

Good Work

Interview with Craig and Susan

“You spend more waking hours with people, you're colleagues with than you do with your husband, wife, or children or whatever, whatever it is.”

We often separate our work from our personal life and even our spiritual lives. But with so much of our time spent at work, could our faith have a lasting impact on the job?

“To follow Jesus is a holistic thing, what does it mean for me to be a Christian in this setting here?”

Jo: I'm Jo Chamberlain from Messages of hope. Today, I have with me Craig and Susan from Engage Work Faith, a South Australian organisation dedicated to connecting people with faith in the workplace.

So welcome, Craig and Susan.

Craig: Thanks for having us.

Susan: Yes. Thank you very much.

Why it's important to engage with faith in the workplace

Jo: It is a pleasure. So tell us, why does the organisation Engage Work Faith exist?

Craig: We are trying hard to help Christians build deep connections with the people they work with. Cos often they're involved in their church and their life, they often can have very shallow relationships at work, in the sense that they don't really know the other people that they're working with.

We exist really because. At the end of the day, **Jesus wants to transform every part of your life.** So, we're saying, if that's the case, then there's room for a ministry like this to try and help people when they're out in the workspace.

Jo: I can imagine that for most of us, we spend more time in the workforce than we do in most other places, don't we?

Craig: You spend more waking hours with people you're colleagues with than you do with your husband, wife, or children or whatever it is.

Supporting women in the workplace

Jo: So, Susan, your role with Engage Work Faith is to support women in the workforce. Why is this so important to you?

Susan: Quite a lot of women are part-time workers. So, they also have a volunteer role, if you like to put it like that, in the household, perhaps with their aging parents and of course with their young children.

And they're torn between trying to keep their workplace open. Economically, they need to go back to work, and also, they want to keep their options open for promotion. And how do you remain Christ-like when actually you're very tired?

Craig: And you're playing catch up ball every week on what everybody found out over five days, you gotta find out over....

Susan: That's right. That's right.

Jo: And you come back on a Monday morning, and things have been discussed without you, and then all of a sudden you have to catch up, and in between then and then I've had to deal with excursions, swimming forms, all these sorts of things. And then oh, I have to take the mum hat off and put the exec hat on...

Susan: I remember one woman saying to me, "I'm so stressed I have to put five different food groups in my child's lunch box, and it gets checked." So you can't just put the packet of this and a packet of that. It was more the organic original stuff. But it just created this extra stress for her.

So looking at ways of honouring your family, but also, where do you get your identity? It's not in the perfect house. It's not in the perfect this, **it's actually understanding that Christ values you. So how will that out work itself in your home and in the workplace?**

The challenge of connecting work with faith

Jo: Craig, you run the organisation Engage Work Faith. What have you noticed about challenges that working people face?

Craig: I was a pastor in a city church, and I had a congregation of – at that stage when I got to Adelaide - Yuppies is what you call them, basically double income, no kids. I had that sort of congregation. And they forced me to think about work. And I realised that they were going into settings where they really needed to understand how to behave as Christians, what it would mean for them to follow Christ in that setting? But because it wasn't at church, I didn't see it. So, they dragged me out into that area and that was really helpful.

This sounds dreadful now, but I just thought of them as some of their jobs they did at church. So they were small group leaders. They were PowerPoint operators. They helped with the music. I saw that side, but I didn't realise they were running places and handling difficult people in another setting altogether and making ethical decisions.

And so, it was just by being invited to meet them in their work context, and even if it wasn't in their office, just meeting them in their foyer often I got enough of an idea. What I was seeing was how difficult it was and how much work they had to put into applying their faith into that setting. And sometimes because it was so hard, you also had people switch off and just live a siloed life at work, just go in and do what they had to do in their work and then get out and keep their head down.

Jo: So, do you have any examples of someone who's been able to connect their work and their faith well?

Craig: There's a guy who's a top chef in one of the hotels here in South Australia. He's a brilliant chef. But when I asked him how does he go at being the head chef in his kitchen,

he said, "You do realise that most kitchens, they're horrible environments. Everyone gets critiqued." "And," he said, "they're shift workers, so they don't often have very good relationships." He said, "in my kitchen, what I wanted to do was I wanted to bring them together. I wanted to praise them when they did things well. I wanted to clap them when we got it right as a team, and **I wanted to show them what Christ was like.**"

Every morning he would get them together from the night before and say, "last night we were under a lot of pressure. But Jeremy here, he did an amazing job with those desserts, getting them out." And he would name the things and he actually lifted that whole atmosphere. And I think what a great thing for a Christian to do.

Jo: To actually think that just that attitude itself actually transforms the environment that they're in.

Craig: Yeah, and if you are the person eating in the restaurant, I'd rather eat food from people who are happy than people who are stressed and arguing.

Jo: I can imagine even a high-stress environment, everything's really quick. But I love the idea of just having that one person that champions either the faith or just that atmosphere of you are loved, you're accepted, I care about you, makes for a good working environment.

Openness to Christianity in the workplace

Jo: Do you think that people are open to talking and thinking about faith while at work? Might there be some opposition to hearing any sort of Christian message in the workplace?

Susan: I think people are anti the big rally and the big kind of thumping on the desk. And I think the world has become postmodern or, 'my truth is just as important as your truth.' So, I think understanding the culture and understanding that person's truth is just as important. And how do you actually speak into that? And that's really quite a challenge.

And I think one of the things we really aim to do is to encourage our Christian workers to build relationships. **Unless you build a relationship with someone, you cannot have the right really to actually speak into their lives.**

Craig: It's a humble posture to your relationships with people because even that hostility you talk about, I think that's breaking away and underneath that are generations who, they're actually hungry and they're actually thinking, "I dunno whether consumerism really works. I dunno whether... really I've got to where I needed it to be. I thought it would take me till 65, but I've got there at 35. So what is there now that I can do with my life?"

So, there's a lot more, spiritual hunger out there. I think people are asking questions less about Christianity's not true. They're saying things more like 'what's my purpose? What's my meaning here in this world? Where am I playing my time into for significance, though?' They're more personal, meaning sort of issues. That's the big shift I think, in faith, and people are trying to say, 'who am I really?'

Jo: And I guess that's the challenge these days when you do have so much choice out there. And like you were saying about, 'this is my truth, that's your truth.' When we start adopting our truths, what we are faced with is so many options. It's not like an either/or, it's 'which faith is it? Is it a faith?' Or is it just believing in nature? Is it believing in something else? Is it believing in science? But what I'm encountering more and more are just the

people who are just feeling that sense of something's missing. When they're faced with a crisis, when they're faced with a challenge, they go, 'I can't do this on my own.' So then what else is there? There's gotta be something more that I can lean into that's gonna help me through the life questions.

Craig: It's almost like that transcendence, that they're looking for some something beyond themselves in this world.

Responding to people hostile to faith

Jo: When you hear people say things like, "oh, church is just a crutch. Christians just use God as an excuse" or something else. What's your reaction to that?

Craig: I think it's good to ask people how they've come to that decision or that belief. So, I was with a friend the other day. He isn't a Christian, and he said, "I can't believe it because it's just too farfetched, it's too farfetched." And I wasn't quick enough at the time, but because of the friendship, I can come back to him on this, I think, I would say to him, "what makes you so certain it's uncertain? Because he has to have reasons for that. He has to have a basis for why he thinks that. And I'd be curious to know what it is: "How come you've come down on the other side? I'd like to know what your reasons are."

Susan: And Jesus did this. He often used a question back again when he was challenged by the Pharisees to put a question back to them, it made them think. So I think it's not feeling anxious about having the right answer at the right time, but being humble.

Craig: It's not about winning an argument.

Susan: No, but sometimes in the back of my head, I feel like I need to do that. But no, it's actually being humble, using the right tone and really listening to where they're coming from.

Practical ways to bridge work and faith

Jo: So how do you bridge that gap between work and faith?

Craig: I think some of the things we are talking about, which is getting people to understand that to follow Jesus is a holistic thing, what does it mean for me to be a Christian in this setting here? It might mean that I need to put some time in and get to know these people. It may mean that when nobody else empties the dishwasher, I empty the dishwasher and I don't make a big song and dance about it.

Certainly, in one place we had an office, they were very suspicious of a Christian organisation in the workplace. But about three months into being there, I was standing out near the dishwasher and one of the staff from a law firm came in and she just said, "we like you guys." And I said, "oh, that's nice to know." She said, "you empty the dishwasher and you clean up the sink."

Susan: Yes. I think that's important. Your life and the way you live it needs to shine as perhaps for some people quite different. So, if it's the five o'clock drinks, you might go, but you might not stay till, 12 o'clock at night. So you might go to socialise and then it's time to go home cos you wanna go home to your family. So you don't ignore that, but it's something that you make a conscious decision: 'I'll just meet with my mates and then I'll go home.'

Jo: It's interesting 'cause even our culture itself has foundations around the Christian faith.

Not so much about who Jesus is and what he means in society, but the message of kindness, love, forgiveness, care, restoration, all those things, they have a Christian theme. They're the core, this essence of our Christian faith that transcend into workplace culture and any other culture.

It's interesting that you mentioned about the workplace drinks. Sometimes the best conversations come out of even when you are in those environments and you are the one stable person that they can come and talk to. My husband had that experience where it was just one of his workmates came up to him randomly and said, "oh, I just love how you are a Christian and I can talk to you about anything." And my husband said, "oh, I didn't know that he knew I was a Christian."

What was it about his nature that said, 'I'm a Christian'? He was always there when his friend needed somebody or his colleague needed somebody to talk to. When there was a crisis, he remained calm. When there was a need, he was there to offer support and to unpack the dishwasher. He would be the servant in the organisation. And I guess if you're putting on the Christian values, people pick up on that and they go, there's something different about this person, but in a good way.

Susan: Yes, that's right.

Being patient and humble

Jo: Wow can we be mindful of people who just don't want to engage with Christians?

Craig: **You've gotta be patient. I think you've gotta have a good dose of grace. And you've gotta be in there for the long haul.** There's one situation I can think of and I changed the names, but let's say Daniel and Michael. Daniel's a uni lecturer and he works alongside Michael, who's a uni lecturer, and they've been in the same department. He prays for him every week in a small group that he goes to. Whenever they get anywhere near something Christian, Michael says, "I'm an atheist. And I've come to that conclusion after a lot of thinking."

Just last year, Daniel came to me and he said, "We had a really hard department meeting and everyone cleared out and then it was just Michael and I there. And Michael said to me, 'I think I've got a hole in my heart and I think you know how I can fix it.'" So he just said, "let's read the Bible together." So they just started reading the Bible together.

Come a year on, they've read through most of the New Testament with each other. The guy says, "I need to find a church." So then, Daniel goes around and helps him look for a good church to be in. And the guy gets baptised in the sea at Easter with his family.

It doesn't always end up like that, but the attitude of the Christian and the way Daniel operated is I think a model and instructive. **Christianity doesn't walk into the room when I come into the room.** God may have been walking with that person for years in a whole range of scenarios. So that's why asking questions and listening to their stories helps so much because you think, "oh, I'm not the first port of call here God, am I."

Susan: Yes, absolutely agree. I think we're all on a faith journey and I think we need to be curious about other people, be curious about our own faith. So I think that humble approach is really important. And understanding that sometimes ,it's being with people that we don't normally associate with as well. So, we need to get out of our own middle-class bubble as well sometimes.

Jo: The best example I can think of is the way Jesus did actually live his life. He wasn't there mixing with other people of faith. He was the one who was sitting with the people who were sick and infirmed. Even those people who were against him, he sat with. And you sit there and you go, what's stopping me from being out in the world and bringing that Christ-like attitude to my relationships?

Being a Christian friend

Craig: Do you know the thing that really gets me is the recent research is that 60% of Australians cannot locate a close Christian friend in their life.

So you think about the implications of that is basically they can't see what the Christian faith looks like with skin on. They're open to whatever stuff comes on the media. They watch films with gawky ministers in them. The couple who are Christians are always the ones who have got the most dysfunctional relationship in the Hollywood movies.

So I just think if the Christian said 'I'm gonna be a friend,' it would be a huge difference.

What does God say about work?

Jo: So what has God got to say about work? Is there anything in the Bible that helps us to frame what healthy work should look like?

Craig: Because I'm a Christian, that does frame the way I think about work.

So, there's God in Genesis 2 with dirt under his fingernails, putting a garden together for us to develop, not just maintain, but to develop and do more with. So that's the sort of world he's given us. Then we see the first thing that goes wrong is, among other things, work when we step away from him in Genesis 3. So work is messed up and it sucks after that.

And then we see Jesus steps into the world and goes, "I'm here to do my father's work." And what does he here do? He goes to the cross and restores the possibility of a relationship with that creator that we are in the garden with. And then he says, "I'll come back, and then all your work will add up to something."

So I think that alone is something that if Christians understood in their head when they're working, they're radically different from the people around them. People are working for all sorts of reasons. They're paying their mortgage, they're worried about something, they're trying to get ahead in their career, they are annoyed that someone got a step up ahead of them. And then when things go wrong, 'the world's against me' and all that. The Christian could just witness in their difference of how they understand work because of their relationship with God: "You say you are having a bad day. Why do you think, it happens this way?"

Jo: And I think us Christians, we are not immune to the same challenges that other people face. Like we all experience shame, guilt, frustration, brokenness, pain, suffering...

Craig: Things not working properly.

Jo: Yeah. Just the simple, like, "I've had a bad day." Christians get that too. But it's our response to that, that we can then speak to; we could fall to pieces or we could turn to God as a loving, gracious God with his arms of forgiveness, his love and tenderness for us, our identity and worth within him. Our lives can be transformed just by thinking about this one other element of my life that could make such a difference and bring me hope.

Craig: I think Tim Keller says, Christians can make some of the best workers in this world precisely because they are not overly attached to it at the end of the day.

Jo: Thanks Craig. That's a really insightful comment and a great way to finish the program today.

Thank you Craig and Susan from Engage Work Faith for sharing with us today. If you're interested in hearing more about how faith and God can be part of the workplace, visit **engageworkfaith.org.au**. And if you'd like to explore more stories from us, visit messagesofhope.org.au.

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