

**Faith & Work Award Dinner**  
**Ridley College, The University of Melbourne**

**Mark Scott, Former CEO of the Australian Broadcasting Commission**  
**13 May 2016**

**You can also watch Mark's address [here](#).**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My self-imposed silence on leaving the ABC has lasted a fortnight, which is about 13 days longer than some predicted.

The ABC is such a constant presence in the lives of so many of us – and working there you did feel surrounded by all that was produced by the hardworking staff each day.

For good or ill, I had a significant media profile – at least amongst those who cared about the media. And my twitter forays could also generate a bit of a stir on occasion.

But now is the time for a winter hibernation. Disappearing for a while. Hopefully not my winter of discontent – anything but. I am content to be someone with nothing to say, or perhaps more accurately, someone we no longer need to hear from for a while.

From what I can see so far, the ABC is doing just fine without me.

But this invitation from Gordon Preece, even coming as it does in my early period of exile, was interesting. I hoped it might provide me with an opportunity to pause and reflect a little bit on things I am learning along the way. Perhaps also, to contemplate a bit where we are heading. So I will clear my throat, make a few observations, then disappear again if I may.

It is flattering to receive an award like this – particularly when I consider others who have received it, like last year's winner Barney Zwartz.

But you also do fear at moments like this, the Imposter Police are ready to storm the doors and march you away.

I make no great claims about having successfully integrated faith and work. Anything that may seem like a strategy is more in practice, muddling along, making it up as I go.

I remember hearing Tanya Plibersek speak at a Radio National forum about families. The question came for her – as it always seems to come for successful women. She has a high profile demanding job – as does her husband. And she was asked, how she coped with all the demanding personal and professional demands in her life. She just let out a sigh and said – there is no secret – you just muddle along. Never a truer word.

And that is all I can really speak about tonight about Faith and Work. I have just muddled along.

But let me share a bit about how I see things: in operating at a workplace, in creating media spaces where Christians can operate – and about the future media landscape.

Having held a high profile job, you do get invitations to speak a numbers of events if you are known as a Christian. I have been happy to do some.

And in NSW, in this era, anyway, there are always other names if I can't. I can suggest trying the Premier or the Police Commissioner; the Governor of the Reserve Bank or the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University. Of course, the Federal Treasurer is a more recent addition to those on the circuit of prayer breakfasts, weekend retreats or annual church dinners.

To be frank, at times I have had a reluctance to say 'yes', not just because of diary demands and other pressing priorities. At times you feel like you are being asked because you are high profile and a Christian – that for some you are the equivalent of the local boy who made good. A sense that someone from the flock can emerge through the flack and survive.

And I also knew, that at question time, there would be an inevitable polite undertone of cross-examination as to why I hadn't made the place where I worked a little more Christian, a little more supportive – why I hadn't used what I had been given, to help the faith a little more.

My answer often wants to be that I feel like I have far more expertise in talking about my work than my faith. Media law reform, the impact of convergence, the transformational power of technology, the empowerment of audiences: these I can discuss about with some confidence.

Having a high profile job may give you a platform to speak, but what do you feel qualified to say on matters of faith? Does the status of your business card give you authority to speak of spiritual things with any authority or insight as well? Do you really have anything to say, apart from the fact that you have more questions than answers?

## **A spiritual journey**

One of the advantages I have had in playing senior roles in the media is the chance to have interesting conversations with a range of people – often in settings that can be conducive to more expansive off-the-record discussions.

I remember asking one leading churchman – a very well-known figure in his circle – whether he felt he was on a spiritual journey.

He seemed rather surprised by the question, or confused by my sentiment behind it. And he didn't embrace the concept.

His explanation was that as a leader, he had reached a position on key issues facing the church – and around key spiritual doctrines. These were fixed positions for him - truths. And it is was clear that he saw his position as needing to advance these positions for fellow-travellers and defend against those who would attack or undermine.

As I listened to him, I felt how far his position was from mine.

I very much feel like I am on a spiritual journey. Mostly overwhelmed by how little I know or understand. Tested by the reality of all I see around me. Challenged by thoughtful people who have asked questions and come up with different answers. Being someone shaped by life's experiences.

For me, the journey is the thing.

Some years back I made a joyful discovery of *The Odyssey*, through Robert Fagles vibrant translation – and afterwards, stumbled across Cavafy's poem based on the epic, *Ithaka*.

In a sense, the story of The Odyssey is that the journey is the thing. All Odysseus wants to do is get home to Ithaka, where his beloved Penelope waits. But his restlessness is frustrated at every turn.

The advice of Cavafy is clear. He writes:

*Keep Ithaka always on your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.  
Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.*

So my comments tonight need to be seen in the light of feeling like I am on a spiritual journey – as are so many others are. From a Christian tradition; a follower of Jesus Christ. But perhaps with more questions than ever, and more concern about the state of Christendom – and how people see Christians and faith in this era.

For matters of faith though, I find solace in the words of TS Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place  
for the first time.*

I want to talk a bit about issues of Faith and the Media – but let me first speak about faith at work.

### **Faith at work**

At times I would be asked the question about how being a Christian has affected how I do my job.

The term Christian can be so loaded now. Everyone brings their own interpretation to what it means – most particularly those who would not identify themselves as Christian.

At times it can be seen as ideological. It can be infused with an expectation of clear fixed positions around social issues, or a mindset of judgement and expectation. Pretty narrow, pretty closed. Perhaps a little bit boring. They are the perception challenges.

My answer had little to do with media policy and programming and decisions about what people saw and heard.

But reframe it to asking how being a follower of Christ has shaped my approach to my job – it seems a little different. It moves to reflecting more how I want to act, the person I aspire to be, the things I want to do.

The reality is that the people who were in the best position to judge were those who worked with me everyday.

It is the people who work closest with me at the office, who would have come to best view of how I was going, attempting to walk in his footsteps.

Any claims I would make about being a follower of Christ in the office would pale in terms of credibility compared to the testimony of those who watch, who listen and who really know what it is like.

I suspect all of us are conscious of our credibility gaps. But it is hard to really be aware of them in practice. Just how big is the gap between the person we want to be and the person we actually are most of the time? We may not be in the best position to judge that ourselves.

My office colleagues aren't here to tell you about me (thank goodness). Just thinking about that helps keep me grounded and challenged.

But it is simply a test of applying some New Testament principles. Am I quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry? Do they see some fruit of the spirit in my life – including those not always associated with CEOs: patience, gentleness and self-control. A sense of what is important being beyond the simple material things of this world. Evidence of faith, hope and love – the greatest being love.

Fundamentally, is there any evidence at all that what matters most is the people – acting with compassion for the throng that is around.

In answering those interview questions, I would try and make the point that being a Christian doesn't shape as much what I do, but who I am – or who I want to be. The Christian decision-making, the Christian actions, should be hard to parse or separate out.

In any workplace, particularly as a CEO, you have a myriad of opportunities to work through these challenges – because of the humanity there is all around you.

I have often discussed this with my wife, who runs a girls school in Sydney. In both our workplaces, it is all about the people.

On leaving the ABC, I was struck that my memory was often drawn to the challenging moments of humanity. A work place is full of life – people living with the complex and demanding, the inexplicable and the overwhelming.

We had terrible moments – some of which received considerable publicity. The sudden deaths of valued staff members; crises of work, health and safety; flashpoints from post-traumatic stress – and what seemed countless examples of serious illness or accidents.

I don't want to detail them, but suffice to say that when leaving, a number affected checked-in with me, harking back to those difficult days. And the grief and pain for some may fade, but never totally disappears.

When I think of how I responded in these moments, I just hope I was up the task. Showing love and compassion and generosity. Being there for people. Hopefully doing as Jesus would have done, providing comfort and support and strength.

Who knows? Sometimes, people would just say to me, that 'you're a good man'. A deceptively simple phrase, but one that indicates, on that occasion, you somehow did some good for people in need. And something that you would want a follower of Jesus to be. A good man. A good woman.

But then, you are aware of other times. When you didn't focus properly on the person in front of you. When you were constantly distracted by the transient and peripheral and lost sight of what was important.

There are times when the letters and the phone calls arrive describing you as anything but a good man: the decisions you made, your thoughtlessness, the things you allowed to happen.

It is when you only realise later the insight in the observation widely attributed to Philo of Alexandria: 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.' When you realise that at times you weren't there, you made the wrong call. Or if you made

the right call, that you delivered it in the wrong way. That you weren't a good man and that you feel short of the person you should be.

Senior leadership lays so many traps. A narcissistic bubble. Flatterer's words. Remoteness. A comfort that that can crush empathy and insight. So many offers to talk – so much self-believe that what you have to say is most worth everyone hearing.

I would have never understood before taking on a chief executive role, how closely the organisation watches you: assesses your interest, your mood, your engagement. And in doing so, comes to a judgement of you. Not just about whether you are up to the job, whether you are steering the place in the right direction – but the kind of person you are. Whether they would want to follow you – and whether they think you are the real deal.

And so finally, internally, my test was pretty simple. In an organisation where very many weren't Christian – never or no longer – I just wanted my presence to make sense. If people heard I was a Christian – I didn't want them to roll their eyes, make a snide remark or cackle loudly. But if they simply shrugged their shoulders and said 'fair enough' – or even better – attributed some of the better attributes they saw in me to faith – then I would accept that.

As we all know, as we all have seen – all the public proclamations can be eroded by what is not so public. And my starting point, in thinking through what it has meant to be a Christian at work, has started not in front of a microphone talking to the many, but how life takes place with the few.

## **Doing the job**

There are Christians who are media executives. A hardy bunch, not vast in number, as best I can make out.

But I have been struck a number of times by what some people expect Christian media executives will do or should do.

From those without faith, there can be concern that the Christian media executive will use his or her platform to push their personal cause: to shape the discourse towards a Christian world view – in news, in comedy, in drama and debate.

That is their fear.

In early profiles of me taking on the job at the ABC, for some people, descriptions of me as a Christian were almost as alarming as me once having worked for a Liberal state government. The sanctimonious barbarian was inside the gates.

And then of course, I have met the Christians, who fully expect a Christian media executive to use his or her platform to push what they see as their side: to shape the discourse towards a Christian world view – in news, in comedy, in drama and debate.

That is their expectation.

You can find yourself the muggins in the middle.

The Christians can be tough. I remember speaking at a function only to be denounced for being the editor-in-chief of newspapers that ran horoscopes.

I simply responded that the research showed that the loss of horoscopes would cost up over 10% of sales – and that I could make that decision, shortly before being fired. At which point the Christian questioner would no longer have a Christian as editor-in-chief of the newspaper he read. My response undoubtedly disappointed.

(As an aside, the biggest name in horoscopes back then and still now was a man named Jonathan Cainer – an Englishman with an extraordinary following. I remember a lawyer telling me she didn't believe in horoscopes but he was amazingly insightful for her life. I hadn't thought of him for a decade until last week, when I saw he had died at the age of 58, suddenly ... and unexpectedly.)

I do remember laughing when I heard that the horoscopes at one afternoon newspaper were doled out to underemployed sub-editors, who, cigarette in mouth would hammer out on the keyboard: Virgo – stormy days ahead; Libra – be ready for a lucky break etc etc. There was nothing a good sub couldn't do.

Let me explain how I have approached being a Christian as a media executive with the fears and expectations it might trigger.

The media organisations I have worked for have been solidly secular – although the Fairfax family came from a strong Christian tradition, and in Sydney, would shock readers by commissioning a punchy evangelical editorial on Easter and Christmas – a tradition that continued long after the family lost control of the mastheads.

So at no time was I asked about my faith in any job interview. At no time was my personal world view expected to shape the work done at the papers, or at the broadcaster.

And the job has been to reflect modern Australia to itself. To tell Australian stories. To host a national conversation and to celebrate our shared culture and cultural diversity.

Broad, respectful, inclusive – increasing our understanding of each other and the world around us.

I am very pleased at the steps we took at the ABC over the past decade to do this. I feel programming is far more inclusive than it has ever been. We hear a range of perspectives, encourage debate and try to create an environment where the audience is smart enough to make up its own mind.

That has been the achievement of programs like Q&A and The Drum – let alone all the conversations we put to air each day on ABC radio.

Of course, it is all in the eye of the beholder. Some newspaper columnists never hear a conservative voice. But daily I would get complaints from people who insist they never turn on a program without seeing a representative of the conservative Institute of Public Affairs.

As the Prime Minister commented after one skirmish at the ABC generated a flurry of attention, when it comes to the public broadcaster, everyone is a programmer.

At times there have been some valid criticism of how we covered some issues concerning religion and people of faith. It applies to Christians, but not exclusively so.

The essence of drama is conflict and at times, there has been criticism that discussion programs have been cast for conflict and conjecture, in a way that creates theatre, but not enlightened discourse.

So people who feel they sit in the mainstream: be it Christian or Muslim or Jewish – feel that the voices who are represented to speak for them, do not do so at all. And there are some sceptics who feel that Richard Dawkins hardly speaks for them. It can feel like the casting takes place on the extremes.

Or at times, casting fills a stereotype. Christians rolled up to provide predictable views on a narrow range of social issues – and do not disappoint in their predictability. But who do disappoint many of faith, who are watching, but who have established a more complex or nuanced response to issues than is being reflected on their screens.

It is an issue I held discussions on at the ABC, challenging producers to dig a little more deeply, to find some nuanced voices, to not just round up the usual suspects.

Just like the IPA has appeared more often on the ABC airwaves, so have organisations like the Centre for Public Christianity. And the opportunities have emerged for them to speak on far broader issues than simply debates around sexuality.

The appointment of Scott Stephens at the ABC to edit wonderful Religion and Ethics content has also given a rich home for debate and discussion, with articles of genuine depth and substance winning global acclaim.

I know there will be many critics about the recent Q&A exploring diversity of Christian perspectives in modern Australia. Who made the panel – whether they were really Christian, the issues covered, the things unsaid that should have been said.

But there was an hour, on a top-rating show in prime-time, discussing Christian issues on the public broadcaster. An interesting moment I would have thought.

You do get questions and challenges, about where are the Christians in the mainstream? Where is the Christian view? It is a perspective that Lyle Shelton from the Australian Christian Lobby will raise, without irony, while making two appearances on Q&A this year. And while others are tweeting, why is Lyle Shelton always on Q&A.

Some hold a view that still in modern Australia, the default perspective that we start with a Christian view, a Christian presence, a Christian assumption. That our first principle is as a Christian nation and that it should be reflected as a foundation underpinning all that follows.

But traditional faith is simply not as important in the lives of millions of Australians, compared to those of generations ago. It is self-evident. There are lower levels of mainstream church attendance. People identifying as Christian in the census are much lower. And it is no longer a requirement that you demonstrate you are an ethical and moral contributor to society by your church attendance and identification, the way it once was.

There is a great interest in spirituality, there is a search for meaning, there can be a seeking of truth. But it is wrong to assume the Christian truth as a starting point for discussion.

For Christians to be outsiders, to feel like outsiders – might be strange to some, but in fact, it is just returning to a traditional state of events. Not the mainstream, but the contrarian, challenging outsiders. Outsiders who are invited in, not because they automatically have a seat at the table, but because they have something interesting and compelling to say.

## **Faith and the Media Revolution**

I thought it might be worthwhile for me to conclude by making some broader observations about what is happening in the media sector, the transformations I have witness first hand over the past ten years. They will profoundly affect all of us and I suspect present challenges and opportunities to people of faith.

A few years ago, Deloitte wrote a report on the impact the digital revolution will have on different organisations. It was titled: Digital Disruption: Short Fuse, Big Bang.

Media organisations were at the short fuse, big bang end of the disruption. Immediate sweeping changes, impacting on audience behaviour, content creation and business models.

Over a decade at the ABC, I saw the creation and arrival of ubiquitous smartphones and tablets; the sweeping penetration of social media like Facebook and Twitter; the global distributive power of streaming superpowers like Netflix and Spotify; and the disruptive dominance of tech firms like Apple and Google.

At its core is the breakdown of the local media market. An ecology that linked local content to local advertising. The paper in the regional city with its own reporters, to create a newspaper that was financially underwritten by local advertising.

But through the Google and Facebook algorithms, local advertising needs can be met from the US West Coast, with ads delivered to people from those communities from servers far, far away. We have seen what has happened to regional and national newspapers as a result.

Similarly, in Melbourne, you could only watch the television programs telecast in Melbourne. The programmers at a handful of networks, determined what you could watch and when.

But think of your own behaviours now. Watching major new television series, released globally worldwide at the same time, possible streamed from the other side of the world. A diet of global podcasts, many of which were never broadcast first on the radio. You have an ability to read the world's finest newspapers before the print edition is delivered in their home cities.

It is a personalised world for you. The power has migrated from the producer to the audience. You decide what you consume and when and how. What you see and hear and how you engage.

And the personal world, though wonderful, comes at a cost. The breakdown of the shared world, a collective space, a commons.

When there was less choice, media organisations by definition needed to be broader and more inclusive. The target audience was the mass audience. Something for everyone didn't mean everything for someone. There was a mix, a plurality of content. It was the only way to reach that broad, local audience.

Now the local audience has much more choice than the local offerings.

And the online world is so big, the choices are so vast – there is a place for you to belong.

You see the challenge in politics and in special interests. It is now increasingly possible for you to spend your time looking at websites, listening to podcasts and watching programming that confirms your ideological view; that frames issues the way you see them. For you, it's just right.

If you get lost in these insular worlds, your perspectives are reinforced. You are rarely confronted with alternative views, fairly presented. There is little genuine dialogue and open discussion.

It leads to the current circumstance in American politics – where many in the country are astounded by the rise of Trump, which they didn't see coming. And clearly many others are astounded the others are astounded – hadn't they been listening to the anger? To the fury?

There is risk in retreat. To comfortable ghettos. To closed eco-systems. To worlds that affirm and don't challenge, or provoke or confront. All of which leads to lack of insight, lack of empathy and understanding.

For those who feel on the outside of their local community, there is a broader world to embrace. Small communities in many places can aggregate large. Niches scale.

I suspect for some Christians, it means there may be a comfortable media world that reinforces and affirms, that does not challenge or confront, that can feel like home.

You can increasingly see it globally. What may be a small market in any one place becomes a massive global market for Christian music and film, for blogs and websites. Christian fitness, Christian diets, Christian dating websites.

I was interested in the comments for the chief analyst for a major film box office website, reporting on the rise of the Christian film market who said:

*'Religious crowds are underserved and they have been for a while now. What you're seeing is a big section of the population that wants movies that speak directly to them with themes they can relate to. So there's no surprise that's there's this rush out.'*

*'If you're going to make something aimed at religious crowds just go the whole way: Aim it at religious crowds without the secular movie-going population because the reality is there's a big enough audience globally for you to just make a film that's aimed directly at religious people and that's it and still succeed. It doesn't have to be everything for everyone.'*

A single film isn't significant. But the pattern could be. It shows a pathway to place removed from where the gospel is meant to speak.

As I wrestle for understanding on my spiritual journey, I am always comforted by the way Jesus acts in John Chapter 3 and 4.

For there in chapter three is Nicodemus – in the night: the driven, intelligent leader, seeking the truths about life's deepest questions from Jesus.

And then in the next chapter, the women from Samaria. Jesus speaking deep truths to her, across the great divide of gender and ethnicity and conventions of social behaviour.

Jesus speaking to those who seek him and those who find him standing right beside them.

But the kingdom is in the streets, with the people. In word and deed.

At times I have looked on social media – and there are the Christians at play (or at times more appropriately at war). Debating who is right over what issue. Firing off shots, scoring points in the latest battles on women's ordination or marriage equality. Or complaining that the people Q&A says are Christians wouldn't pass their doctrinal test.

Jesus had little time for debate with the religious folks. He saw the crowds and said they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Despite all my questions and challenges along a spiritual road, I have always found that to be a truth I understood. I have seen enough through years working in the news, or working alongside people wrestling with life's realities, to know that the world should not be this way. We do feel harassed and helpless, we need words of hope and compassion. We need light to find a path to truth.

In serving Him, we serve them. And in serving them, we find Him.

So – some thoughts for you this evening before I resume my vow of silence.

Thought fragments really, because I am still thinking all these things through. That's the value of being on the journey that lasts a lifetime. Lots of thinking time.

Thankyou for your hospitality this evening.