

## Serving Christ Outside the Church

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*"There is not a square inch  
in the whole domain of our human existence  
over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all,  
does not cry: 'Mine!'"*

Abraham Kuyper (Dutch Prime Minister 1901-1905)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

There are many ways to serve Jesus Christ and in this essay we will be thinking about our talents, gifts and callings. How can we serve the Lord with imagination, flair and courage? How can we invest our lives in God's kingdom? Too often Christians focus exclusively upon church and church programmes and this stops Christian people thinking outside the church box. Of course some people are called to serve God inside the local church community and this is important and not to be neglected, and all Christians are called to worship together. Preachers, pastors, evangelists, youth workers and other church workers are busy doing God's work. But there are significant and influential Christian callings that go beyond the local church gathering. This essay will help to address this issue and in our conclusion we will turn to you and help you to think through your calling to follow Christ in every area of life.

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First a story.

### The Shay Cullen Story

Father Shay Cullen is a Missionary priest from Ireland and a member of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. He has devoted his life to rescuing and ministering to child prostitutes in the Philippines since 1969.

He was born in Dublin in 1943 and was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in April 1969. Later that year he was assigned to parishes in Zambales and Olongapo City in the Philippines. Once there, Cullen became aware of the brutal sex industry that flourishes in this third world country and he began to combat its sordid and corrupting influence.

Cullen is famous for his espionage and undercover activities. He can be described as a spy for Jesus. Sometimes he swaps his clerical robes for the guise of a paedophile tourist. Using hidden video cameras, he visits and exposes the hidden places where children are prostituted and abused. On one occasion in 1995 he infiltrated the brothel of an Australian

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Kuyper was one of Holland's foremost Christian leaders in politics, education and the church from 1865 to 1917, a period of over 50 years. His influence is still felt today in his native land and in many other countries.

madam who explained calmly and rationally that this was the 'cheapest' sex around. After filming these conversations with pimps and brothel owners, Cullen calls in the police, rescues the children and has the guilty people arrested.

In the Philippines there are an estimated 100,000 children who work as prostitutes. Some of these girls and boys have been sold by their impoverished families into a life of slavery. In the worst forms of sexual enslavement children are chained to beds, abused daily, threatened and tortured, beaten and bruised and made into a plaything for the rich and powerful.

Cullen contends that sexual slavery thrives because of corruption which functions at all levels. Police officers, judges, and government officials are bribed by the sex offenders and their cases never get to court. Cullen has witnessed many abusers and paedophiles walk free from courtrooms and prisons.

Consider the following two examples of corruption and injustice in the Philippines. In the 1990's a Filipino congressman was sentenced to life imprisonment for the rape of a 12 year old girl. The wealthy politician transformed his prison cell into an oasis of comfort and luxury. He took over an entire dormitory, equipped it with television, shower, heater and fan. He employed fellow prisoners as servants who set up a hamburger stand for the politician's personal use and enjoyment. The congressman was even able to start a tennis club in the prison grounds! All this was made possible by the ancient art of bribery and 'greasing palms'.

What a contrast with the tragic story of 12 year old Jamie. This small boy was arrested by the police because he was playing cards on a street corner after school. The police claimed that the boy was gambling; his family said it was merely a matter of a child playing a harmless game. The boy was convicted and sent to prison where he was repeatedly raped and abused. His family was unable to find sufficient money to bribe the police and Jamie languished in prison. Fortunately Cullen has now rescued Jamie and he is slowly recovering from his terrible ordeal. Cullen often visits prisons in order to rescue innocent children like Jamie.<sup>2</sup>

In 1974 Father Shay Cullen established his Preda Foundation in Olongapo city. Cullen and his co-workers are struggling to eliminate child abuse and his foundation gives rescued children a chance to recover and find healing in a loving Christian community and to enjoy a much happier life free from violence and abuse. Here is one of the many positive stories that highlights Cullen's work.

Jenny, 13, had been abused by her step-father and raped by her cousins. When she was rescued by the staff at Preda and arrived at the foundation, she was sullen and morose. She would not talk or smile and she spurned any attempt to befriend her. In the following weeks, she began expressing her pain, fear and anger. Two months later, she was laughing, playing with the other children and learning to cook. This is a wonderful glimpse of God's kingdom breaking in and restoring a young girl's life.

Shay Cullen has also been involved in business activity that brings huge blessings to Filipino people. The foil fruit drink pouch is the latest way to deliver and sell drinks in the Philippines. But the foil pouches have a serious drawback as they are an environmental hazard when the empties are thrown away. Cullen's Preda recycling project turns the hundreds of thousands of throwaway aluminium foil pouches into raw material for lucrative economic projects for

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay *The Modern Forms of Slavery*, Cullen has written about Jamie and other Filipino children. <http://www.crc-online.org.uk/downloads/Conference%202007%20Fr%20Shay%20speaker%20notes.pdf>

abandoned mothers, survivors of sexual exploitation and young people rescued from prisons. All are getting a piece of the foil pouch project which recycles the pouches into high quality shopping bags, back packs, wallets, hats and other attractive, colourful and useful items. Hundreds of poor people are employed and many more are joining this great recycling and sewing project. A business enterprise rooted in biblical principles of justice and stewardship.<sup>3</sup>

Although Cullen has saved many lives and helped countless others, his provocative work has made him very unpopular with Filipinos sympathetic to crime and vice. He has received numerous death threats and is under constant harassment. Attempts have been made to deport him because his exposure of the sex trade has been damaging to local government officials who profit from the trade.

Cullen has received several human rights awards and has been nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize. He has testified before the US Congress, the Philippine Senate and is a well-known speaker at international conferences.

### **The Significance of the Shay Cullen Story**

As Shay Cullen struggles against the evils of the sex trade we are confronted with both slavery and the widespread tendency to treat people, in particular children, as items to be traded. Children have morphed into sex toys. Young people have been made playthings.

This is the fruit of a consumerist way of life. When life is exclusively focused on consuming goods and services, people relate far better to things than people. And so often the committed consumerist loves things (watches, cars etc) and uses people. Instead, as our King, Christ calls us to work the other way round: love people and use things.

Notice that there are two different kinds of slavery in this story. We can speak about external slavery and internal slavery. The child who is chained to a bed is a slave in an external sense. She does not want to be there. Her freedom has been stolen from her. On the other hand consider the internal slavery of the abuser. This human being is enslaved to a way of life that is deeply sinful and destructive – not just to other people, but also to themselves. The paedophile is addicted to lusts and cravings that enslave them in a vice-like grip. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, the Liberator, has arrived to set both the abuser and the abused free. Free *from* the slavery; and free *to* live the full abundant new life Jesus came to make possible.

As already mentioned, Shay Cullen contends that the sex slave trade flourishes in the Philippines because there is endemic corruption at every level of Filipino society. He is often shocked when powerful, rich abusers have 'greased palms' and hey presto! they are set free. Bribery is a form of sinful behaviour that is condemned on many occasions in the Bible. Consider this passage in the book of Deuteronomy.

Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this story go to <http://cpcabrisbane.org/Kasama/2005/V19n2/PredaFairTrade.htm>

Shay Cullen shows that in the Philippines there are police officers, judges, business people and politicians who offer and accept bribes. They force innocent children, like Jamie, to languish in prison because his parents cannot bribe government officials, whereas rich, powerful politicians can bribe or pay to have their own burger bars and tennis clubs – even when they are in prison! We could say that even prisons reveal a sort of consumerist caste system: the rich and powerful are pampered and the poor and weak are enslaved.

At an international conference of church leaders the convenor asked the assembled participants what was the greatest problem in their countries. Almost all included bribery and corruption as the most serious problem they faced. The convenor responded as follows:

“If corruption is the major problem, then why are we preparing our young people only to be pastors and evangelists? Why aren’t we training them to be the godly entrepreneurs, economists, police officers, judges and politicians that our countries so desperately need?”

It’s worth spending a few moments amplifying this important insight. It is not enough for the church to produce gifted evangelists, youth workers and pastors. We need Christians to be busy serving God in all spheres of life. The job of a politician can be made into a calling to serve those they govern rather than feather their own nests; a judge can serve Christ by being just; a police officer can refuse to be bribed and avoid brutality; a journalist can research and write with honesty and integrity; an entrepreneur can seek profit without profiteering; etc. Jesus had this broad understanding of calling when he famously spoke about salt.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown outside and trampled by men.

Matthew 5:13

In this passage Jesus is calling his followers to be a salty, healing presence in all of life. Consider little Jamie. He needs police officers who care for him and show him mercy. He needs magistrates and judges who refuse to put him in prison because he is playing with cards. He requires godly entrepreneurs (e.g. Cullen’s plastic pouch recycling business) who can give his mum and dad good jobs.

Jamie also needs politicians who make sure that prisons do not tolerate the abuse of vulnerable children. He requires a justice system that does not reward guilty politicians with cheeseburgers, mustard and tennis on demand. Jamie needs Christians who serve God outside of the local church congregation. Christians who serve God in their everyday jobs. And, remarkable though it may seem, the witness of Christians doing their jobs honestly, imaginatively and responsibly can have a powerful knock-on effect on others in the work place who may not be Christians.

Let’s focus for a few moments on this word ‘justice’. God is just. Consider this verse in Deuteronomy.

He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

Deuteronomy 32:4

Psalm 72 is another Scripture which can help us to gain a deeper insight into what this means.

Endow the king with your justice, O God,  
The royal son with your righteousness.  
He will judge your people in righteousness,  
Your afflicted ones with justice.  
The mountains will bring prosperity to the people,  
The hills the fruit of righteousness.  
He will defend the afflicted among the people  
And save the children of the needy;  
He will crush the oppressor.

Psalm 72:1-4

Throughout the Bible God is always urging his people to focus on defending the poor, the needy and the oppressed, and at the same time he is concerned with the punishment of the oppressor. Innocent people must be protected and guilty people must be punished fairly. This is the heart of the biblical teaching.

Jesus summed up this biblical teaching in the following way.

Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone.

Luke 11:42

Shay Cullen is an outstanding missionary and his story commands respect but he would be the first person to point out that the church should not concentrate exclusively on missionary activity. Of course little Jamie needs people who can tell him about Jesus: that's essential. But there are many other needs as well. We could say that in spreading the gospel the evangelist, the youth worker and the pastor depend upon godly police officers, judges and government officials etc doing their bit outside in the world. And these people, in turn, depend upon the evangelists, youth workers and pastors doing the preaching and teaching. This is what the New Testament means by the Body of Christ being made up of many parts but all functioning together as one unit (1 Corinthians 12).

### **Thinking through this Story and your Calling**

As we soak ourselves in this story and its significance, we can learn so much about the many ways in which believers can serve God. The story can really help you to think about how to use your life and your gifts as part of your contribution to God's kingdom wherever you end up working. You don't have to be a priest in the Philippines to work for God.

Let's now think about how different people with different talents and passions could serve God in the Philippines.

Focus for a moment on the callings of politicians and government officials. They have power and authority which they can use for good or ill. They can feather their own nests with bribes and ill-gotten gain. They can do deals with paedophiles, multinational corporations and brothel owners. Little Jamie and his parents will suffer when these callings are twisted and betrayed.

God needs disciples like you to take up this kind of work! You could be a modern-day William Wilberforce. You could go into politics and work to help to set captives free (Luke 4:18-19) by championing the plight of the oppressed in society.

But perhaps political service is not for you? Think again. Could you imagine yourself as a police officer? You could work powerfully for God in all sorts of ways. You just need a Holy Spirit-breathed imagination. As a copper you could have helped little Jamie in the most practical of ways. Instead of getting the hump because Jamie's mum and dad couldn't bribe you, you could have rescued the lad yourself and taken him home. As a believer in Jesus Christ your police work could be transformed. God loves justice and mercy (Micah 6:8) and police officers can faithfully serve the Lord by protecting innocent people and locking up the guilty. This is 'salty' police work.

But you might say – "Sorry but I don't want to be a copper. I want to be a plastic surgeon. How on earth can I serve Jesus doing a liposuction?" And I would say to you – you need a baptised imagination. Consider little Jamie once again.

He has been in prison and he has been abused. Perhaps his nose was smashed to pieces when he was beaten up by a grumpy inmate. In that situation Jamie really needs a plastic surgeon and you could be an agent of God's healing love. Instead of wasting your talents helping rich women feel more desirable you could sort out little Jamie's injury. But perhaps I am challenging you too much? Maybe you should only work for the rich and powerful. Jordan is probably a much better client than little Jamie. In that case don't think about serving God at all. Worship the money god (Matthew 6:24), get rich and buy a yacht!<sup>4</sup>

Again there are many people who have no interest in police work or the surgeon's scalpel. Suppose you want to serve God as a journalist. Well you could waste all your talent and energies writing articles about Jordan, Paris Hilton and famous Filipino celebrities.

Yes - you could easily sell your soul to the devil and the old liar would be cracking open the champagne 'down under' but you could be a responsible and godly journalist. Get that baptised imagination today. You could write articles about Jenny, Jamie and Shay Cullen. You could expose corruption, bribery and injustice. You could think through an intelligent Christian response to the Filipino situation and write witty, informative and powerful essays. Your pen could humble mighty armies of filth, sleaze, and degradation! Maybe that's too much of a challenge? Don't worry, relax and spend your time writing superficial articles for Hello magazine. It's lucrative and easy. Just cash the cheques.

So you lack writing talent? How about serving the Lord as a judge? A perk here is that you can wear an impressive wig (if you live in Britain). Judges can do amazing things. They can imprison paedophiles who prey on little girls like Jenny or they can take bribes and imprison little boys for playing cards. So you want an easy life do you? Take the line of least resistance. Collect the bribes, become wealthy and retire at the age of fifty. Go to Spain and play golf all day long. Crack plenty of inane gags about Bruce Forsythe and Jimmy Tarbuck.

Perhaps judging is not for you. You lack the degrees and legal insight. I understand perfectly. How about joining the prison service? You could become a prison warder instead. Think about the good you could do. You could stop rapes, beatings and abuse. You could protect little Jamie from the bad guys. You could pray for him and show him love. This would please the Lord and make Him smile because you'd be spreading His good news. Don't forget Joseph – he served God as a prison warder (Gen 39:22).

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<sup>4</sup> There are complexities in every calling which I cannot address in this essay. For example there can be genuine concerns about physical appearance that are not superficial and empty. Plastic surgeons must make wise decisions about their work and this can include cosmetic surgery. It is also possible for Christians to work for both rich people and poor, vulnerable people. But simply exploiting the insecurities of wealthy people should not be an option for the committed believer. I am indebted to David Hanson for these important insights.

But you might say – “I love cameras and I want to be a photographer! Can I serve God in that way?” Again you need a baptized imagination. Buy one at the supermarket today! You could take the most haunting and poignant photos that tell the truth. Or you could prostitute yourself and become an annoying wasp who stalks famous celebrities and members of the royal family. Don’t waste your life and talent on that cul de sac. Too many fools have gone down that road. It’s well paid but empty and God-forsaken (Matthew 7:13-14).

Maybe you are very gifted in an intellectual sense and you long to be an academic. Let’s say a sociologist. How could a clever thinker like you serve the Lord? Again it takes some thought, perspiration and imagination. You could write a discerning scholarly account of Filipino society. You could analyse data and statistics about prostitution and the sex trade. Your ground-breaking book could help people to understand the underground brothels, the corrupt police force, and the stinking, rotten prisons that cry out for sensitive and prophetic analysis. Scholars can serve the Lord in their unique way. Reading their books will build up both faith and understanding. Christian academics can inform and persuade those in power to make positive changes. One more piece of the kingdom jigsaw.<sup>5</sup>

But you say all this bores me. It leaves me cold. I want to spend most of my time writing poems. How can the budding bard serve the Lord? Well again the recipe is godly imagination and thoughtfulness. You could craft explosive poems about life in Filipino jails. You could write about little Jamie and his hero Shay Cullen. You could have the whole church weeping and praying. Your musings could evoke strange worlds, desperate men and God’s merciful rule at work.

Now you’re getting cross and you start shouting and using blue language. “I’m a fan of the Italian renaissance painter Caravaggio and that’s my passion. How can I serve the Lord Almighty as an artist?”

“Calm down,” I would say serenely. “You don’t have to paint ‘religious scenes’ in order to please the King of kings. You can paint unforgettable scenes of life in the Philippines. Brush into existence cheeky characters with both their glory and their shame. You don’t need to follow Tracy Emin and focus on just the seedy stuff. Nor do you have to do a Michelangelo and glory in Man’s greatness and Lofty Grandeur. Take a leaf out of Rembrandt’s book and conjure great art that honours the biblical worldview. Both the glory and the shame. Capture this in your paintings.”

And you say – “But this is not me. I want to tell little Jamie about Jesus. I want to be an evangelist.” And I say to you – “Marvellous, be an imaginative evangelist but make sure you work with all the other members of the Body of Christ. Together you will bear fruit. Together you will build God’s kingdom.”

**The End**

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<sup>5</sup> When we consider the calling of an academic we must always remember that people have ‘multiple’ callings. A sociologist might also be called to pastoral work. A plastic surgeon may also be called to be an evangelist. I am indebted to Anne Burghraef for this important insight.

## Who are we?

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