

Stakeholder or Neighbour?

A Fresh Look at Business Relationships

A report by Richard Higginson

This issue of FiBQ includes a profile of Paula Vennells, who was our keynote speaker on the Friday evening of this year's Faith in Business conference. She certainly got it off to an inspiring start, provoking a very interesting time of Q & A. We are also publishing in full the excellent talk given by David Barclay about Corporate Social Responsibility and the Common Good. We have published this talk in full partly as a follow-up to articles on CSR which have appeared in the last two issues; he gives a perspective which is refreshingly different, coming from someone who engages constructively with business rather than being a businessperson himself.

Between Paula's talk on Friday evening and David's on Sunday morning there was lots of other interesting input, and this article provides the opportunity to report on it.

On Saturday morning **Dawn Stallwood** spoke on 'Business for Kingdom Purpose'. Dawn used to

work for a law firm; now she runs her own consultancy. Her faith came alive in a fresh way a few years ago and she has found that being a Christian definitely gives her an 'edge' that was not there before. She derives inspiration both from the nineteenth-century Quaker capitalists (well chronicled in Deborah Cadbury's book *The Chocolate Wars*) and the Kingdom perspective found in John Mulford and Ken Eldred's article 'Entrepreneurs Transforming Nations'. She cited their view that 'Kingdom entrepreneurs represent an engine that can transform a nation from one of self-centred individuals to one of other-centred people who love God and each other. The business sector perhaps more than any other in society has a unique opportunity to bring transformation to whole communities'.

Dawn proposed that God is the ultimate Stakeholder. Regarding him in this way has made her resolute

and courageous in taking a moral stand, refusing to connive in clients' dodgy behaviour.

Seeing God as stakeholder is also consistent with chief executives regarding themselves as stewards and servants. Dawn invited delegates to split into groups and consider the question: 'what would a business or organisation need to look like to attract either (a) Jesus or (b) Lucifer as chairman? Interestingly, several groups reported that they felt Jesus – with his concern to save the lost – would be more interested in transforming ropey organisations than maintaining good ones.

Dawn finished her talk with an interesting exposition of the story about the widow's oil in 2 Kings 4:1-7. She feels this has much to teach us about business/life in a pressure cooker. The widow – faced by a crisis caused by a diminishing supply of oil – did not panic, but faced the facts, sought wise and godly counsel, and acted with faith. The solution was



Photo: Andrew Wilkinson

found in partnership with God. She did the natural and he supplied the supernatural.

After coffee, **David Ball** focused on the key stakeholder groups of employee and customer. He is the founder-owner of the David Ball Group, which makes industrial sands, cements and concrete. Throughout its history, he and his company have been at the forefront of technological advance in the industry. In the 1990s, he took the performance of integrally waterproof concrete to a new lead. More recently he has pioneered Cemfree, a new zero-cement concrete which is much more environmentally friendly than any of its predecessors.

David believes that his business contributes to the building of God's kingdom. He is driven by three key concerns. "The first is a passion for quality, making sure the product is right first time, every time. The second is training and education our staff, along with the training of our customers – very important! – into the way that things work properly. The third is service, service above self. You put the interest of your customer and your client first". He sees quality, training and service as similar to the three legs of a stool: "If you get these three principles as the core of your business, your business will succeed and it will thrive".

Following a break for networking in the first half of the afternoon, we came together in the second half to hear **Steve Apted** and **Steve Mitchell** do a joint presentation about Christian publishing. This is a sector which has seen major retrenchment in recent years, brought about by a combination of the impact of Amazon, decline in Christian readership, resistance of Christian publishers to change and the process of disintermediation (cutting out the middle men). The two Steves used Porter's Five Forces Model to analyse the industry, surveying in turn the bargaining power of customers, the bargaining

power of suppliers, the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitute products and competitive rivalry within an industry. Several key players in the Christian publishing world have disappeared.

Under the title "Someone has to be the bad cop", Steve Apted explained how he had been brought in by IVP as an interim chief executive. In this role he had pushed through a merger with SPCK. This found favour with most stakeholders, but not the staff – much of the IVP operation having to close – which had been painful. However, it does mean that IVP is now on a much firmer financial footing, while SPCK has diversified its theological position. The future for Christian publishers certainly lies in an increasingly digital output, with physical bookselling becoming a more localised and sharply focused activity.

In the evening attention switched to the area of investment, with **Bill Seddon**, Chief Executive of the Central Finance Board of the Methodist Church, explaining the church's policy about investing in the corporate sector. He showed how Jesus' words in Matthew 5:13-16 concerning the function of salt and light provide an inspiration for the work of his department: "For us ethics is neither a minor side-issue nor an end in itself but part of our response to the Great Commission".

Bill worked systematically through their mission statement:

- To provide a high quality investment service seeking above average financial returns for investors
- To follow a discipline in which the ethical dimension is an integral part of all investment decisions
- To construct investment portfolios which are consistent with the moral stance and teachings of the Christian faith

- To encourage strategic thinking on the ethics of investment
- To be a Christian witness in the investment community

The biblical principles which the Methodist Church seeks to follow are to encourage fruitful use of economic resources, activities consistent with God's nature and values, a concern for the vulnerable and oppressed, and healing of the effects of the Fall.

'The future for Christian publishers certainly lies in an increasingly digital output...'

Bill pointed to examples of the Church engaging constructively with companies to improve ethical performance, notably in the mining industry. (He has taken part in the

Mining in Partnership initiative which we described in detail in FiBQ 17:4.) Bill was subjected to some searching questions, both from delegates who felt the Church's policy should be more rigorous and others who felt the whole matter of judging some companies more 'righteous' than others was fraught with difficulty. But his talk certainly provoked plenty of debate.

Following David Barclay's talk on Sunday morning, we had a plenary session in which the conference were brought up-to-date with what was happening in several different 'faith and work' organisations, including Faith in Business Quarterly. For the second successive year, we had a delightful visit from some local Cambridge schoolchildren, talking about their activities as young entrepreneurs. The conference then concluded with a Communion service at which Michael Hodson, chair of the FiBQ steering group, preached powerfully on the book of Philemon.

As is our custom at these annual conferences, an invigorating time of stimulus and fellowship was had by all. 