

NETWORKING: Christian conscience and multi-level selling

Prepared by Rev R W Whittall. Adopted by the Commission, July 1993

What is Networking?

'Networking' describes the direct sales approach used by some international companies, who market their products through a network of individual agents. In many cases, the agent not only sells the products to personal contacts, but also seeks to recruit further agents from among those same contacts. The larger this personal network becomes, the greater the rewards for the 'networker'. Some companies give little or no emphasis to building a network; others vigorously promote this aspect as a means of achieving substantial financial success.

These companies have been careful to avoid the discredited practices of 'pyramid selling' — in which few (if any) products were actually sold — but their 'multi-level' operations are still regarded with suspicion by many people, and some of these companies have been criticised in business journals (eg *Business Review Weekly*, 24.1.92).

In general, it can be said that networking offers people the opportunity to build up a personal business selling legitimate products, with the flexibility of working from home, full or part-time, without the financial commitments of traditional shopkeeping or other self-employment. In a time of high unemployment, networking has given many people a satisfactory alternative to regular work, in businesses which — it must be stressed — are neither illegal nor immoral. However, there are ethical questions which should confront a Christian who seeks to earn a living through networking, and also some underlying theological and pastoral concerns which legitimately worry pastors with members working in this way.

An Important Word to All Workers

It must be clearly and strongly stated that there are moral and ethical questions which can and should confront any Christian working at any job. None of us is free from a responsibility to examine — in the light of God's holy law, and under the gospel — our motives and actions as we live and work in today's world as baptised, redeemed and sanctified children of God.

The principles under which the activity of a 'Christian networker' can be examined are no different from those which apply to a Christian farmer, lawyer, labourer, teacher, shopkeeper or any other occupation. In some cases, however, the potential problems are more obvious and arise from the nature of the work itself, from the way that work is structured and organised, or from the expectations and direction of those who control a particular business.

Pastoral Concerns

Some pastors are particularly concerned about the involvement of their members in certain networking groups which are leading them to question or drift away from existing church membership (see *The Lutheran*, Letters, 21.12.92; 18.1.93; 24.5.93). Tapes and study materials sent to those who attend convention worship services clearly reveal the para-church orientation of this particular form of networking, with its basis in decision and prosperity theologies, and its open encouragement to networkers to seek out Christian fellowship supportive of the philosophy and goals of 'the business'.

On offer is a mixture of fundamentalist Christianity and the promise of financial security, or even real wealth. It is packaged in the arcane vocabulary of the network (reminiscent of the Lodge) — the hierarchy of 'directs', those 'up-line' and 'down-line', the leadership of 'emeralds' and 'diamonds', of work described as 'drawing circles'. It is therefore easy to see how some people — grateful for the chance to work productively in a time of high unemployment — can be drawn into an essentially sectarian grouping, with inevitable conflicts with their existing church membership.

While the commitment and enthusiasm generated by these groups cannot be questioned — and is perhaps to be applauded in comparison with our often half-hearted approach to ministry and mission — it is disturbing to see such gifts misused and channelled into areas fraught with spiritual danger.

Two Issues for Networkers

- a) The first is largely a matter of (social) ethics, and involves what might be characterised as the 'outward form' of networking — the expectation that those involved will use personal contacts (eg wider family, friends, church contacts) both to sell their products and also to seek to advance their position in the organisation (and gain financial rewards) by recruiting others to become a part of the network. How is this to be achieved, without compromising Christian conscience?
- b) The second, more difficult, underlying issue is that of God at work in this world, and his blessing on our business endeavours. Does he promise material success as a reward for hard work, and even in return for (or along with) spiritual growth and maturity ('strong faith' or 'commitment')? Some aspects of networking philosophy appear to promote this idea in a particularly crude form, and is related to a view of spirituality which places an emphasis on the innate abilities of the human will, as well as to the belief that growth in personal and congregational life will be enhanced by the application of certain key business principles.

The Christian Response

- a) *The Social Question:*
Although people involved in selling — of any kind — often appear stubbornly unaware of the negative reactions engendered by aggressive sales techniques, they should be confronted by the fact that their enthusiasm for their product or service can often ride rough-shod over the ordinary rights of a customer. Christian salespeople should be careful to avoid practices which involve any suggestion of:

- i) bad manners — taking advantage of personal relationships to further business interests, in an inappropriate or insensitive way;
- ii) bad business ethics — where pressure is placed on a person to buy a product, or become involved in a venture, regardless of her or his true individual circumstances; and
- iii) moral wrongdoing — where deceit of any kind is used to induce a person to buy a product or service, or to persuade them to undertake commitments on the basis of false or misleading information, or where shoddy goods are offered or misrepresented.

Quite simply, we are applying here the wider implications of the Seventh Commandment, 'You shall not steal', as conveyed by Luther's explanation: 'We are to fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbour's money or property, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of making a living' (*The Small Catechism*).

Because the networking approach seeks to exploit for business a person's existing family and social contacts, those involved would seem to need special diligence and sensitivity to avoid problems particularly with i) and ii) above — and naturally a Christian would be unable to continue involvement in any scheme whose methods clearly breached the Seventh Commandment (iii above). Care is needed to maintain openness and honesty when seeking to recruit new agents; the nature (and name) of any business venture should be clearly spelled out in the initial approach.

Unfortunately, the defensive — even secretive or threatening — reactions of networkers to any criticisms (as experienced by some pastors, and reported in various business magazine articles) only serve to support the negative reactions of those outside 'the business', and to feed speculation and suspicions as to the true nature of networking.

b) *Blessing and Success:*

There seems to be little doubt that the multilevel sales organisations (like many business ventures) use the promise of potentially great financial reward to recruit new salespeople, and that some Christians work within this field under the (misguided) assurance that God's special blessings are evidenced by their success in this business.

In response, the following points can be made:

- i) Lutheran theology teaches a clear distinction between the 'theology of the cross' and the 'theology of glory' (see, eg chapter 5 of P. Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther* [Fortress Press, 1966], and Luther's Explanation to the Appendix to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism [LPH, 1983, p.25-29]). This, we believe, is the heart of biblical theology — revealed supremely in the life, teaching, and redemptive work of Jesus himself — which proclaims a God whose work in this world lies hidden under apparent insignificance, humility and failure, and not in the trappings of worldly success and achievement.
- ii) We also teach the freedom of the Christian, under the gospel, and this includes the freedom to work at one's calling in the world (Augsburg Confession XVI, especially para.5 [*Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert,

p.38]), and to know God's blessing on our work most surely in the assurance of his forgiveness of our sin, and in the opportunity to grow in faith and love towards him in the midst of life's struggles. That freedom is also the liberty to serve one another in and with the gospel, not to strive for personal gain or advantage at the expense of our neighbour's well-being.

- iii) While the pursuit of wealth and financial security also comes under the area of Christian freedom, and pastors dare not burden individual consciences with guilt in these matters, evangelical preaching cannot ignore the challenge to preach both law and gospel to those who imagine that prosperity is a God-given right or who appear ignorant of the many responsibilities which come with material blessings. Greed, whatever form it takes, is always sin (Luke 12:15; 1Cor 6:10; 1 Pet 5:2).
- iv) In parish situations where 'networkers' are actively recruiting, a pastor has the right and responsibility to be informed of such activities, particularly where he has reason to believe that people are being misled by teaching regarding a 'gospel of prosperity', or are being lured away from the fellowship of word and sacrament. In such cases, careful but clear counselling will be required for those involved, and the pastor should seek the support of the parish lay-leadership for any action taken.

For Pastors

As those called to speak God's word specifically to the gathered community of God's people (and to the wider community, when occasion arises), pastors should:

- a) themselves work in a manner consistent with the centrality of the cross, avoiding the temptations of a 'theology of glory', humbly acknowledging the blessings of God (seen and unseen) on those who work faithfully in accordance with his will;
- b) model a cheerful and positive attitude to daily work of all kinds, and encourage the kind of energy and enthusiasm which brings its own rewards to business, family and parish life, whatever the particular circumstances;
- c) be intelligently informed about the world of work and business, especially within a local community, and build their reputations as concerned counsellors who are ready and willing to discuss members' ethical and practical concerns;
- d) take opportunity, in their public teaching and preaching, to guide people into a true understanding of the nature of work and service in today's world, anticipating the problems faced by members in their everyday lives.

A Final Word

Pastor Andrew Pfeiffer (*The Lutheran*, Letters, 24.5.93) gives sound advice which will serve well as a conclusion to this presentation; he suggests that:

people involved in network marketing [should] continue to see it only as a business venture, avoiding such services [convention celebration events], and critically assessing any literature and tapes they receive.

As always, 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 John 4:1)!