



**An Address by Heather Lewis to the Librarians' Christian Fellowship Conference "Beyond Librarianship" held on Saturday 20 April 2013 in the Eadon Hall, Methodist Central Hall, Warwick Lane, Coventry.**

## **Introduction**

First of all I want to say that my title is not in any sense meant to be derogatory. When I decided that I needed to explain and apologise for the title "*Am I just a librarian?*" I realised that it could be interpreted in several ways.

Librarians are sometimes the butt of unflattering caricatures. However, within our working environment we ourselves can sometimes underestimate the skills and experience we have gained and that is one of the things I want to explore today.

In addition, none of us is just a librarian even if we work in that field. We all have a varied life outside our work in which we play many roles within our families, our social lives, our churches and other voluntary activities in which we participate.

I intend to look at some of the issues around dealing with redundancy or the need to change job. I hope it might also be useful for anyone wanting to review their work/life balance and future plans. As Christian Librarians we share at least two things in common - our faith and the context in which we work, albeit a very diverse range of roles in a variety of organisations.

We can all challenge ourselves about whether we are where God wants us to be at any stage in our lives. For those of us fortunate enough to be in a fairly settled environment we need from time to time to reassess what God wants us to do. We may not be pushed by circumstances such as the threat of redundancy or yet another round of re-organisation. However, the things we do and the job role we have may have been

right two, five or ten years ago but perhaps we should be asking "*Are we still fulfilling what God has for us to do?*"

I'm really not here to tell you what to do but to highlight some of the things I've learned and you can decide whether they are relevant to you - either for you to emulate or to avoid. Each of us is different so what I have found to work for me may be of no use to you. What I will try to do is to offer you some questions to ask so you can find your own answers.

The context in which we each work will differ from other library and information workers so the skills and experience we have accrued will also be different. Our aspirations and dreams will be different and the wider circumstances of our lives - our personal and social lives and family responsibilities.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing but not always much use. Thinking about possible scenarios, planning ahead and researching in order to be prepared can be more practical. It is difficult to be objective when we are in the middle of a stressful situation such as redundancy. It's worth giving it thought even when it is not imminent and asking ourselves some of the relevant questions.

### **Questions to consider**

Let's start with some quite general questions about ourselves and the place which work has in our lives.

1. How well do you know yourself?
2. What motivates you?
3. What are the essential and desirable elements of your day to day life including employment?
4. What is important about having a job?
5. What are the limits beyond which you are not prepared to go?
6. Is paid work something you intend to do full-time until you retire?
7. Where are you in the overall pattern of your career?

These are not specifically job related questions. They are bigger questions about yourself.

### **Being a Christian**

Before I go any further I would like to set this in the context of our faith. I'm sure when you have difficulties to face or decisions to make you pray about them. Whether small issues or large we need to know what God wants us to do. I hope that all of you have people with whom you can pray whether within your family or your church or elsewhere. Often it is good to pray with someone outside the context of the decision - so for a work issue, not a work colleague. It is important to be able to see beyond the immediate issue and try to take a big view of the situation. It may be as we consider these issues you are the one who can come alongside someone else in such a situation rather than being the one faced with the decisions.

### **The context of the change**

Let's look briefly at the context in which we need to make these decisions and we'll come back to those questions in a minute. You may be facing redundancy or you may feel you want to get out of the wrong job. (I've done both).

#### **1. Redundancy**

The job is redundant, not you.

- Redundancy does have some advantages over choosing to leave a job.
- Redundancy is often done relatively publicly whereas getting out of the wrong job usually has to be done more discreetly.
- There are certain rights which you have if your job is being made redundant. Find out about your rights - take advantage of any advice - redundancy counselling, assessing your skills, CV writing, time to do job searching and attend interviews.
- Use all your networks and take support and advice if it's offered to widen your view but don't let someone else make your decisions for you.

#### **2. Getting out of the wrong job**

The job you are doing may have been the right job once but things change, for example, circumstances and expectations - yours and the organisation's. You may decide that you need to take the initiative and reassess your situation and look for something else.

Getting out of the wrong job usually has to be done more discreetly as the decision is likely to be a personal one. You may be wise not to broadcast your intentions if it will be to the detriment of yourself, your colleagues and your ability to do your job in the short term.

Try to read your current position - what are the best and worst case scenarios? If you can anticipate likely situations you can start to prepare the way for making a move.

So whether redundancy looms or you choose to make a change you need to learn to articulate your strengths in terms which are relevant to the context in which you will be presenting yourself.

Let's go back to those questions:

### **How well do I know myself?**

When I was made redundant in my forties I was offered support in the form of a psychometric assessment. I don't think I knew that's what it was called at the time but I was given a long questionnaire to answer. My answers were analysed and I was presented with results which I discussed with an adviser. They gave me quite a lot of food for thought and formed the basis of my CV which I had always written previously to be read within the library and information world. If I can give you one example which would probably never occurred to me on my own. My adviser said I had a very unusual profile. On the scale of personal ambition my score was quite low. On the scale of wanting success I scored quite highly. From this she concluded that team work was important and, in particular, the success of any project or area of work with which I was involved. Whether I won the prize, as it were, for any achievement was of little importance. This also reflected my management style at the time but it was not something I had previously stopped to think about.

Those of you who are members of CILIP will probably already know about their ***Professional Knowledge and Skills Base*** document.<sup>1</sup> Although this is primarily intended for development within the library profession there is a section on generic skills:

- Leadership and Advocacy
- Strategy, Planning and Management
- Customer Focus, Service Design and Marketing

- IT and Communication

There are, of course, numerous other assessment tools and psychometric questionnaires which you can use to get a more subjective view of yourself than you would naturally be able to devise on our own. These may analyse your personality type, your skills or your preferences. I have found in various situations, not always in my working environment, that these have been helpful in seeing where I fit in with other members of a team or a group. I have, for example, used the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*<sup>2</sup> on a work-related management course as well as in a church environment. We recently used the *DISC team profiling tool*<sup>3</sup> in our church leadership team.

If you get the opportunity to use any of these tools or have already done so they can provide useful evidence to add to your profile or CV.

### **What motivates me?**

I learned quite a lot about my motivation when I was made redundant. This is something which changes with circumstances and experience. Trying new things sometimes tells you what you don't like and will seek to avoid in future! Doing familiar things is sometimes necessary when other aspects of your life are demanding or changing.

Just to offer two examples that apply to me:

- i) I need other people around me
- ii) I need deadlines.

So team work and project work are both good motivators. If I were looking at a new potential working environment I would want to know:

Would there be people with whom I could share ideas? In my current role, I have an excellent team and I job share with someone who enjoys doing the things I'm not good at!

Is there an end or are there goals set to measure what has been achieved? Although this may not apply to the whole of a job role, having time limited tasks from which I can see an end result and draw a sense of achievement is a motivating factor.

## **What are the essential and desirable elements of my day to day life including employment?**

Is your geographical location important, unimportant or essential? How far are you willing to travel or move to get the right job? What scope does that give you?

After I was made redundant, I had several local short-term and part-time jobs. After a few months I found a full-time permanent position or to be exact I was actually headhunted which was quite flattering at a time when my morale was quite low. However, this turned out not to be the right job for me long term and eventually, after just over two years, I decided to leave even without another full-time permanent job to go to. It was this job that had taken me right away from librarianship, something I might not have been brave enough to do without being pushed. It also taught me a lot about what was important to me, what I enjoyed and what I was prepared to tolerate. Being in the wrong job is not always an entirely negative experience.

One of my criteria was that I wanted to stay local which was one of the bonuses of the job I described there. However, it had significantly reduced the number of jobs for which I had been willing to apply. It was a choice I was determined to stick with as the length of my day and the amount of time and energy I had to do other things in the evening and at weekends was important. It also meant that I could sometimes curtail the length of my day by starting later or finishing earlier. My personal reasons for that are not important to discuss here but they are things which each of you would need to consider for yourself.

## **What is important to me about having a job?**

For some people, paid work gives them a good structured routine to their day and week and year. Not all jobs are like that and maybe your experience of library and information work has included long days, late evenings and weekend working. Do you mind work dominating your time so that you have to decline social invitations or opportunities to do voluntary work or attend clubs or other meetings?

For some working from home is an attractive option. I have never considered it as such and there are lots of reasons for and against it which are worth considering and listing in your own circumstances and talking to others about their experience.

For me, as I've already said, interaction with people is very important so working on my own is not an attractive option.

A friend of mine was made redundant a couple of years ago and said what she missed, and it seemed a really genuine concern, was that her opinion mattered. She had become an expert. People came to her for advice and information. They respected her opinion. Redundancy took this away. Don't underestimate the impact in all sorts of ways of being separated from a role which you have developed, maybe over many years.

For many people earning money is obviously a great motivation for having and keeping a paid job. Recognising what is well rewarded in the job market may be something you need to explore. When I was in library management I was involved in evaluating pay grades and I knew at that time what needed to be in a job description to gain points in that process. Criteria change and I'm no longer in that field. That is certainly an area to explore if the amount you need or want to earn is a priority. It may enable you to couch your CV in terms which are regarded as valuable by a prospective employer.

### **What are the limits beyond which I was not prepared to go?**

In the area I live, north of London, I set myself a fifteen mile radius, but only West, North and East as going fifteen miles south would take me into the London area with all the attendant travel stress. I had commuted into and across London for a couple of years earlier in my career which had been fine at the time but not something I wanted to do again. It came in the category of "*trying something new and not wanting to do it again*". Roads were busier, trains more expensive and less reliable and I no longer lived at an easy walking distance from the railway station.

When considering the limits you set for yourself it is also important to have in mind a pay rate below which you are not prepared to go. This would need to take into account the costs involved or savings made with length and type of journey, parking and the like.

### **Is paid work something I intended to do full-time until I retire?**

When I was younger rules about local government pensions and retirement were more generous than they are now. Some of you may remember the eighty five year rule. When your age plus the length of service added up to eighty five you could apply for your pension. So if you started working aged eighteen and had a continuous record you could consider retiring at fifty one or fifty two although this was at the discretion of the employer. An opportunity like this might open up all sorts of possibilities for voluntary unpaid work or at least dropping the need to earn further down your priority list.

### **Where am I now in the overall pattern of my career?**

When, about four years ago, I applied for the job I now have, which incidentally I have enjoyed much more than I anticipated, I knew that this was probably the last significant job move I would make. I had already started, as I saw it, to practice being retired when I dropped my working hours from thirty seven to thirty which gave me an extra day off each week. I came to my current job on twenty five hours but within a year the hours were increased to full-time which was not what I had in mind, so I offered to job share and dropped to half-time when my job share partner was appointed.

I recognised when I started in the post that it was not something I would have considered doing when I was younger. My reason for this was that I thought life experience was a great asset working in a prison environment. Conversely a naïve attitude can be quite dangerous. I now think for a different reason that it is a good thing I didn't get into the job earlier. It is in many ways like going back a generation and I am quickly losing touch with some aspects of librarianship which are central to many people's day to day work. For example, none of the inmates we serve in the library have access to the Internet. Use of computers is strictly monitored and for many very limited or non-existent. Many people could not imagine looking things up in a book rather than turning to the Internet for answers but if our users are to do their own research it has to be hardcopy which in some areas is becoming hard to source and very expensive.

So I would say, if you are trying to build a career and a future working life, beware of eccentric environments where you can easily get out of touch whether within the library world or not.

### **Practical steps**

If you are looking for ways you can transfer the skills and experience you have acquired to other areas of work, here are some suggestions for practical steps you can take:

- Define your skills, and therefore the potential job opportunities, widely.
- Be honest but positive. Have someone who knows you well work with you if you can.
- Include skills and experience acquired in all parts of your life, not just your paid work.
- Adapt your library skills - Try writing your CV without using the word "*library*".
- Use your contacts. Network in all parts of your life - family, social and church as well as work.
- For anyone seriously considering a change of career I recommend [careercomp@niononline](mailto:careercomp@niononline.com)<sup>4</sup> which may help you either to focus in if you have lots of ideas or broaden your view if you need more ideas.
- Use the resources within the profession.

Looking at some LCF literature, for example, the range of work in which members are engaged includes

- public libraries
- academic libraries
- school libraries
- commercial companies
- law firms
- healthcare
- the voluntary sector
- government departments.

There are also members who are students, lecturers and bookshop workers. So here is a range of experience and environments some of which you may not have considered. Some of these people will have developed an expertise in a specialist field which would allow them to move out of the library while staying within the organisation.

At the *Umbrella* conference in July 2013<sup>5</sup>, one of the key themes was "*Future Skills and Future Roles: What will society need from our profession?*"

Things move and change very quickly and developing the understanding and flexibility to move with the changes can be vital.

Read! While I've been preparing for today, without looking particularly hard I've come across several useful articles in recent sources. Here are a few brief quotes from an article by Bethan\_Ruddock in *Update* June 2012<sup>6</sup>

*"look beyond the job titles""know what skills you have"*

*"the person who is reading your application or interviewing you might not have any ideas what a librarian does"*

*"experience doesn't all come from the workplace"*

An article by Laura Williams<sup>7</sup> from a recent *CILIP eBulletin* included some good advice:

**Structure** - One of the hardest things about not having a job is often the lack of structure and routine. I found it easiest to treat job hunting like a regular nine to five job with a lunch hour.

**Flexibility** – To succeed in finding a job, readjustment of your plans might be required. ...You may not need to compromise but I recommend thinking about what area you would be willing to compromise on.

**Positivity** – Positivity is required to survive unemployment. ... Volunteer to gain new skills or take up a new hobby ... Anything that helps give back a little self-worth will help in the job hunt. Remember that you never know what is just around the corner.

I had a particular example of "*you never know what is just around the corner*": How many of you when looking for a job as a librarian would go to a general high street recruitment agency? On one occasion, when I had just finished a temporary job and was out of work, I walked from my home into the main street in Hemel Hempstead. I was usually in too much of a hurry to walk and would drive to the town and rush round on my way to somewhere else. That day I walked round the corner into the shopping centre and on the front door of a recruitment agency it said "*Wanted: Qualified Librarian*" and I landed another temporary job setting up a library for a big international IT company whose European HQ was in Hemel and I didn't even know it was there.

I'm sure some of you will remember John Wickenden speaking at this conference last year or perhaps you read his address in *Christian Librarian*<sup>8</sup> It was entitled "*God's purpose driven librarian*" and I'd just like to quote from it to finish: "*I want you to understand how to discover*

*God's purpose for you in your job, how to be content and positive in your job, how to be yourself in your job, and how to let God change your environment and look for opportunities for change and development."*

Wherever you are, working or not in paid work, it is where God has placed you and He has a purpose for you there.

### **Sources:**

1. *Your Professional Knowledge and Skills Base: identify gaps and maximise opportunities along your career path*; at [www.cilip.org.uk/pksb](http://www.cilip.org.uk/pksb).
2. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). For an explanation go to [www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/](http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/)
3. DISC team profiling tool. For information about this and other tools for job matching and working relationships go to [www.axiomssoftware.com/](http://www.axiomssoftware.com/)
4. Careercomp@nion online: the UK's independent and impartial gateway to careers related information on the Internet. For information go to [www.careercompanion.co.uk](http://www.careercompanion.co.uk)
5. Umbrella conference in July 2013<sup>5</sup>. For more information including the conference programme go to <http://www.cilip.org.uk/umbrella2013/Pages/default.aspx>
6. "Looking a bit further to find that job" by Bethan Ruddock in **CILIP Update** June 2012, page 21
7. Laura Williams' article can be found at <http://theatregrad.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/unemployed-librarian/>
8. John Wickenden's article in **Christian Librarian**, Autumn 2012, page 39-44.

**Heather Lewis**, *MCLIP*, has been employed in library and information work for most of her career. Following redundancy in her forties she explored fields of work outside librarianship before becoming a prison librarian in 2009. Outside of part-time paid work her interests revolve around church life and music and practising to be retired by spending time with a wide circle of friends and drinking coffee..