



Australian National Prayer Breakfast 2021

Keynote Address by Dr. Jenny George, Converge International

Hello. My name is Jenny George and I'm speaking to you today from the lands of the Wurundjeri-Woiwarrung people of the Kulin nations. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this beautiful land and pay my respects to their elders: past, present and emerging.

It's good for us as a nation, and as individuals, to be praying together today. I hope that as I tell my story, you will be drawn to think about your own, and to pray for those around you.

My story is a story of a mathematician finding purpose. The thing I'm good at, is maths. I liked maths in high school and it felt right – it fitted me well.

My story is also a story of a Christian finding calling. Like many people listening today I was brought up to seek a higher purpose. I have always wanted my life to have meaning and quite early on, as a teenager, I made a decision to trust that my life could be used by God in a meaningful way.

Connecting that to maths wasn't straightforward, at least not in the beginning. I had the vague idea that it might be good if maths was applicable to something, and so I studied *applied* maths.

I got a scholarship to do a doctorate and I worked on that doctorate for 5 years. I worked on the problem of a queue where servers can choose the pace they work at. And, true story, I proved mathematically that in a perfect world you should pay people the most when they are doing nothing at all!

Well, you might have spotted two tiny flaws with that – we don't live in a perfect world, and the motivations of people are way more complicated than you can represent in a mathematical model.

So, I moved towards applying data to make good commercial decisions and I taught that for many years at the Melbourne Business School. It was satisfying and it was something I did for nearly 16 years.

The two biggest things, though, that happened to me in that job, happened about the same time: I became Dean of the School, and the Global Financial Crisis hit. Suddenly people woke up to the fact that data-based decisions are no good if they're not ethical.

I spent much of my years as Dean talking to newspapers, and students, and business people, about business education.

But I wasn't asked about my specialist subject of data-based decision making. They didn't want to know about maths. They wanted to know about ethics. The problem of the day was how to train students to be ethical.

The key theme that I emphasised during that time was "Good business is good business"- by which I meant: sensible, profitable commercial decisions will be morally right decisions. A reputation for treating everyone honestly, even your competitors, will ultimately lead to better business outcomes.

I had come to believe that if we seek the good of the people in our company and our customers and everyone else we impact, then we will build a business that is sustainable, and profitable, and that we can be proud of.

It was curious though. Ethical practices were all the rage – but ethics was a much more popular word in business circles than character, and you almost never heard anyone talk about virtue. Business people were fine to talk about the rightness or wrongness of an action but reluctant to talk about issues of the heart.

Well, after that season of life I developed a thirst to do it for myself.

I wanted to have a chance to put these ideas – the notion that "Good business is good business" - into practice. I made the leap out of business education and into the commercial world.

So now I'm a mathematician who works in mental health. The company I work for, Converge, is a commercial enterprise and yet it has one of the strongest visions that I can imagine: A vision of Australian workplaces full of people who are not just doing OK, but who are flourishing.

And I feel that I have found the purpose that I was seeking way back in high school. Because now I still do maths modelling (and I love it!) and I still think about data-based decision making, but I know that the things I am modelling, the decisions I play a part in, result in transformed lives.

I'm humbled by the many stories I hear every day.

Exhausted aged care workers who were terrified that they would catch COVID and spread it to their families. Our people helped them keep going.

A postal worker in chronic pain. Off work for six months. Hopeless, because she couldn't see an end in sight. No idea if she would ever work again. We got her back to work. The pain didn't go away but working with purpose again transformed her life.

And then there are the most moving stories.

I hear one of these almost every week – the people who tell us “I don't think I'd still be around if it wasn't for my counsellor”.

These little victories – and big victories – encourage me every day.

And I feel in some ways that all the threads of my life have come together in the content of what we're doing as well. When I used to talk about ethics in business education, I hadn't quite put all the pieces together. We were trying to teach ethics as a method. We gave students rules, advice about what to do when a big decision comes up.

But that only teaches a formula. It can't make someone *want* to be good. You can't hope that good decisions will come by giving someone a checklist that they run through before taking an action.

People aren't like that.

Decisions aren't like that. Decisions come from the heart.

What I've seen as I manage my company is that there is a virtuous circle at work. Good businesses cause their people and their clients to flourish. And flourishing human beings make for good businesses.

I am now convinced that flourishing human beings and ethical business people are one and the same thing. Working in mental health has shown me that it's not just ethical decisions but also that good mental health is built on a foundation of good character.

Martin Seligman is one of the most famous psychologists in the world, and the father of Positive Psychology.

He wrote a book called “Character Strengths and Virtues”.

He links the traditional religious virtues, found across all the ancient religions and cultures of the world, and shows how they lay the foundations that good mental health is built on.

That's important because I think that sometimes we think about this the wrong way.

Let me give you a quick example:

Shut your eyes wherever you are right now – just for the next few seconds.

Now I want you to picture yourself doing something for your own wellbeing.

Keep your eyes closed and think about doing something for your own wellbeing.

[pause]

...

What did you choose? What was that picture?

Was it reading a favourite book? Was it Listening to music?

Did you "treat yourself"?

OR

Did you picture yourself volunteering at an op shop?

Did you think about coaching seven year-olds to play soccer?

Was that what you chose to do for *your* wellbeing?

In fact, it would have made much more difference.

Sometimes we don't know what's good for us.

A Californian researcher did an experiment.

She asked one group of people to do something for themselves and another group of people to do something kind for someone else.

The group that did something for someone else had higher increases in wellbeing, sustained over more time, than the group that chose to "treat themselves". It even boosted their immune system!

The best way to love yourself is to love others.

Good mental health is built on good character.

But good character isn't something you are born with, it's learned and practiced and cultivated. And sometimes we need help getting breakthroughs.

I was talking to a colleague about this recently. We'd been building a model of mental fitness; trying to explore all the little habits in life that help you stay fit – mentally fit. Just like cardio exercise is important for physical fitness, things

like a positive mindset, sleeping well, volunteering your time, are exercises for your mind.

I remarked to my colleague that many of the mental fitness exercises we were “discovering” were things that people used to get from going to church and I wondered whether our modern not-so-church-going society had actually found good replacements for them.

When thanking God before every meal has gone, have we lost the habit of gratitude?

When looking forward to an eternal future no longer happens every Sunday, have we lost the habit of hope?

When donating our money and our time, sacrificially, is no longer expected of us, have we lost the habit of giving?

I think this intertwining of mental health and spiritual health might be why there is such good evidence to show that counselling that embraces the whole of a person including their religious beliefs leads to the best mental health outcomes for them.

Working with every person and their unique spiritual beliefs can be incredibly powerful and effective for good mental health.

And that couldn't be more important than right now.

COVID has knocked us all around. It's changed our habits and undermined our mental fitness. It has challenged our sense of hope and questioned our purpose. COVID – the illness and the measures we have taken to control it - is a mental health challenge. AND a spiritual health challenge.

I'm usually pretty resilient. But with the lockdowns we've had here in Melbourne I've been more irritable than ever before. Yet part of spiritual health is patience. Part of mental health is patience.

I usually walk to work. But in lockdown I walk downstairs. Sometimes to the kitchen! Yet part of spiritual health is caring for my body. Part of mental health is caring for my body.

COVID has led to mental health issues, and to spiritual health issues.

As I think about the work my colleagues do, I am reminded that Christians are asked to be continually transformed, more and more, into the likeness of God.

We look after our minds and bodies so that we can do God-like things. And we are told what God is like, and what people who are like God are like.

As the Bible says in Galatians 5:22, they're people full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And isn't that what we all want?

When you think about it: There's no-one who comes to a counsellor to make them *more* impatient. There's no-one looking to become *less* loving. *Less* joyful. No-one looking for *more* conflict in their lives.

Good mental health goes hand-in-hand with the virtues Jesus teaches us to cultivate. Christians believe that's the way we're made to be. That the pattern for human flourishing is becoming like the God who created us in his likeness.

Every counsellor works with someone to achieve a little victory; a little change to be made more like what we are made to be:

A measure more self-control

A dollop more gentleness

A sense of peace

And that's why I'm so sure that working in mental health is, fundamentally, *good*.

I'm not a trained mental health professional. I'm still a mathematician trying to help out any way I can. With my spreadsheets and my data-based decision-making trying to enable these little victories to happen.

But now I'm a Christian who has found her calling. I'm a mathematician with purpose.

Let's pray together this morning for purpose.

Let's pray for the mental and spiritual health of our nation.

And ask God how we can fulfil our own calling and purpose.

