Keynote Presentations at the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace 2011 Conference

Wednesday 1:00 – 1:30 Bill Pollard

Judy: Alright, everybody. We are about to begin again. Please take your seats.

Thank you. Just at lunch I introduced Sarah Miller but I want to tell you a little bit more about her. Sarah Miller is an executive coach to physicians, a deeply spiritual woman and a person who has got an incredible background in marketing, believe it or not. She has been helping us get the word out about this conference and keeping me on track and keeping me organized in terms of how large our outreach might be and how large our vision might be. So, I have asked her if she would introduce Mr. Pollard to us.

Welcome, Sarah!

Sarah Miller: Thank you, Judy. It’s my pleasure to introduce Bill Pollard. Here are some of the facts about his work life. He has been the former Chairman of the Board of ServiceMaster Company and some of you may recognize some of the names such as Terminix, TrueGreen, Merry Maid and American Home Shield. He has also been the Director of Herman Miller Inc., Coveted Companies, and he is a Director of his alma mater Wheaton College in Illinois. He is from Illinois and grew up there. I want to tell you the big things about Mr. Pollard and that is he has been married 52 years, he has four children, one of his daughters is a pediatric nurse and has four daughters of her own and that’s a miracle if you do work like that. His son Chip is with him today and he is the President of John Brown University and followed in the footsteps of his father by being trained as an attorney. And he has another son and another daughter and 15 grandchildren between the ages of 25 and 5 years old.

So, I gave Mr. Pollard a little quiz over lunch and I asked him, I said “What is your favorite word and sound?” and he said “I love beautiful classic music” and his favorite word was ‘love.’ Then I said “What sound or word do you dislike?” and one he said ‘hate’ and he said “the sound I dislike is the music my grandchildren play.” And then finally I said “Mr. Pollard, when you reach those pearly gates, what is it that you want to have said to you?” and he replied “Well done. Now, good and faithful service.”

So, I am pleased to introduce Mr. Pollard.

Bill Pollard: Well, I am delighted to be with you today and participate. I count it a real privilege to participate in this event at the Tyson Center. I very much appreciate the vision of John Tyson in setting this up and the good work of Judy and her team including Sarah and all of the rest of them as far as putting this conference together. I also enjoyed hearing my brother-in-law this morning. You probably don’t know that but the best decision he made in life was to marry my sister. So, Don and I have experienced a lot of life together and as we found ourselves ultimately in leadership of companies, we also shared ideas and thoughts
including times when we could bring people from the two companies together with respect to some common interests. And then a special privilege is to have my son here today and Judy had I have spent a couple of days with Chip and his family. So, that’s been another good reason to come to northwest Arkansas.

Etched in stone on the floor of the chapel of Christchurch College in Oxford University are words written by John Locke over 300 years ago – “I know there is truth, opposite falsehood and that it may be found if people will search for it is worth the seeking.” Now, over the last three years we have seen a collapse in financial markets, domestic and global economic meltdown, foreclosures and unemployment at record levels. In fact, in today's paper the question was whether or not they could finish these foreclosure issues within 50 years in some of the states based upon how they are proceeding. And also largely from my perspective an ineffective involvement of government in its attempt to correct the situation. While there have been some signs of improvement, there is still uncertainty and, yes, there is an appropriate use of that word ‘sustainability’ again because there is questions about sustainability of certain things in a market system and certainly there are major questions about predictability. What were the causes for this financial collapse? Everybody has been trying to discuss and find that out over the last three years. Was it the self interest of profit seekers compounded by forces of unrestrained greed? Did it reflect a lack of moral compass and a duty of care in the underwriting, packaging and selling of innovative securities? Or are we to conclude that these up and down cycles of a market-driven economy are just inevitable?

President Obama soon after his election suggested and I quote “We have arrived at this point as a result of an era of profound irresponsibility that engulfed both private business firms and public institutions including some of our largest corporations and the seats of power in Washington DC.” So, have we lost a desire to seek and know truth, to act responsibly as we do business, to determine what is right for the common good. Will more legislation and regulation solve the problem? As we conduct business in this pluralistic society, can we agree on a source for moral authority? Can the business firm make money, create wealth, and also be a moral community for the development of human character and social concern? Can leadership make a difference? Does one’s faith have a relevance in the way business is conducted? And are the concepts of continuity and sustainability still relevant in this volatile and rapidly changing world?

As we try to answer these questions, I think we should first recognize the reality that it is people who make markets work, people who can be right or wrong, good or evil, honest or dishonest, prudent or selfish, people who are imperfect and weak, sinners yet made in God’s image with dignity and worth in their own fingerprint of potential, people who have been created with the freedom of choice but who are also morally responsible for their decisions and actions. We should also recognize that in this dynamic and changing market world the ethical and moral decisions required of business leaders cannot be determined by a set of rules. Nor can a socially or commercially desired result always be achieved by the interjection of more government, funds and control. While legislative actions
bring a higher standard of accountability and can provide a stick for more penalties for violations, they cannot assure the honesty, the character, the integrity of the people involved in making these decisions.

So, how can these virtues become more an integral part of the way we live, the way we do business, the way we lead, and the way we conduct ourselves in our various work environments? I suggested that we need a transformation in how business firms are led and how future business leaders are taught. Those of us in the market with a strong faith commitment should provide an example for others to follow. We need to bring our faith work on Monday and to learn to integrate the claims of our faith with the demands of our work. In so doing, we should be concerned not only about what people do and how they do it in their work but also about the person they are becoming in the process. This important concept relating to the responsibility and accountability of a leader became a reality for me as I was mentored by my predecessors in ServiceMaster and also through the writings and friendships and advice of Peter Drucker. Now, Drucker is often referred to as the father of modern day management and he reminds us that the management of people in an organization – we are not managing things, we are managing people – is truly a liberal art and requires the understanding of what makes up the human condition. “This”, he said, “includes the recognition that a humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or its rational nature but it also has a spiritual dimension. It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good or evil and to make moral judgments. It is the driver for developing a philosophy of life and a world view that can provide a moral and ethical standard that is not relative, that is other oriented and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

Management as a liberal art is about treating people as the subject of work, not the object of work. It’s about crafting a culture of character and recognizing that the business firm has a duty of care only to the customers it serves but also to the societies within which it operates. To be effective and responsible in so doing, Drucker concludes that leaders must be able to draw upon the knowledge and insights of the humanities, social sciences including psychology, philosophy, economics, history and ethics but also, he goes on to say, the leaders must have an appreciation of the role of faith to determine the ultimate purpose and meaning for life and work of the individual.

Now, on questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of the 19th century philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard. In Drucker’s essay entitled The Unfashionable Kierkegaard, he comments as follows and I quote: “Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature, not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center and yet responsible and free.” If you are further interested in exploring this whole concept of management as a liberal art, a new book has just
Thus there is a growing recognition and the fact that the Center is established here for faith and spirituality is another confirmation of that. In the learning and understanding of what it means to lead and manage people and in that process, this should not be divorced from questions of faith or even the role of God in one’s life. While some in the secular academy may find this conclusion difficult to accept. Others are ready to recognize its validity. In his book *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago, a Nobel Prize winner, traces the history of religious faith in America and its effect on our society and economy. In so doing, Fogel concluded that a major issue in our culture today was simply a lack of the distribution of what he referred to as – now, this is an economist speaking – spiritual assets. There was, he said, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs. He also went on to say that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexity of ethical issues, they will have to acquire more spiritual capital.

Now, for us in ServiceMaster, we decided when the company was formed back in 1947 by our founder to be overt about this issue and we raised the question of God and the role of spirituality in our mission statement. Our company objectives were simply stated – to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably. Those first two objectives for us were end goals. The second two were means goals. We did not use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was in fact the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God’s world. As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn’t want to play by these rules, we didn’t belong in the ballgame but also we tried to encourage an environment where the workplace could be an open community, where the question of a person’s moral and spiritual development, the existence of God, how unrelated the claims of their faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, sometimes debate and, yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as in fact the soul of the firm. It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong but because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we typically could not hide mistakes. Mistakes were flushed out into the open for correction and in some cases for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading. The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation and measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it was also energizing as one realized that continued potential for creativity, innovation, growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person and not just a pair of hands to get the work done.
We found that regardless of the task, people can find a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. They can develop a strong ethic that extends to the care of others, a sense of community, a willingness to give back, to practice charity. Yes, they can develop a respect for the dignity and worth of their fellow workers and a willingness to serve as they have an opportunity to lead. As they do so, with all their differences, they were honoring their Creator even though some did not recognize Him as such. The community of work so developed first provided a fertile ground for raising the important questions about the purpose and meaning of life and work and the responsibility of the firm to support and enrich the environment in which it operates.

Now, for me as a follower of Jesus Christ, one of the best ways I found to integrate my faith with my work and to lead in the development of the firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led, to reflect the principles that Jesus was teaching his disciples as he washed their feet including that no leader was greater or had a self interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said to be measured by what I did. My faith and the ethic of my life became a reality as I was able to serve those I led. It was the salt and life of what I believe and provided a platform for me to share my faith. Servant leadership did not come naturally. For me, it has been a continuing learning experience. The first thing I had to do was understand what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster senior management team and spent the first two months of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors, doing the maintenance work and the other work that was part of our service business. In so doing, I was beginning to understand what would be my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Later in my career when I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgments between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and recorded as results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules and satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance, a result that was real, a result that our customers could depend upon, a result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise, I was deceiving myself and those I was committed to serve.

Now, unfortunately but true, there are often many trappings that are collected around a position of leadership. The perks or prestige of office, the arrogance of succeeding and then succeeding again and thinking you know something can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers rather than focusing on their responsibilities to others. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on the judgment of a leader unless it’s nipped in the bud. Let me share an example about learning a lesson from Peter Drucker that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and it reflects a continuing need to be aware of the subtle effects of hubris.

One of the benefits of my friendships with Peter was that he never hesitated to point out those areas in which I could improve. One of those important moments
of learning occurred while we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo, Japan for Japanese business leaders. After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner together and I shared my disappointment and, yes, even anger over the fact that no one from our leadership team from our Japanese partner had been present. Now, we had planned this seminar for at least six months before it occurred and they were to be involved. They were to invite customers and prospective customers. It was a great opportunity to do that and they had promised to attend. Now, they were not there and there was room for 250 people in the audience and there probably was 120. It was what a missed opportunity. I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that the leadership of our partner no doubt was upset with that decision and I explained maybe this was the reason why they didn’t show. I told Peter that although I had planned to get on the train the next morning and go down to Osaka where their headquarter was, I decided to change my plans. If this is the way they were going to act, then I was going to get on the next flight in the morning and go back to the States. When Peter heard this, he encouraged me and said to rethink it. Then I got a rather lengthy lecture on trying to understand the Japanese culture as he felt he understood and of course I had been involved for 15 years in the Japanese culture; I thought I knew a little bit about it. So, I listened very politely but he knew I wasn’t really listening.

So, dinner was over and we decided to go up to our rooms and as I prepared for bed, just as I was ready to climb into bed, there was a call, 10:30 at night. He said “Bill, this is Peter. I want you to come up to my room. I want to talk to you more about this issue of going down to Osaka.” And I said “Peter”, I said, “I am in my pajamas.” And he said “Well, take them off and put on your pants and get up here.” So, dutifully I did and as I came to knock on his hotel door he opened the door and there he had a chair already moved right next to the bed and he said “You sit on the chair, I am going to sit on the bed.” And so he looked me in the eye and he said “Bill, you are suffering from hubris. It’s time to eat some humble pie.” He went on to explain quickly that leaders can lose touch with reality. He pointed out that my job as a leader was not to go home. My job as a leader was to go down to Osaka and resolve the difference. That’s what the people of our partner needed. That’s what the people of ServiceMaster needed. And it was my pride that was getting in the way. Well, that was great advice. Obviously, the next morning I was on the train to Osaka and my meeting there accomplished the result that needed to be done. I did need to eat some humble pie in that meeting but the lessons were clear and leadership was not about my feelings, it was about the people that I was responsible to lead. Now, little did I realize then that six months later the President and CEO of our partner would die and I would receive a call from his wife and she would ask me to come to Japan and speak at his funeral, not just speak at his funeral about the kind of person he was but with specific instructions “Please come and share what you shared with him in the past about your view of life, of death and the future.” So, I had a chance, an open chance to share my faith at the invitation of his wife.

So, as we invest ourselves in the lives of others, people will respond and seek answers to questions, questions in life that go beyond the bottom line. As part of
expanding our business to China, I made several trips to China including being asked to share our principles at one time with both business leaders in Beijing and government leaders in the Great Hall of the People. After one of those trips, I received a note from one of our Chinese employees who had been traveling with as an interpreter. Here is what Zhu Xiang said in that note – “When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden. Mao's book became our Bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood. Mao said serve the people, leaders should be public servants. This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standards but when I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. That difference must be the starting point of ServiceMaster – to honor God and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth. ServiceMaster is designed to be a big tall tree with strong roots which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person’s daily life. It is still growing in mine and I am still learning.”

Zhu is a thinking person. She felt accepted in our work environment. She was confronted with life choices that went beyond doing a job and earning a living, choices about who she was becoming and how she could relate to God. She was growing and developing an understanding of herself and the purpose and meaning for her life.

Now, for me, the world of business has become what Peter said is “this is your channel of distribution, Bill, for fulfilling and living your faith.” If I was in church today and we would talk about this being a calling or a ministry. It’s reached from a janitor’s closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of People in Beijing, from sweeping streets in Osaka to ringing the bell on the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do but who I believe have been created in the image and likeness of God and who by my words and actions should see the reality of God’s love. Creating cultures of character requires leaders to know what they believe and why they believe it, to seek truth, to know the source of their moral authority, to know what is right even when there are no rules or codes of conduct. The global economy and market provide a wonderful opportunity for people of faith to live and share their faith. There is a common language of performance in the market that crosses secular, cultural and religious barriers. When there is performance, people listen and yes, some people listen and respond and seek to grow in the person they are becoming. As ServiceMaster grew to involve the management and employment of over 200,000 people, delivering services to over 10,000,000 customers in the US and 45 foreign countries, we had great diversity of faith and culture. Yet we can all agree on a common purpose to recognize the dignity and worth of every person and to have a firm commitment to other than self. If we are willing to search for it, truth can be a found in the practice and implementation of such commitments.

Thanks for your careful listening.

Sarah Miller: We do have time for two, Judy tells me, questions. Does anyone have a question?
Interviewer1: Thank you. How did the name ‘ServiceMaster’ get started?

Bill Pollard: There are two meanings, really – masters of service and serving the Master. That’s how it was put together by our founders, yeah.

Sarah Miller: Here is your chance, one more question we can take. Anyone?

Interviewer2: Bill, you said at one point, you were asking the question what is right for the common good. I was wondering how much that is inherent in the mission of ServiceMaster.

Bill Pollard: Well, it was inherent in the mission with a single-minded focus on the dignity and worth of people and I guess I found as when you get down to drawing either the parameters or lines or the circle around core ethics, it starts with your view of the person and that then develops out into the macro judgments of how you are going to conduct yourself individually and how you are going to conduct yourself as a firm. I will just give you one small example of the things we did. One of the things we did is people used to be concerned, especially in Wall Street when I was representing the company, the chemicals we use in our business. We use chemicals to clean floors, we use chemicals to obviously kill bugs, we use chemicals to kill weeds. So, I used to respond “Well, we kill things” and that used to really get the attention of the audience and obviously that has a potential toxic effect to it. So, one of the things we did was regularly, every quarter, we have all of our people that were involved in touching those chemicals tested with respect to whether there was any adverse effect of the chemicals and we spend a lot of time looking at how the runoffs would happen and how they could be used in a way which would minimize the runoff effect generally. So, that was an example of greater good. I think I will give you one more example of it. I had a banker friend of mine the other day, we were at lunch together and he was complaining about the regulations that were coming down on banks and he also said they were being blamed for a lot of things. So, then we started talking about the issues of the way mortgages were packaged and sold and I said “You know, did anybody ask the question whether they would be a buyer of what they were selling?” It sounds kind of fundamental, doesn’t it? That’s the kind of question you’ve got to ask if you are really interested in the common good and the greater good..

Judy: Thank you for being with us today and honoring us with your presence and your words and we have got a little token from the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace. Thank you so much.

In addition to this PDF transcript of Mr. Pollard's Presentation (provided by Universal Stewardheirship, Inc.), you also can download an audio or video file courtesy of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace.

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