PART ONE

I. Introduction

Welcome to the Woodstock Business Conference, (WBC) a national movement of spiritual and social renewal for the business community. The Conference aims to help business and professional executives to move with practical wisdom toward greater integration in their lives and more effective leadership. To see how the WBC approaches its mission, a little history may be helpful.

A. The Business Vocation Conferences

The Conference began in 1992 to address some fundamental questions raised by a group of business leaders:

What difference does it make, and for whom, if business leadership is seen as a call for excellence, a call to do God’s will?

How does a business run by a committed Christian differ from any other?

These and similar questions were raised during the course of three national Business Vocation Conferences organized by the Woodstock Theological Center (1989, 1990, 1991). Business Vocation Conference participants included selected business leaders, experts in business ethics, church leaders, and government officials. Several conclusions about the role of business and religious faith followed from these national meetings:

1. The role of business leadership is difficult and consuming

Business demands constant vigilance by busy business executives. Time is always an issue. Business leaders and professionals must attend ceaselessly to their enterprises to keep them viable and growing, to meet competition, and, above all, to make a profit. How this is to be done is, of course, where many conflicts arise. The executives must account for their business decisions to their boards, shareholders, lenders, employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, and, in the case of publicly traded companies, to outside financial analysts as well.

2. The business enterprise itself plays a fundamental role in public life
This is particularly true today in an age of interdependent commercial and financial global activity. As they address the needs of their companies, corporate executives, entrepreneurs, and professionals are constantly making moral decisions that affect not only their own firms and themselves but also the broader community and society at large. Business leaders find themselves in the role of reconciling conflicting claims to financial and social prosperity.

3. Moral issues are ever present

Whether explicitly recognized or not, today’s business leader faces moral issues coming from all sides.

4. Business leaders must draw upon their convictions, beliefs, and experience

In deciding what is the right thing to do, business people come to affirm that ethical and moral values do provide them with the guides upon which decisions are based. Ethical and moral values should also undergird the structures and systems that support the business enterprise. One question keeps recurring: where are these convictions and beliefs to be found? How does one locate his or her moral compass? Where is the bridge? Thoughtful men and women, when questioned about a particular business decision they made, are often unable to articulate fully the moral and ethical values grounding the "decision." Our pluralistic culture, with its accepted ways of understanding, discounts and frequently denies the relevance of religious faith to business practice.

5. The apparent gap between faith and work

Men and women of faith speak of an apparent gap between their faith experience and experience in the marketplace. They conclude that sometimes the knowledge born of faith that we are loved by God seems naive in the face of the often harsh reality of the world of work. Woodstock Business Conference members seek new language, new more effective channels for encouragement, and fresh instrumentalities to help business leaders and executives bring their religious faith to business practice in mature and responsible ways.

6. A quest for spirituality

Research in the area suggests that acceptance of a world where faith and work are sealed off from each other does not come free of cost. In fact, it runs counter to the deepest yearnings of today's business men and women. Business people are hungry to figure out how to relate faith and work. They search for meaning and a way to bring "the deeper self to decision making."

7. Spirituality vs. religion

"Work and spirituality" is now a very popular topic. We see the development of a spirituality in business movement driven by concerned individuals attempting to integrate
their lives. It is a bottom-up phenomenon rather than a system of thought or behavior imposed from above. Some favor the term "spirituality" out of the concern that "religion" may be considered to be dogmatic, oppressive, restricting, an imposition from outside the individual. Spirituality is thought of as freeing, basic, true, and at the core of the individual as a spiritual being. Our culture demands respect for the personal and deeply held beliefs of others. Failure to do so smacks of bigotry and puts people at a marketing disadvantage. No movement seeking to respond to our deepest yearnings wants to be tarred as oppressive, outmoded, or quirky.

8. Religious belief contributes to ethical and moral values

For people of faith, meaning can be found in religion, not as the mindless oppressor of personal freedom but rather as a trusted path by which they approach their ultimate goal in life, eternal life with their loving God. For Christians, religion in general, and particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition, contributes to ethical and moral values in a number of significant ways:

* Thousands of years of prayerful reflection have produced a rich treasury of thought directed to practical resolution of questions of right and wrong. Guidance in the form of stories, parables, commandments, exhortations, and wisdom sayings abound.

* The motivational power of religious conviction sustains morally correct behavior. Having in mind one’s ultimate purpose, loving union with God, curbs any bent toward narcissism, self-gratification, and sin.

* A picture of the world emerges from which it makes sense for people to take the dilemmas of moral action seriously and make the effort to do the right thing.

* A way of life is presented which is more comprehensive, integrating, and demanding.

* A community of believers opens access to a much deeper range of values than those expressed in the conventional wisdom of the day.

* A community of believers also provides needed support for people to do the hard work necessary to get the whole picture, to find the fullest explanations, to come to good judgements, and to do the right thing.

The Judeo-Christian tradition sees business as a calling, a vocation. This tradition highlights the fact that as a business person you are a steward, entrusted with God's creation. You employ your talents and skills. You manage the assets at your disposal for the creation and distribution of wealth, employment, products, and services. The executive, manager, and professional need to be able to perform with skill and competence. Hopefully, you can do so with peace of mind. Business people like you gather in Woodstock Business Conference chapters to reflect on their religious faith and its meaning and impact on the totality of their lives. Such gatherings are important evidence of a coalescence of the spiritual quest and the world of work.
**II. A Mission and A National Network of Business Executives**

The Conference’s founders embarked on a mission. They set out to help business leaders of faith find the necessary language and encouragement to create cultures that are consistent with Judeo-Christian values. To do this, they initiated a national network of business executives who would meet in local chapters to offer each other a kind of peer ministry in support of the mission.

The Business Vocation Conference (BVC) was formally incorporated in 1992. The founding business leaders engaged an executive director and sought and obtained tax-exempt status for the BVC as a 501(c)(3) organization. They deliberated and hammered out a Mission Statement that today states:

The Mission of the Woodstock Business Conference is to establish and lead a national network of business leaders to explore the Judeo-Christian tradition in order:

* to assist the individual to integrate faith, family and professional life;

* to help the leadership of the firm to develop a corporate culture consistent with Judeo-Christian values; and,

* to aid business leaders and corporations to exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large.

The Conference welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another’s religious traditions. Grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, the WBC is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

The founders started BVC pilot chapters in three cities (Milwaukee, New York City, Washington, D.C.). The Washington, D.C. chapter, organized and coordinated by James L. Connor, S.J., director of the Woodstock Theological Center, was the most successful of the three pilot groups. Its meeting process was amplified, refined, and then offered as a model for groups of business leaders, including the other pilot groups. In time, the Conference published the Woodstock Business Conference Process Book. It explains how to form new chapters, describes the process, and offers an initial array of thirty topics for people interested in forming and leading new Conference chapters. A periodic newsletter (now, the Woodstock Business Conference Report) was also initiated.

The BVC Board came to recognize that the Woodstock process played a unique role in the growth of the Conference. In addition, the day-to-day operations of the Conference moved to the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. As a result, the BVC board on May 25, 1994, changed the name of the corporation to the Woodstock Business Conference and changed its fiscal year to conform with that of the Woodstock Theological Center.
The number of WBC chapters grew from one in the fall of 1993 to the thirteen by mid-1998, plus a graduate business school chapter at the University of Notre Dame. In October 1997, the WBC held its first retreat for WBC leaders. That experience encouraged WBC chapter coordinators to offer retreats for their own chapter members in various locations.

The activities and coordination of efforts between the Woodstock Business Conference and the Woodstock Theological Center developed to such an extent that, in June 1998, the boards of both organizations decided to formally consolidate the WBC within the Woodstock Center as an integral unit in the Center’s Program on Business, Ethics, and the Economy. This consolidation gave the WBC a ready-made platform for further growth and access to the resources necessary to sustain the gains it has made.

III. The WBC Process

The success of the WBC has been due, in large measure, to its effectiveness as an answer to our yearning for integration in our lives. It helps us to respond positively to our desire to make a difference in our firms and the wider society. People are not satisfied with the status quo. Business executives, managers, and professionals want to bridge the apparent gap between faith and work. The process used at WBC chapter meetings promotes practical wisdom with theological reflection on the issues and problems of the contemporary workplace. The first-year program offers exercises for the chapter meetings as well as activities in preparation for and beyond the meetings themselves.

A. Chapter Meetings

What is this WBC process and how does it work? Local WBC chapter members gather each month to address issues based upon their experience in the workplace. The approach is deceptively simple but each step is vital to support an atmosphere of trust and faith-inspired reflection. The meetings themselves are scheduled to mirror the time, place, and surroundings of a typical business meeting. They generally take place at the same place, date, and time each month. The meetings, lasting about one hour and a half, aim to begin on time and end on time so that busy business people can count on and set aside the same time each month.

1. The WBC format:
   a. Introductions.
   b. Opening prayer.
   c. Reading of the Mission Statement with the three goals of the WBC.
   d. Scripture: A passage from Scripture related to the topic under consideration is read aloud, followed by a period of silent reflection (five minutes), and then sharing of insights (seven to ten minutes).
   e. Topic: Material on the topic for the day has been previously mailed with the meeting notice and minutes of the last meeting's discussion.
f. Reflection and evaluation on the meeting and the process (five to ten minutes before conclusion).

g. Closing prayer.

This format evolved from the experience of business and professional people who began to engage in systematic theological reflection on their lives in the workplace. Over time, its elements and the order of proceeding emerged and were refined. The topics, including those we recommend for the first year, also developed from the experience of WBC chapter meetings. These topics or cases have been researched, explored in conversation, considered anew by different WBC chapters, and updated.

2. Essential features of each critical element in the process

   a. Introductions. The aim is to build a sense of community. New people are often present. Our WBC chapters grow and thrive because members so value their own participation that they invite their friends and colleagues to join with them.

   b. Opening prayer. Each session begins with a prayer, an acknowledgment that God holds us in existence and gives us the light to know and the strength to do the right thing. We must have God’s grace, light, and support to hear His Word and learn what to do in the case or situation under consideration.

   c. Mission Statement. After asking God’s grace for the meeting, the next step is to recall the WBC Mission Statement. Reading the threefold mission statement at the beginning of each meeting helps keep discussions on track and avoids wasting valuable time. This element, reading the mission statement at the beginning of each meeting, was incorporated in response to frustrations experienced in earlier theological reflection groups where participants frequently sought to revisit the purposes for the meeting.

   d. Scripture passage and reflection. One of the recognized strengths of the WBC process is the period marked by reading a pertinent Scripture passage aloud followed by a five-minute interval of silent reflection. After the silence, participants share how the particular story or image struck them, how the passage applies in life today. The discipline of silence, so rare for many busy executives, opens new vistas. WBC members tell us how their appreciation of this phase of the process grows over the course of a year. By entering into our discussions through the threshold of Scripture, we are introduced to the "mind and heart of Christ," with His sense of purpose and values. He is the touchstone or criterion for the accuracy of what we will decide, as contrasted with "popular or conventional wisdom." His is the "world" or the "context" within which we want to place and locate the issue or problem we will be considering. By entering in this manner we discover new horizons. A whole new light shines on the subsequent discussion of marketplace issues.
One WBC participant articulated the richness of this phase:

I found the few moments of reflection in response to the Scripture, to be very, very moving. It would probably be much more difficult to get some insight into the Scripture without the WBC structure. Reading Scripture this way allows barriers to come down. Scripture allows a common ground for our discussion.

Another added:

Reading Scripture and reflecting on it helps us to look at our business lives in an entirely different context. The WBC meeting is the first time in years or perhaps ever in our lives to just sit down and read the Scripture. What we think about when we take on business issues is different because of the Scripture, whether or not we talk about it during our discussion. And, it often leads right into the topic we are to discuss at the meeting.

e. Topic. Next comes the topic for the day, i.e., the case, issue, problem, or opportunity. We focus on the concrete details from our work experience stimulated by the case presented in the articles and questions sent out by the coordinator. Here we also recall the feelings, drives, motivations, and concerns associated with the event. While not explicit in the format itself, a series of orderly steps inevitably emerges from the back-and-forth of the discussion:

(1) What is the data? What do I see? Necessary data includes not only the events themselves but all the surrounding circumstances: the people, relationships, and communities involved, as well as the underlying desires and motivations of the participants.

(2) What does it mean? We push to understand and explain what is going on. The discussion develops a range of explanations. Hearing different perspectives helps people to come to a fuller understanding of the situation.

(3) Judging: "This is it!" Eventually responsible business people are by training and inclination prompted to "make the call," to name the fact of the matter after due consideration of the explanations offered. And then, we judge, "Is this good?" "Is it worthwhile?" "Do I like this?"

(4) What shall I do about it? The final step is deliberation, discernment, and decision. Responsibility calls us to respond with some kind of action.

These four steps follow the same pattern in any human activity where we are functioning well; where we are the best we can be. When we can see the pattern at work in ourselves and in the meeting process, it helps us to confirm that we are on the right track. We acknowledge we are moved through these steps by God’s love at work in us. It is the grace we seek, the answer to our prayer.
f. Reflection on the Meeting. Another important, and often unrecognized, step in the process takes place in the final five to ten minutes before the end of the meeting. Here, we stop to reflect back on the meeting to see how well or badly it went. We recall some important insights that occurred and identify issues that warrant further exploration. It is here that chapter members often select the next topic and accept responsibility for its preparation and presentation.

g. Closing prayer. The meeting concludes with prayer, an expression of gratitude. Often it is The Lord’s Prayer. We acknowledge that God has been with us, helping, guiding, even challenging. We hand it over to the Lord. "Thy will be done."

B. Between Chapter Meetings

Over time, the WBC process helps to form the WBC member and leads to better, more thoughtful, and more effective action. However, achieving the three goals of the Woodstock Business Conference requires continuing, cumulative effort over the course of a lifetime. An examination of the process of orderly steps outlined above is helpful, not only to understand what is going on in the meetings themselves, but also for use by individual members between the meetings as we reflect on our daily work and make practical decisions, particularly in situations involving ethical implications.

1. Minutes of the meeting.

Minutes or notes of the discussions at each chapter meeting serve a crucial function. Because they help to reinforce the insights reached and decisions made as a result of the meetings, solid notes that highlight the conversations are most important. Fortunately, one or more members in a group are usually able and willing to take good notes for the group. These notes or minutes are also helpful for those who were out of town or were otherwise required to miss a meeting. It enables them to stay in touch. A sample of the minutes distributed by the coordinator of the Washington, D.C. chapter can be found in the Appendix. Minutes need not be so extensive. However brief, minutes are a real help to sustain and nurture the WBC process.

2. Preparation for each meeting.

Each month, WBC chapter coordinators circulate a package of materials with an agenda, notes of the past meeting, articles, Scripture, and questions for the next meeting. This package enables WBC members to review and consider the past month’s meeting and to reflect upon the Scripture passage and the upcoming topic in preparation for the next meeting. Experience over the years has shown that progress in personal and group growth occurs more rapidly and surely when members prepare in advance for chapter meetings.

Ideally, chapter members spend roughly ten minutes three or four times a week reading, reflecting upon, and praying over the upcoming case or issue in light of the Scripture reading and focus questions. We find that it helps to record what insights have occurred
or what feelings and convictions we have experienced. We recommend a notebook or journal for just this purpose.

When individuals come prepared, the meeting moves quickly as each shares the fruit of previous reflection and prayer, rather than simply offering spontaneous reactions at the meeting itself. This kind of preparation makes the sharing qualitatively different—much deeper, more provocative, and mature.

C. Beyond the Chapter Meetings

The movement toward personal integration does not stop with the chapter meeting. Many members, challenged by the monthly conversations, pursue intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth outside the meeting. They explore and share articles, books, tapes, programs, and spiritual reading.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his Spiritual Exercises, has excellent advice about doing reflection well. He insists that the only way to learn is by doing, reflecting on our success or failure, and doing again. A Daily Examen or focused review on the events of the day is an invaluable exercise. See the articles on the Daily Examen in the Appendix: "Rummaging for God" by Dennis Hamm, S.J., and "Welcoming the Spirit — Every Day" by William J. Byron, S.J.

IV. What Underlies the WBC Process

There are two aspects to the WBC Process. The first is the method, an approach that the people appropriate over time. The second aspect concerns the topics or cases for the discussions of the WBC chapter group (we will talk about the topics in Part Two). What underlies the Woodstock process or approach is a conviction about who we humans are, how we are loved into being, how we work, and what we are called to do and be. We learn it from Jesus, both in what he taught and how he lived. The way of proceeding moves as follows:

A. Start with experience

We start and continually stay with the concrete experience of the actual everyday issues or dilemmas we have faced and resolved (or failed to resolve). Staying with the concrete, the tangible, and the experienced avoids head trips or flights of fancy. The starting point is not instruction or lecturing about leadership, ethics, or ethical decision making in the abstract. This is not a top-down approach. The reason for starting with experience is the belief that doing the right thing is not a subject to be memorized or understood intellectually, but a way of actually doing things. This way of doing stems from and expresses very basic feelings and beliefs: one’s beliefs about life, its meaning and purpose; one’s image and hopes for oneself; one’s relations to and regard of others; and, the role of business and the economy in promoting the good of human beings and society. It involves much more than numbers, ideas, or purely intellectual reasoning. Therefore, the Woodstock approach is more concerned with the person who decides than with
ethical principles, important as they are. Good business men and women, individuals who are attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible, will invariably make better business decisions.

**B. Find the pattern in good decisions and actions**

The process asks WBC members to focus on what happened when the job was done well, when good decisions were made and carried into action. The initial task is to describe the facts of the situation, to describe the experience and all its relevant details.

The next step is to find the pattern. Specifically, we walk through the process and name what we were doing. We recognize how each step relates with the others. Drawing out the patterns of good decision making and action helps us to see what was at stake, what was considered or taken into account, what was ultimately decided, how it was carried out, and what was learned as a result. By reflecting on the pattern, we find in our own life experience and behavior a pattern of steps whereby we behave well and ethically. We all do this spontaneously when acting well. What God created "is good," Genesis tells us — even though we mar it with our sinfulness, inattention, bias, and timidity. Therefore, if we honestly strive to do as well as possible in the struggle to make good business decisions, we will find a pattern that is written into us by God Himself when he created and redeemed us.

Finding the pattern helps us to be faithful to our basic vocation or calling in life. Finding the pattern for coming to do the right thing is the self-correcting process that enhances our ability to decide and act ethically. Moreover, since this pattern of good decision making is the way by which people grow to maturity, responsibility, and full human freedom, we are all called to follow this way. It is who we are as humans and how we operate when we are at our best.

**C. Name the values**

What values are we trying to preserve or promote in the particular decision or action? Were some values in tension or conflict with others (e.g., corporate competitiveness and compassion for employees)? How were values prioritized in the actual decision reached? Most business decisions are not about good and bad, but about good and better. The challenge is to determine which is better. In concrete cases it often depends on all the circumstances, the question of motivations, and how the decisions are implemented.

**D. Identify the blockages**

As a Woodstock Business Conference member you will learn to assess what blocks your efforts to make good ethical decisions. It may be inattention, untested assumptions, biases, and forces inside us or our businesses. Or, it may be factors external to the business organization (e.g., government regulations, widespread corruption, the unethical behavior of competitors, disregard of the health and well-being of individuals, or systems that sabotage the possibility of ethical business efforts). We look to see what can be done
to promote a more ethical climate, not only within our firms, but in the larger social environment within which the firms operate.

Over time your attention may shift, moving from your particular organization to noticing the impact of the broader social environment on our business decisions. WBC members seek to describe this relationship and interaction between the social order and the firm’s decisions. From such inquiries comes better understanding of our responsibility to contribute to the health of the social order within which we live and work.

**E. The relevance of the Gospel**

The Scripture reading and reflection surfaces the crucial question of the relevance of the Gospel and Christian tradition in analyzing and knowing what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. More concretely, we explore how the Gospel motivates us to choose and do what is ethical. How it helps us to see and understand our role in the world as a business leader or professional. How it enables us to evaluate specific business action plans, as well as social policies.

Remember, the WBC process is not an answer book. This process leads to deeper understanding which, of necessity, aids us to come to more informed, appropriate decisions. In this way of proceeding we keep using all we have learned in each new situation. By reflecting on how we have handled ourselves in making past decisions, we see how we can improve both the process of decision making and concrete business determinations. Our lives grow in a spiral of cumulative behavior. Business life is no exception. This cumulative dynamic has the potential for improvement as well as decline. We progress to the extent that we make the effort necessary to pay attention to all the relevant data and ask the necessary questions. We progress if, on the basis of our questioning, we make the commitments to judge what is true and do what is good. What we are doing is who we are patterned and called to be. We are simply fulfilling our vocation by responding to the calling which is built right into us, thanks to God’s creation and redemption.

**V. CONCLUSION**

Woodstock Business Conference members affirm that they have grown morally and ethically. They say that they can better see the good and evil in their work lives and elsewhere. They sense that they are empowered to choose and act more responsibly. They call the WBC chapter meetings their "monthly moral check-ups" and report that they become "better spiritual leaders back at work." One WBC executive said he learned to listen better:

The group has helped me develop an ability to listen. I value my time with the group because I have found insight through listening. The insights might not exactly come at
the time of the meeting, but they come unexpectedly, that day, a week, or even a month later.

From sharing and discussing together, WBC business and professional leaders note changes in their attitudes. New insights arise, perceptions are sharpened, and fresh frameworks for understanding business problems develop. Often the patterns and systems within one’s organization and society will snap into sharper focus. Members find the necessary encouragement to take innovative and effective action and to initiate change where needed. A financial vice president from the Detroit chapter said it well:

I have seen people become more open, and I have learned to challenge my own assumptions. It has been very positive. I have learned from listening to others dealing with challenging moral situations such as firing, or going after the money and forgetting my family, or the need to take care of my organization as a whole rather than simply my individual or selfish pursuits.

The CFO of a healthcare organization added:

A challenge in any large organization is how to lead in a consistent manner. How do I provide necessary guidance and example for others? In meeting with this group, I learned to be more open, to challenge assumptions, to ask whether this is the morally right thing to do?

As a member of a WBC chapter you engage in a unique process. This is more than a prayer circle or a support group, although the process includes prayer and a community of mutual support often results. Rather, it is an opportunity to exercise your talents, intelligence, and emotional and social skills all within a process of meditation, reflection, discernment, and action. Underlying this process is a spirituality of engagement which is designed to move participants in "Christian practical wisdom," to promote Christian values as we direct our organizations so that we can contribute beneficially to our firms and to the broader society.

Like other WBC members, you will see new and different aspects in each case. There is a gradual, cumulative, progressive depth of appreciation that only comes from this iterative process of repeated probing. Moreover, insights into a situation or issue will come in most unexpected ways during the course of the ordinary working day. A particular event might trigger a whole new insight on the issue or case under study that is inevitably—because of periodic prayer—lurking close to the surface. Relationships between a topic and something immediately at hand suddenly spring up.

By reason of this iterative Woodstock process, the meshing and blending of prayer and daily work experience, a quasi-habitual modus operandi, a prayerful, reflective way of regarding all the different issues, cases, decisions, and dilemmas, that come up in daily life, gradually matures. As that disposition grows, we become Christian Leaders in the Marketplace.