

# The “Ralph Winter Moment” of Lausanne IV: Workplace Mission

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## Abstract

At the First Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, Ralph Winter introduced the concept of “unreached people groups” and reshaped 50 years of missions. At the Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul-Incheon, the concept of “workplace mission,” as presented by Julia Garschagen, has the potential to reshape the next 50 years of missions. As significant as this “Ralph Winter moment” may be, there are also barriers that could cause the Church to miss it. This article will discuss the strategic value of workplace mission and the main barriers that need to be overcome to implement it.

**Key Words:** faith and work, holistic mission, Lausanne, workplace mission

## Introduction

At the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Ralph Winter drew the evangelical world’s attention to “Unreached People Groups” and reshaped foreign missions for the next 50 years. I came to the Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul-Incheon in September 2024 listening with eager expectation to hear the next “Ralph Winter moment” that could shape the next 50 years of missions, and I believe I heard it. While there were multiple themes that were worthy of global attention at Lausanne, there was one that has the potential to push forward the Great Commission for decades to come: workplace mission.

Julia Garschagen, German theologian and director of the Pontes Institute for Science, Culture and Faith, presented the plenary session entitled, “Holy Ground: Living Out Faith in the Workplace.” Garschagen’s presentation used an exposition of Acts to draw the evangelical world’s attention to the need to engage in workplace mission. This article will go through the main points of Garschagen’s arguments with my own analysis. It will then look at a few barriers that could potentially cause us to miss this significant moment in global mission along with points of application to overcome these barriers and better engage in workplace mission moving forward.

## Julia Garschagen’s Workplace Mission

*Jerusalem: Mobilizing the 99%*

Garschagen’s overall approach was to go through an exposition of the Book of Acts from the lens of workplace mission (Garschagen 2024). She began in Jerusalem, pointing out that it was not just apostles, missionaries, and church planters who spread the gospel throughout the ancient world. Rather, it was everyday Christians in their everyday workplaces who, as she put it, “gossiped the gospel” (Garschagen 2024) everywhere they went. The vast majority of these witnesses of Jesus were not pastors and evangelists but were bankers, fishermen, traders, soldiers, jailors, government workers, and social activists. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they had become the new Temple of God, and their new faith had a powerful impact on their workplace (Garschagen 2024).

It seems like a very basic point, but the idea that the Early Church grew and spread not only by apostles and missionaries but by regular everyday workplace Christians is especially important in the broader context of the Great Commission today. For example, Lausanne Movement CEO

Michael Oh stated in his opening night speech at the Congress, “Year after year, there are more people in the world who have never heard the gospel than the year before” (Oh 2024). Despite all the efforts in the past 50 years to send out more missionaries and reach more unreached people groups, despite the more than 9000 unreached people groups that have been reached with the gospel, and despite the incredible growth of the Church in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, it still remains that “. . .with the explosion of population growth in many of these same areas of the world, the trajectory is not an *acceleration* of the sharing of the gospel, but a *deceleration*” (Oh 2024).

If we, the followers of Jesus Christ, are ever to have any hope of finishing the task of the Great Commission, it is not going to happen by foreign missionaries alone. Garschagen pointed out that it is only one percent of the Christian population that are full-time pastors and missionaries. These facts point to the reality that if we who talk about evangelizing the world truly are serious about it, we need to mobilize the rest of the 99% of everyday Christians to engage in workplace mission (Garschagen 2024). Garschagen’s effort to draw mission leaders’ attention to the 99% builds upon Michael Oh’s own shift in attention to the 99%, as he has stated, “You [the 99%] don’t exist to help professional ministry leaders [the 1%] fulfill the Great Commission. We exist to help you do it” (Oh 2019).

#### *Philippi: Workplace as Holy Ground*

The next stop on Garschagen’s journey through the Book of Acts was Philippi, from Acts 16, where she referred to the workplace as “holy ground.” Through the story of the jailor at Philippi who was transformed by his encounter with Paul and Silas, Garschagen portrayed the workplace as a place of priestly presence, where those who are the Temple of God can work in integrity, where they minister God’s grace and love to those around them simply by doing the best job that they can in a way that is glorifying to God and that will bless all those who are around them (Garschagen 2024).

This reimagining of the workplace as holy ground removes the sacred-secular divide. That dichotomy has been a major characteristic of Western culture that has lifted up the role of professional ministers and missionaries. But this priority on the “sacred” professions has had the effect of disengaging workplace Christians from mission. So, understanding the workplace also as a sacred calling can empower workplace Christians to make a holy impact for God’s Kingdom in this world, not only on Sundays at church, but every day of the week in their workplace.

Garschagen’s desire to break down the sacred-secular divide joins Leslie Newbigin’s exhortation to reinstate the priestly role of every believer and avoid a clericalized church that only recognizes the service of professional ministers (Newbigin 1960, 97). Furthermore, Newbigin calls for every believer to embrace their missional calling to engage their faith in the workplace (Newbigin 1986, 143).

#### *Corinth: Workplace as Mission*

Garschagen then went on to Corinth to talk about working in the workplace as mission service. From Acts 18, Paul joined Aquila and Priscilla, who were leatherworkers like Paul, also known as tentmakers. Garschagen painted a picture of Paul, not just the apostle and missionary, but the tradesman, who would gossip the gospel to his customers, and invite his work colleagues to the synagogue to hear more about Jesus. She emphasized the idea of “the priesthood of all believers”

not as Luther's idea but as God's idea, that every believer has a holy calling to do ministry at their workplace.

This point is particularly important for the sake of global evangelization. If workplace Christians can really engage in ministry where they are, then they can do it all over the world as well. This shift in mission is so important, because it is so far from what the current reality is.

Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch, in their 2009 version of "Finishing the Task," point out that about 40% of non-Christians live in reached areas of the world (Winter & Koch 2009, 543). Imagine, for example, a Pakistani living in New York. That individual and associated community bring Halal restaurants, South Asian supermarkets, mosques, and even Islamic education centers for their children. They are not full-time missionaries, but they are certainly bringing Islam to the United States. The rest of the 40% similarly import their cultural and religious practices. By comparison, how are Christians influencing primarily non-Christian contexts? What percentage of Christians are living in unreached areas of the world?

One percent (Winter & Koch 2009, 543). Of course, there is the opportunity for those Christians to build churches, grocery stores, restaurants and even Christian education centers for their children in those unreached parts of the world where they live. But because they make up only one percent of the world's Christians, it is unlikely that they will build any of those things. And they are such a small minority where they are living, it is difficult for them to have an impact in those parts of the world. If the workplace really is a place of mission and ministry, mission-minded Christians need to be sending out workplace missionaries all over the world. The need is to send out not just full-time evangelists and church planters, although that is definitely still a necessity. But there is also a need to send out full-time doctors and engineers and musicians and teachers to unreached areas of the world, simply to work there and live there and become workplace missionaries to those areas.

#### *Supporting and Training the 99%*

Garschagen also stressed the importance of the Church's role in supporting workplace missionaries. While pastors and evangelists are only one percent of the Church, they have the role of supporting and training the 99 percent who are in the workplace. Garschagen made the comparison of the recognition that Christians and churches give to the one percent of professional ministers and missionaries, calling them, training them in seminary, and faithfully praying for them. But churches do none of that for workplace missionaries. Garschagen offered the imaginary example of churches interviewing workplace Christians during the Sunday service in the same way they interview visiting missionaries. Imagine churches organizing prayer networks for workplace missionaries in the same way they do for professional missionaries. Imagine commissioning people to be sent out to specific industry fields to engage in workplace mission in the same way that foreign missionaries are commissioned and sent out to specific mission fields (Garschagen 2024). And I would add, imagine prioritizing training for those workplace missionaries in a similar way that training for professional ministers and missionaries is prioritized.

This idea of recognizing and providing training for the ministry of workplace missionaries during the Sunday worship is also supported by Matthew Kaemingk and Cory Wilson in their volume *Work and Worship*. Kaemingk and Wilson propose that the Sunday worship should recognize the priesthood of all believers and that it should prepare them for the "active worship" of engaging their ministries at their workplaces (Kaemingk & Wilson 2020, 31).

If churches do not recognize and train Christians in the workplace as professional ministers and missionaries are recognized and trained, of course, not only are workplace Christians not going to know *how* to engage in workplace mission, but they are not even going to know that they *should* engage in workplace mission. But of course, that is not normally what churches do. And there are reasons why they do not do it.

### **Barriers to Workplace Mission**

Workplace mission can be a powerful way to refocus global missions in order to make major advances in the Great Commission in the coming decades. For mission leaders of this generation, this could be our “Ralph Winter moment.” But as important as this moment could potentially be, honestly, I think we are going to miss it. Specifically, there are three barriers that will likely cause us to miss it. But as I describe these three barriers, I will also suggest some practical ways we can overcome them.

#### *Sacred-Secular Barrier*

The first barrier is the sacred-secular barrier. Ever since the rise of secularity in the modern West, Western Christians have divided their existence into the sacred realm and the secular realm. The Church in the West has also exported that way of thinking to the rest of the world.

Because of this sacred-secular divide, church leaders and pastors focus most of their attention on the sacred realm, that is, the activities that go on in their churches. Within this framework, it does not occur to many pastors and church leaders (nor is it in their self-interest) to draw the attention of church members to the workplace. It is hard enough to get church members to come out for an event or even to give consistently in their offerings, but that could all be compromised if pastors start preaching that their workplaces are sacred as well.

Herein lies the nature of the barrier. The one percent who are professional ministers and missionaries are the ones who need to mobilize and train and send out the 99% of Christians as workplace missionaries. However, because all their experience and training and the priorities of their self-interest are centered on the sacred realm, it is counter-intuitive to draw the Church’s attention away from the sacred realm in order to focus on what has come to be known as the secular realm.

In order for workplace mission to have any chance at success, professional ministers and missionaries need to break down this sacred-secular divide altogether. Garschagen’s model of workplace mission was built on the theological foundation of concepts such as the priesthood of all believers and the people of God as the new Temple. There were also biblical concepts that Garschagen did not refer to, such as Michael Goheen’s “kingdom mission” (2014) and Christopher Wright’s “missional people of God” (2006). These biblical concepts underpin the idea that all these spaces and occupations that are traditionally considered “secular” are actually devoted to God and are themselves sacred as well.

In fact, Garschagen’s efforts to break down the sacred-secular barrier is building on already existing efforts in the “Faith and Work” movement. Ministries like Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s Center for Faith & Work (2021), and The Gospel Coalition’s teaching and training on Faith and Work (2024), and Michael Goheen’s Surge Network (n.d.) have been promoting and training Christians to impact their workplaces with the gospel and use their workplaces to impact the world for God’s Kingdom.

While Garschagen's proposal of Workplace Mission may be seen as a continuation of this Faith and Work movement, it goes beyond local gospel impact in the workplace, or even regional impact in major cities. Rather, Workplace Mission is a means of global evangelization.

### *Cultural Barrier*

The second barrier is the cultural barrier. The vast majority of workplace mission will take place in a culture that is unfamiliar to many professional ministers and missionaries. Imagine the culture of a software company where the Christian computer programmer works, or the culture of the hospital where a Christian nurse works, or the culture of a trading firm where a Christian investor works.

These are cultures that would be very familiar to those Christians in the workplace, but they would be very foreign to most pastors. And since it is the pastor who is supposed to be training the workplace missionary, this cultural barrier between the pastor and the workplace would be a significant hindrance to workplace mission.

For workplace Christians, if they are very involved in their church and are devoted to Christ, they may learn all the right theology, and they may be trained in all the right habits and lifestyles, but they may not know what Jesus has to do with engineering, or medicine, or programing, or investing. If that is the case, the gospel will not have relevance, and workplace mission will not go forward.

Furthermore, there are also the cultural differences between different ethnicities and different nationalities. Workplaces are not just diverse in their work environments; they are also diverse in the demographics of their workers. Therefore, workplace missionaries also need training in cross-cultural skills—an area that is better recognized and understood by the Church. Even so, it is still an area in which many pastors and even some missionaries are untrained and under-equipped.

In order to eliminate all types of cultural barriers, then, the pastor needs to learn the workplace culture. Think of what a typical foreign missionary would do to learn the culture of their mission field. They would spend time with the people, listen to their stories, build relationships, and live life together. That is what the pastor must do to learn the culture of the workplace. Pastors regularly ask their workplace church members to spend a week in a foreign mission field, or spend a weekend at a church retreat. Pastors should be willing to do the same, to spend an evening at a church member's company party, or visit a church member's office, or join a workplace basketball game or pub night. In order to understand how Jesus is relevant in the workplace, pastors must get to know that workplace. Only then can they begin to know how to properly train the workplace missionaries in their congregations.

### *International Barrier*

In addition to the sacred-secular barrier and the cultural barrier, there is the international barrier. Can you imagine what a game-changer it would be if the Church could mobilize the 99% of Christians who are in the workplace to be engaged in workplace mission? But even if the 99% of workplace Christians could be re-discipled to have Jesus impact their lives, and then re-educated to see the workplace as the holy ground of their own ministry, and then re-trained to know how to analyze their own workplace culture and apply Jesus to the needs of that culture, that still leaves the billions of people in unreached areas of the world who would have no access to the gospel in their language and culture. That is why the Church needs to overcome the international barrier.

Of course, it is still necessary to send foreign missionaries, both to unreached areas and reached areas of the world. But it is also necessary to send workplace missionaries; the Church needs to send Christian engineers, teachers, programmers, nurses, bankers, and whatever else, to all the unreached areas of the world.

There are actually some organizations that are already working on this challenge. There is the entire movement of Business as Mission which promotes Christian entrepreneurs to start businesses internationally for the sake of mission (BAM Global 2025). But there are also newer organizations that are sending out Christian professionals to be employed in other countries. For example, the 18.26 Network is an organization of the Presbyterian Church in America (n.d.). They focus on mobilizing what they call “vocational missionaries,” making connections, providing training, and overseeing member care to place Christians in professional jobs all over the world. But just like in the beginning of the unreached people group movement, the number of organizations and mission agencies who are focused on international workplace mission is far too small.

One idea to increase the numbers of workplace missionaries who would go internationally is to recruit them the same way that long-term foreign missionaries are recruited, by first recruiting them to go short-term. But what would a short-term workplace missions trip look like? Imagine a long-term foreign missionary who has connections with locals in the mission field who work at a hospital or an investment firm or a software company. That person could invite a Christian doctor, or Christian investor or a Christian programmer, to come and teach a seminar, or do a short-term project for a couple weeks. The initial impact would be just to help that local company with their work, which in itself is enough. But it could also help strengthen the relationship between the foreign missionary and the local friend, and it could provide greater inroads of relationship and impact into that company. For the short-term workplace missionary, the experience would give a taste of what it is like to cross that international barrier, and they may gain an interest in coming long-term as well.

There are also greater possibilities in term length with international workplace missions. It does not have to be just short-term or long-term, but a new category of “medium-term” could be created. As a foreign missionary, one could either go short-term, for a week, or a few months at most, so that it would not be too disruptive to the rest of that person’s life and career. Or, a workplace missionary could go long-term (four years or more), so that the mission becomes that person’s actual life and career. However, taking two or three years out to spend in another country as a missionary (as heretofore understood) would be too disruptive to most people’s actual career, so most would only do it as a stepping stone to go long-term. But for workplace missions, a person could go for one, two or three years, and it would not disrupt their career. Rather, it would actually contribute to it. Imagine if someone had a few years of experience working at an investment firm in Dubai, or at a bank in Jakarta, or at a software company in Bangalore. It would not hold back that person’s career, but it would push it forward. Moreover, one would not have to commit one’s whole life to it up front, but just like any other work internship or temporary work placement that person could work a few years and then come back to their regular job. Workplace missionaries would have this medium-term option to make a real impact in another country and then come home.

## Conclusion

In thinking back to the 1974 Lausanne Congress, there must have been many Christians at the time who heard Ralph Winter's call to unreached people groups and thought, "That's just crazy. That's way too hard, there's no way we can do it." But now at this moment, 50 years later, the Church has come a long way. This movement has resulted in more than 9000 unreached people groups being reached with the gospel. Today, Christians may look around and see how entrenched the workplace is in a secular environment, where the gospel is seen not only as irrelevant but as unwelcome. The Church today can also hear the call to workplace mission and think, "That's just crazy, there's no way we can do that." But we can. It will be difficult, and it will take changing the way we think about mission, train for mission, and engage in mission. And honestly, when I look at the barriers, it seems more likely that we will just let this moment pass us by. But what the Fourth Lausanne Congress has given us is the chance to look to the future, see the barriers ahead, and navigate a way around them. If we have the vision and the faith to do it, this could be our Ralph Winter moment.

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