

Dear Friends,

With all the talk of recession and the growing threat of mass unemployment, my mind has been returning to moments in my ministry when I have been privileged to visit local centres of employment. In the '70s I went down Parkside Colliery with a church member who worked there as an electrician. This was a deep mine in Lancashire, near Wigan. In the early '80s I had a personal guided around a large cotton spinning mill in Bolton. I learned how the mill women developed lip reading to converse amidst the noisy machines.

Seven years ago, I was appointed to another industrial area, The Black Country. This area is spread over the four Metropolitan Boroughs of Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall, and Wolverhampton, north of (and never to be confused with) Birmingham. The old joke is that if you ask a local where the real Black Country starts, the usual answer is "about half a mile over there", because the actual boundary is somewhat amorphous and contested. I was told that the journal of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century USA diplomat recorded that the area, which had many coal mines and furnaces, was "black by day and red by night" due to the heavy industry.

Ministers who were new to this area of the West Midlands were asked to attend an induction course on "*Ministry in the Black Country*" run by the Black Country Industrial Urban Mission. We had visits to highly professional headquarters buildings, had talks at the Black Country Partnership, heard about the massive Jaguar Land Rover plant which was still in development stage and has since opened creating thousands of jobs in engineering. We were hosted by the manager of an industrial estate near Brierly Hill in the heart of the Black Country and learnt a lot about the skills needed to manage a successful industrial park in an area with an old transport infrastructure. We were told, "*you can always get to the Black Country, but you can never get through it*". We visited an amazing stock company owned an American Billionaire venture capitalist. In the massive computerised warehouse floor to ceiling was filled with compartments in which steel pipes, rods and sheets of all shapes and sizes were housed and selected by automated pickers when required.

The course was definitely eye opening. Another place we visited was a small independent engineering workshop. As I remember it, there was just the

proprietor and an apprentice there. The gentleman had a lifetime of rare engineering skills, which were in danger of being lost as he approached retirement. He had a fine collection of tools old and new, many made to Imperial or Whitworth measurements rather than metric. These were capable of keeping factories running when their old machines broke down. Here we were told something that stuck in my mind, and which I would like to share with you. It was said that in the West Midlands there were factories that were uniquely able to make very small complex components that were required in order to enable huge machinery on the other side of the world to continue to function and therefore keep massive factories working.

This idea of a small component being vital to a large piece of machinery being made in an obscure midland workshop captured my imagination. In 1640 George Herbert quoted the ancient rhyme: *'For want of a naile the shoe is lost, for want of a shoe the horse is lost, for want of a horse the rider is lost.'*

The lesson I take from all of this is the interconnectedness of things and the importance of the small things. The lesson applies also to our bodies. Take for example the pituitary gland. This is only about the size of a pea and is located at the base of the brain. However, its good functioning is vital to our health and to the development of children. Small things may seem unimportant to the casual observer but are often absolutely essential.

This lesson was not lost on St Paul. In three great passages he likens the Church to the body (1 Cor 12, Romans 12, Eph 4). An individual church member may feel insignificant or lacking in gifts. However, in God's economy that quiet and unassuming member may be as important to the church as the pituitary gland is to the body or the tiny component is to the massive factory.

Whenever you feel that you do not matter, remember the old rhyme about the missing nail in the horseshoe that ultimately led to the loss of the battle. In these strange times, as much as ever, we all have a part to play. We all matter!

May God bless you,

Keith

Rev Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.