

Faith in Business: The Faith and Football Enterprise Challenge

Michael Scott introduces us to Faith and Football, which organises community football leagues and mentoring for inner-city children. It created Enterprise Challenge which runs a competition in schools to create a viable start-up business. Local Christian business people act as mentors and are open about their faith.

Starter for 10. What common thread links the following disparate commercial enterprises? Plushions, a company selling homemade cushions. Wakiki Shakes, purveyors of fine, fruit-based cocktails. Flash Photographers, a firm that produces digitally enhanced snaps of Portsmouth.

Answer? Well, frankly, you'd be hard placed to get there on your own, so I shall help you out. All the above were brought to life by young teenagers, working in tandem with a group of plucky Christian businesspeople.

Cushions and cocktails may not seem like an obvious intersection for faith,

youth and business, but that's the beauty of the Enterprise Challenge, a Christian-led initiative that I'm about to kickstart in my home town, Cambridge.

The scheme – which was created by Mick Mellows, the assistant chaplain of Portsmouth Football Club – works



with secondary schools to lay on a business competition for Year 9 pupils; that is, students aged 13 and 14.

It works like this: interested youngsters form small groups and begin to brainstorm ideas for their own start-up firm, and a viable product. They might come up with anything; something to wear, something to eat, something involving recycled bits and pieces. It simply has to be saleable. Last year's competition was won by a team that turned Scrabble tiles into framed messages. They called themselves Play On Words (tagline: "Life's a scrabble").

Real-Life Experience

Along the way, they face the same kinds of obstacles that trouble any grown-up starter. They must write business plans, devise a promotion strategy, submit accounts and even take their products to market, partly by setting up a stall in a shopping centre. It's not a million miles removed from the BBC's *Junior Apprentice*, in other words – except that there's no Lord Sugar and no-one gets fired or taxied home in televised ignominy. Well not yet, anyway. We're always open to innovation.

What the Enterprise Challenge does have, though, is an ambitious incentive at the end of the four-month process. The winning team – selected by a panel of local businesspeople, and funded by Faith and Football, with support from local Portsmouth businesses – spends a week in India with Mustard Seed Ministries, a Christian charity that supports poverty-stricken communities in Goa. There, they'll see one specific outworking of applied enterprise in a Christ-centred context, working in orphanages and negotiating fair rice prices for hand-outs to needy families. You can only imagine the life-changing impact that might have on a 14-year-old.

From an educational perspective, it's easy to see why head teachers might be keen to sign up for all this. Schools have business-and-enterprise-shaped boxes to tick for their curriculum targets. The Challenge also comes free of charge, any profits raised go to the poor, and the whole thing pivots on regular, on-site surgeries provided by real-life business mentors (hold this

thought; we'll return to it in a moment). And, like any sound business, it has grown steadily. The scheme is now entering its tenth year and operates in 15 secondary schools in the Portsmouth and Southampton areas, with new roll-outs this year in

'The winning team spends a week in India with Mustard Seed Ministries'

Aldershot and my patch, Cambridge. To date, more than 3000 pupils have been through its programme.

Roots in Football

Christianity, however, isn't just tacked onto the scheme in the closing stages. It's a fundamental part of why the initiative exists. The *Faith and Football Social Enterprise & Business Challenge*, to cite the full title, grew out of a Portsmouth-based sports charity that was set up in the early 2000s by three ex-soccer pros. One of them was Mick Mellows, 66, a former Portsmouth and Olympic GB player who had originally come to faith in the 1980s, as his career ended.

"I was 31 and football had been the goal for the whole of my working life," he recalled, when I caught up with him to discuss this article. "I needed to fill that void, if you like.



Women from poverty-stricken communities in Goa selling fish in Sridona village market



“Play on Words” Enterprise Challenge

And that trail eventually led to a basic Christianity course, and to my conversion.”

In the intervening years, Mick set up a sports-based business of his own. It flourished. But in 2002 he gave it all up – to the bafflement, he admits, of some contemporaries – to create *Faith and Football*.

“I suppose I was wrestling with the fact that, as somebody who had become a Christian, I recognised the grace of God in my life and wanted, somehow, to bring that to others,” he explained.

“But looking around, all I could see was a huge and growing gap between the church and those outside it. So what handshake could I use to reach across? All I really had in my hand at that time was football.”

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Oddly enough, football was what brought me to Mick in the first place. A few years ago, I’d been working on ways to engage teenage boys with my local church, since so many of them seemed to be disenchanted by the idea of church-going. Sport was an obvious bridgehead, so I set up a group called *Soccer Sunday*. One day, when I was searching for help and advice, I happened to google ‘faith and football’, which brought me to Mick. I drove straight down to Portsmouth Football Club, where the charity is now based, and discovered that we shared the same goals. If you will excuse the pun.

Day-to-day, however, it’s fair to say that my gifts are rather more inclined towards the boardroom than the football pitch; over the years, I’ve helped to establish firms

in various industries, from construction to advertising, and experience has taught me that relationship-building is quite often as crucial to success as anything else.

It struck me a long time ago that young people often struggle to make the transition from schoolyard to workplace – as Mick had found, albeit in different circumstances, when quitting professional football. Some adapt well, others flounder. To that end, I’d been mentoring a few teenagers by bringing them into my own office, getting alongside them, showing them the ropes – trying to build relationships, in other words, to give youngsters a better chance of flourishing in the world beyond the classroom.

Faith and Football has the same kind of vision. Its core work involves organising community football leagues and mentoring for inner-city children. But its focus has grown to encompass all kinds of other

outreach, including a highly successful Bible-based reading scheme for primary schools and, of course, the Enterprise Challenge.

Any initial suspicion they might have encountered from head teachers – wary, perhaps, of how a faith-based operation might function in a mainstream school environment – has tended to dissolve once they see the schemes in action. Put simply, they work. Students flourish.

Besides, the Challenge makes no secret of its Christian ethos. It's stated clearly from the first assembly, when the volunteers arrive to announce the scheme and explain what it's all about. Which brings me to the rather exciting business of the business mentors.

Mentoring the students

The reason the Challenge works so well is that it relies on local Christian businesspeople to help the students along in weekly or fortnightly surgeries. They come from all walks of commercial life. Our new branch, which we launched on 5 November at St Bede's Inter-Church School in Cambridge, is supported by

a bank manager and a former accountant, amongst others, along with someone who has just set up a high-tech firm doing something I can't pretend to understand with pharmaceutical instruments.

I asked Steve Rolls, a business consultant and former Independent Financial Advisor who has been Challenge-mentoring for 10 years, to explain a little further. "The school makes a boardroom available for a meeting, and then it's really all about asking questions," he told me. "So to begin with I'll ask them all about the product they're going to sell. 'How will you make it? How much will it cost? Who will buy it? Where will you get the money?'"

Business is a total anathema to the average teenager, Steve explained. "Today's employment laws mean they can't even get Saturday jobs anymore, so at the outset they tend to have very little idea about buying and selling. They'll often struggle with deadlines. Some of them have quite

wild product ideas. But over the four months they learn by doing; by trial and error and making mistakes."

Take the *Play On Words* team, for instance, which ran into unforeseen supply issues when they took their product to market on Mother's Day,

and promptly ran out of Ms. "In the end they got their woodwork teacher to machine-cut more letters. That's the sort of thing you learn from experience. You don't learn it in a classroom."

The Christian ethos behind the competition cuts through in various ways. On a basic level, the

teams are raising money for good works. "All the profits they generate go to Faith and Football, to be spent in the UK and abroad," Steve said.

"We've bought bunk beds in orphanages, for example, and water filters for schools." (Incidentally, winners are chosen on the basis of ideas and implementation rather than the breadth of their profit margins; one of last year's teams raised more than £1500 but didn't claim the prize).

'Winners are chosen on the basis of ideas and implementation rather than the breadth of their profit margins'





“Inside Pompey”
(Portsmouth FC)

All the mentors are committed Christians, and the students know this, but their role is about gentle role-modelling rather than proselytising. They embody biblical values through encouragement, by calls to perseverance, and simply by offering a helping hand – with no strings attached.

Biblical Foundations

“We’re not ashamed of the gospel, but this is not a Bible-bashing exercise in any way,” said Steve. “Yet our motives for helping the children are clear. And certainly we hope that those who make the trip to India will have their eyes opened to the fact that the people helping out there are motivated by the Christian faith.”

Mentors can view their Challenge ministry in two key ways. Firstly, they’re living out the biblical imperative to serve God through the act of work, as per the well-known verse in Colossians: “Whatever you

do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” (Colossians 3:23). “In a sense, any business meeting is a holy meeting, because we do what we do for the glory of God,” said Steve.

Secondly, they are also endorsing the biblical roots of enterprise itself. “Business is biblical,” Steve added, simply. “Every time Jesus made a chair, I’m sure he didn’t give it away.

If it was a little family carpentry business, he wouldn’t have been ashamed to put the right price on it.

“Or think of the encouragement to ‘choose good reputation over fortune’ [Proverbs 22:1]. That’s a good business tip for anybody. So, through all of this, we want to teach good practice and

good principles, and be a good signpost to the best businessmen.”

There are all kinds of other Christian values that coalesce with business, of course: integrity, honesty, due

diligence, fairness, wisdom, how we treat other people, how to know when to start and when to stop, how to keep persevering and developing. I like to think of the Bible as a good commercial manual, and I hope that we can get something of that over to the young people.

And of course you can never tell which of these principles will hit home with the students. “I learned that it is best to leave personal feelings out of any problems and just get on with the plan,” wrote one young entrepreneur in an end-of-Challenge appraisal that I read recently. “We must stick to our deadlines,” wrote another. “We lost 14 days of selling by being lazy...”

Looking to the future

I’m now very excited about how the scheme is developing in Cambridge.

Following the meeting at St Bede’s School in November, we have eight flourishing teams, each with five to six students, who have established eight unique mini-businesses. Each team is making real products (T-shirts, candles, cakes) for real


markets, the money they make going back into the charity. We trust God will use this for his glory.

The opportunities extend beyond the Challenge. Faith and Football also runs a follow-up programme called the *Enterprise and Leadership Academy*, which takes the 24 most exceptional students and puts them

through a full business training scheme, in partnership with local companies. That might be an area to revisit in the future.

For the moment, though, we want to focus on encouraging Christian volunteers with business backgrounds to get involved, and perhaps even to help fund the

winners' trip to India. Maybe you could even consider signing up, too. The beauty of the Challenge is that no-one ever quite knows where it will end, or how its impacts will unspool through the lives of the young people it supports.

And that, I think you will agree, is worth a good few plushions. 



Michael Scott *Michael Scott FCIQB MCIInstCES AssocRICS has worked as a Managing Surveyor for a large international business. He has also established an architectural and surveying practice and construction company in the UK. He is regional manager for Faith and Football (www.faithandfootball.org.uk) and can be contacted at info@faithandfootball.org.uk.*

Tearfund Business Partnership Survey

The Henderson Group (<http://www.henderson-group.com/>) in Northern Ireland had been supporting a UK charity for nearly 30 years. This longstanding, family-run business has a portfolio including SPAR, EUROSPAR, VIVO, VIVOXTRA and VIVO Essentials. Its strong company ethos includes committed reinvestment into its own business as well as 'giving back' to the community at home and overseas. In 2014 SPAR partnered with the charity to donate 5 pence from every two litres of milk purchased at a SPAR store. This support provided up to 15,000 people with access to clean water.

The Henderson Group is one of the 91% of companies in Europe that give financially to address global poverty according to the 'Giving Around the Globe: 2014' report

(<http://cecp.co/measurement/global-measurement.html>). This giving still only represents 0.174% of the revenues of companies. In addition 86% of companies offer their employees company time to volunteer domestically and 71% offer it internationally.

These figures indicate that European businesses are very involved in global charitable initiatives. But what is the kind of partnership that businesses are most interested in developing with charities? Why are they interested in developing these partnerships? Is it because the business sees an opportunity to market itself, or do they want to help people who might have nothing to offer the business? And what kind of charities are businesses most interested in partnering with? Does faith play a role in the decision to develop partnerships?

Tearfund (<http://www.tearfund.org/>) as a UK based international Christian relief and development organisation is very interested to get the responses to these questions. This will enable Tearfund to develop better partnerships with businesses and improve its serve to both businesses and poor communities. Tearfund is therefore conducting a survey to understand how to better collaborate with companies in addressing global poverty. Please complete the survey at <http://www.tearfund.org/businesspartnershipsurvey>.

For more information on the survey or on Tearfund's business partnerships contact John Appleton at john.appleton@tearfund.org or 0772 006 8499.