

Finding Synergy in Work and Faith

by Michael Kuo

When I entered the workplace ten years ago, I had absolutely no clue how to integrate my faith and work. More accurately, it wasn't something that I thought a great deal about. The two aspects of my life were so blissfully disparate during my college years that when work came in the form of a 60+ hour endeavor as opposed to classes which inconveniently interrupted my college life, I struggled to understand the value of what I did in the context of the Kingdom of God.

Sure, I read a couple of good books about faith after college. Rich Lamb, my InterVarsity staff worker's brother, wrote one and our InterVarsity chapter handed a copy to each of us as we headed to the homestretch of our college careers. But none of these books, at least to me, provided ample guidance and insight on why an alarming number of "on fire" campus evangelicals end up taking prestigious jobs and encounter spiritual dryness. I had acquaintances for whom the pressure of work absolutely killed any prioritization of the basic means of grace such as prayer and Bible Study. Others I knew had sadly left the church altogether, completely seduced by the lure of power and riches of making it to the top. Specifically, how were "work" and the post-college transition to that life complicit in such stories? And did it have to be this way?

As I dived headfirst into a consulting career with a (then) Big 5 firm, I was duly convicted that I needed to get plugged into a church and Christian community. Check. I didn't quite see how making a decent living engaging upper management clients and my faith life fit together in a practical way. Sure, I had the opportunity to tithe and I would certainly be a "good witness" in the workplace, but was there any other inherent value to developing marketing prioritization strategies for pharmaceutical companies or creating a roadmap for process reengineering for insurance companies? Or was this purely a moneymaking venture to pay my rent while giving part of my salary to the Kingdom?

For two years, I pretty much resigned to the fact that yes, my career was a missions field to love people as Jesus would while earning some money for the Kingdom and not much beyond that. I did, however, find myself growing increasingly disenchanted and demoralized with what I still believed was the limited Kingdom-value of the work of my hands. In the winter of 1998, I decided to take a couple of weeks off and visit an old college friend working for Scripture Union in Jamaica to do some missions work.

Not surprisingly, working with Scripture Union was spiritually refreshing and I enjoyed the chance to impact the lives of students with the gospel. What was surprising is how much of an impact the last couple of days in Jamaica had on my life.

We had already finished our missions work, and I was hanging out at the Scripture Union office with my friend when he looked at me and said, "My yoot, you're a skillful consultant aren't you? Why don't you help us get organized?" So for the next six hours, I did what any business analyst would do – identify the problem and craft a solution. In fact, it was pretty much what I did for my "real" job, but it was absolutely exhilarating. I wasn't simply helping a company add more to the bottom line or sell a product that nobody really needs – I was helping a ministry better organize itself so it could focus on the work of doing ministry.

A day later, I had created a simple database to track Scripture Union donors and members. In what can only be explained as the providence of God, the other Caribbean leaders of Scripture Union happened to be around for a regional meeting. All of them proceeded to ask for similar services. All of them had some sort of management, operational, or financial pain that they'd love to get some help with.

"Hmm...", I thought. I know crowds of Christian business professionals who want desperately to find ways to use their vocational gifts for the Kingdom and there are Christian organizations all over world who need business help. As Gene Rayburn would say, "We have a match!"

So later that year, Synergy Ministries was born and was incorporated 501(C)3 in a matter of months. The vision was to send teams of business and IT professionals and college students to Christian ministries for short-term missions projects where their skills could be used to support ministries out in the field. When Jesus talks about the harvest, we would be the ones oiling the tractors from an operational point of view so the missionaries could focus on reaching people for Jesus instead of how to manage their finances or building a website from scratch. There was synergy in the integration of work and faith. There was synergy in the opportunities for college students to apprentice underneath a Christian professional in a field of interest, doing real work. And as we've seen, there has been great Synergy in the positive experiences shared by both Synergy missionaries and clients.

Synergy (www.synergyministries.org) has since sent over forty people on twelve missions in nine different countries on five continents and continues under the leadership of a group of volunteers who are passionate about the vision. As for me, I am still working on integrating my work and faith, but I'm glad that Synergy provided more opportunities in my life to see how it might look.

Michael Kuo founded Synergy Ministries in 1999 and was the original Executive Director until passing torch in 2005. He is currently a Board Member at Synergy Ministries.