

Due to gathering prohibitions of the coronavirus pandemic, the 2020-21 program will be undertaken in two parts—fall and spring. The fall program will be online and free to the public. The spring program remains to be determined in content. Because the program seeks to support sustained conversation and because conversation can take unanticipated directions, the spring program will be announced in December. It is expected to be online and free to the public. Online programming affords an opportunity to create borderless conversations with diverse and expert perspectives across our region, nation, and world.

The conversation will begin with several assumptions. The first is that ELCA social thought commends conversation about good work for all persons. Good work should not be understood as the privilege of the few. Bad work should not be viewed as the trade-off workers must endure to participate in the consumer society. The conversation will assume most persons want something more than livelihood from work, but that these personal and social goods are difficult for workers to experience—according to extensive Gallup polling. These difficulties will be understood as consequences of socially-constructed institutions and patterns of activity that can be changed with sufficient social will. Given the scale and

character of these difficulties, they deserve careful attention—both to better understand good work and what must be changed today to improve work in the future.

What is going on in work today? What should be done to make it better? Assuming workers want and deserve more than pay, the conversation will consider how workers typically seek at least three personal goods—respect, engagement, and meaning—consistent with their human dignity and unique identities as persons. When persons expect paid work to affirm their dignity and support their identities, the workplace becomes a space of vulnerability and risk, as well as opportunity and gain. While persons also seek these personal goods outside the workplace, they are right to cultivate them at work and to judge workplaces that disregard these goods as deficient and even dehumanizing.

The conversation will examine disappointments and harms that can occur in the life of work and consider constructive ideas for humanizing labor. Because the burdens of good work do not fall entirely on employers, the conversation will consider ways in which workers have an active part to play in creating personal and social goods at their places of work. Society has a part to play as well through social policy and cultural activity. Good work for all must be a shared endeavor of employers, workers, and society at large. The 2022-21 Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work program seeks to support this shared endeavor.

October Conversation

Essential workers in peril: Workplace safety in pandemic times

With the advent of COVID-19, the public workplace has become an environment of new lethal risk. To mitigate infection, government authorities use stay-at-home orders that exempt certain workers deemed “essential” to critical infrastructure such as healthcare and agriculture. Similarly, many private-sector employers now allow or require some employees to work from home while expecting others to work in public settings with varying health risks. These in-person jobs are also deemed “essential” to organizational services and operations. Who are these essential workers? Are they protected well from COVID-19? What measures should employers and society take to provide workplace safety for all workers in pandemic times?

November Conversation

Black, indigenous and people of color at work: American business responds to racism

In addition to the pandemic, race relations in America are top of mind and conscience for millions today following the murder of George Floyd. The Business Roundtable, an influential association of CEOs leading businesses that employ 15 million Americans—along with dozens of other American corporations—have joined the public outcry and have pledged active support for ending persistent income and wealth disparities between BIPOC workers and white workers and the structural racism that supports them. How does racism shape and determine the employment realities and work experiences of Americans today? How do efforts of the

business community to eliminate racism compare with other sectors of society? What responsibility does business have to actively oppose racism? How can American business make a difference to end racism?

December Conversation

Precarious labor in the gig economy: In search of workplace security

As a result of globalization, economic recession, corporate downsizing, and other events, 20th century patterns of enduring and secure employment have given way to growth of contingent workers in the “share” or “on-demand” economy. A new class of independent contractors has emerged in response to unstable and insecure work. While this “gig” economy still represents a small part of U.S. employment, it brings significant changes to the life of work and raises critical questions about the future of work in a context of employment instability and insecurity. Efforts to address these changes are under way. For example, portable benefits programs to mitigate insecurity are being proposed. Is independent contractor work in the gig economy good work? If not, why not and what should society do to make it better?

January Conversation

To be announced.

February Conversation

To be announced.

March Conversation

To be announced.

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