

Legacy: Passing the Business Baton

The weekend spring conference which took place from April 13 –15 was the last that I will organise at Ridley Hall. This was reflected in the title: there was a sense in which I was passing the Faith in Business baton on to others, notably my friend and colleague Peter Heslam, who will organise next year’s conference. But it also provided an opportunity for our various speakers to reflect on the legacy that they are seeking to pass on through their companies and organisations. I shall give a summary of the talks given by each of our six main speakers, highlighting at the end a biblical verse that has proved inspirational for them. Unfortunately one of our scheduled speakers, Mark Spelman, had to withdraw at the last moment because of appendicitis, but we adjusted the programme to make extra space for other components.

Val King: Business as a Force for Good

Val King is Managing Director and Co-owner of Rooflight, a design and manufacturing company with 75 employees which makes windows for roofs and is based near Oxford. She believes passionately that business can be a force for good, and is committed to the corporate living out of four key values which have been agreed by her staff: integrity, care, empowered and unity. For Val care is the most important and one she equates very closely with love. Her vision – which she has seen put into practice – is one of a community choosing to live these values and consciously basing business decisions upon them. Obviously this is not always straightforward, especially when economic conditions are difficult, and one challenge she’s

had to face is what to do about staff who pay lip-service to or are not fully committed to the values. People who are cynical are asked or encouraged to leave. The values are positively reinforced through regular audits and the giving of trophies to staff who exemplify them in an outstanding way. Val quoted Charles Handy: ‘The companies that survive the longest are the ones that work out what they uniquely can give to the world – not just growth or money, but their excellence, their respect for others, their ability to make things happy. Some call those things a soul.’

The conference broke out into buzz groups, and Val asked people to identify 3-4 Christian-inspired values which they would like to see embedded in a new business. The values delegates came up with



**Conference Group
Photograph**

included trust, relationships, courage, humility, truthfulness, perseverance, love, openness, generosity and celebration.

‘But Jesus spoke to them at once. “Don’t be afraid”, he said. “Take courage. I am here” (Mt 14:27). These are words that have inspired Val when as leader she has sought to give her company hope, especially in the midst of difficult times.

Simon Lawson – Family Firms

Simon Lawson is Chairman of Lawsons, a family business which is the largest independent timber, building materials and fencing merchant in south-east England. It has passed through four generations of the Lawsons family. (Simon is not sure yet whether any of his children will succeed him.) Since recovering from near-closure in 1993 the company has expanded from two depots and 50 employees to 17 depots and 450 employees. Simon cited a series of statistics that mark it out from other companies, including a narrow salary ratio of 10:1, low staff turnover and high level of pride in the company. But this pride contrasts with the humility which is perhaps Simon’s most striking characteristic. His Christian roots are Quaker, and before taking over as Chairman he wrote a dissertation on love at work as part of his Cranfield MBA. He has sought to put this into practice. Simon’s understanding of servant leadership is particularly evident in the ‘values lunches’ that he hosts for ordinary staff. These are not given on company premises, but at Simon’s own home; the catering is not outsourced, but Simon himself cooks and serves the food. People are then free to talk about whatever topic they choose. Encouraged by Simon’s own example of vulnerability (he is open about the difficulties he experienced, notably going through a divorce and bringing

up four children) times of remarkable openness have ensued. Lawsons offers several notable benefits to its staff, including an Employee Assisted programme, childcare vouchers and a scheme to enable the purchase of a bike to travel to work.

‘Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together, with one mind and purpose. Don’t be selfish, don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests but also the interests of others.’ (Phil 2:2-4). These were words written by St Paul to the church at Philippi, but Simon has made them the basis of his own corporate ethos.

Keren Pybus – Ethical Trade

Keren Pybus is CEO of Ethical Apparel Africa (EAA), an ethical sourcing company with a vision to prove that cost-competitive quality clothing and ethical manufacturing are not mutually exclusive. She previously worked in the mainstream retail clothing sector for 20 years with companies such as Marks & Spencer and Asda. Inspired by the words of her life coach, ‘If you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat’, Keren’s compassion for the producer-suppliers with whom she did business led her to set up EAA two years ago.

She began by getting the conference to think about the difference between fair trade, which focuses mainly on price, and ethical trade which she sees as covering a wider range of issues: living wages, best place to work, efficient production and processes, ethical buying practices, transparency and integrity.

Keren’s vision is to ‘demonstrate that ethical garment manufacturing should be the norm through delivering cost-competitive quality

products whilst ensuring workers are respected, empowered and paid living wages’. EAA partners with factories in Ghana and Benin to make clothes for brands across the UK and USA. She explained her theory of change which involves working with an aligned factory partner (aligned in the sense of full sharing of values) to create operational excellence, increased export orders, reinvested profit and workforce empowerment, the outcome being great products. Thus far EAA is making encouraging process, though the challenges of running an ethical trading company are considerable and Benin is proving a more difficult country to operate in than Ghana.

‘She seeks wool and flax, and works willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away...She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. She makes herself coverings, her clothing is fine linen and purple...She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come’ (Prov 31:13-14, 21-22, 24-25). The ‘capable wife’ of Proverbs 31 is indeed an inspiration for anyone interested in ethical apparel.

Gavin Oldham; Democratic Capitalism

Stockbroker Gavin Oldham has developed a popular and egalitarian form of capitalism through three linked organisations: The Share Centre, The Share Foundation and Share Radio. This is fuelled by his concern about chronic wealth and opportunity disparity, and his passionate belief in individual ownership and responsibility, based on the core belief that all human life is sacred. Gavin cited a memorable statement by William Gladstone to that effect: ‘Remember that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan, among the winter

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snows, is as sacred in the eye of Almighty God as your own.’ He is particularly concerned about the situation of disadvantaged young people, and through the Share Foundation seeks to give them the financial literacy and skills to generate wealth for themselves – through what he calls ‘incentivised learning’; rather than universal distribution. The Foundation runs a Junior ISA scheme for children and young people in care on behalf of the Department for Education.

Buying and selling shares is something that most people do through rather impersonal institutional intermediaries. Gavin promotes disintermediation – i.e. people taking responsibility (with suitable advice) for the buying and selling of shares themselves, owning their own choices. He mentioned a working group for a new drive for personal share ownership involving the HM Treasury and the Departments for Business, Innovation & Skills, Work & Pensions, and Education respectively. Gavin is driven by a vision of egalitarian capitalism. He thinks socialism invariably stifles enterprise and creativity. Egalitarian capitalism, in contrast, fosters and encourages enterprise for all. He believes that one response to the excessive power of Internet giants like Amazon would be to require them to change their corporate structure, giving their 300 million customers shares in the company’s ownership.

Gavin proposed an addition to the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the educators, for theirs is the ability to break the bounds of poverty’. He is fundamentally motivated by the second great commandment, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mk 12:31).

Robert Hallam: The Partnership Model

John Lewis is one of the UK’s leading retailers, running 50 department stores and 353 Waitrose stores. It is renowned for its high standards of

customer service, as well as its distinctive corporate structure, the business being owned by the 86,000 staff who are all Partners. Robert Hallam has worked for John Lewis for 31 years. Previously Managing Director of the Peterborough, Norwich and Cambridge branches (he opened the refurbished Cambridge store in 2007), he is now Head of Democratic Engagement at John Lewis. This gives him a crucial role in guarding the company’s ethos and promoting its special style of operating.

Robert explained the company’s history by reference to John Spedan Lewis, the son of the founder-owner, who established its constitution in 1928. Lewis said ‘The Ultimate Purpose of the Partnership is the happiness of all our members through their worthwhile and satisfying employment in a successful business’, and ‘the vision of the Partnership was...to make the world happier and a bit more decent’. Although the John Lewis model allows senior managers to make major decisions, these are open to question by more junior members of staff, with the governing council regularly asking the question: ‘is the chairman running the company in the best interests of the partners?’ John Spedan Lewis believed the way to do this was through deliberately seeking out their views: ‘Don’t wait for the Managed to utter. Question them and do it sufficiently often and searchingly’. With no external shareholders, John Lewis lacks the conflicts of interest found in a typical PLC and in Robert’s view, ‘allows us to be counter-intuitive’.

Partner benefits include participation in the regular 5% bonus scheme,

properties where partners can enjoy cheap holidays, and six months of paid holiday for any partner who has worked for John Lewis for 25 years. When Robert took his six months recently, he spent time working in a Christian mission in Zambia, and wrote up his experience for an article in the company Gazette, which goes to 90,000 people.

Proverbs 18:15 ‘Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for insights’ (NIV). ‘The heart of discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out’ (The Message). Robert believes this spirit of mutual listening and learning lies at the heart of the John Lewis model.

Moses Cui: Agape + Economics

Moses Cui is chair of Bringspring Science & Technology Co., a health data software company located in his home city of Shenyang, North-east China. He is also a professor of economics, director of the faith and entrepreneurship centre in Beijing’s Minzu University, co-founder of the Agape Foundation and founder of the Kingdom Business College in China, one of the world’s largest networks of Christian entrepreneurs. His talk was based on

‘The Ultimate Purpose of the Partnership is the happiness of all our members through their worthwhile and satisfying employment in a successful business’

three key convictions: the economic system is out of control, God never leaves us, and the people of God could do more.

First, the economic system is out of control. Moses sees evidence for this in the rise of populism and xenophobia, trade protectionism, and the disparity between rich and poor (both within China and internationally). Second, God never leaves us. He gives us the resources of love, faith and hope which equip

us to take on the challenges which confront us. Third, the people of God – though they are already doing many good things – could do more. In particular, Moses encouraged Christian entrepreneurs and professionals to be more concerned about social issues, undertake social responsibilities, and explore innovative solutions for social problems.

Moses argued that, when applied to economics, the Christian virtue of agape displays five key features. He took a letter from each of these to form AGAPE:

- cre**A**tivity
- exo**G**enesis
- imme**A**surable
- **P**ositive externality
- r**E**sponsibility

Creativity fuels innovation which is at the heart of entrepreneurship, and where agape is involved, this prompts smart innovations which have people's welfare at heart. Exogenesis speaks of transformation, as seen in the switch to renewable energy sources like solar power. Immeasurable speaks of the huge impacts which can be made on society; examples Moses gave were

the use of volunteers to apply first aid and the new-found popularity of green commuting. Positive externality refers to people who can make crucial interventions to solve problems. Responsibility leads to sustainability, and was illustrated by a programme of genetic testing for lung cancer. In each case Moses had vivid examples of Christians in China making positive contributions, both inside and outside the workplace, to enhance the quality of communal life.


'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.' (Dt 31:6)

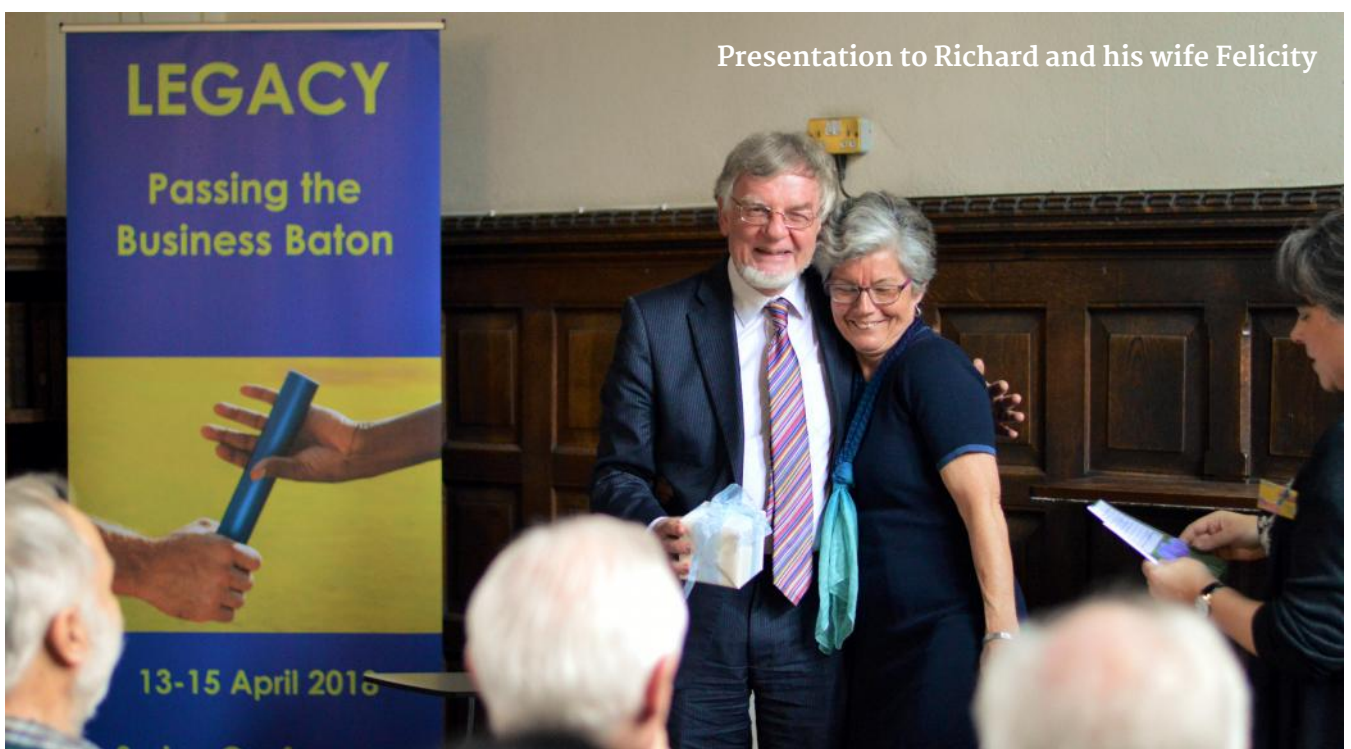
'Although I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity (agape), I am nothing' (1 Cor 13:2)

In Closing

At the closing service to the conference, I preached from Jeremiah 29:1-14 on Seeking the Welfare of the City. In many ways, the message of this articulates what Faith in

Business has been trying to do throughout its history. This sermon is reproduced elsewhere in the journal (see pp. 32-33).

The conference also included a session on Saturday afternoon when we met and gave thanks for God's blessing on the work of Faith in Business over the last three decades. Thanks were expressed and presentations made to myself (Director since 1989), Janine Stewart (Administrator since 1996) and Eve Poole (Chair since 2012). This was an extremely heart-warming and humbling experience for me. My wife Felicity and I especially appreciated the gift of annual membership of Cambridge's Botanic Gardens for 2018-19, something we've already used considerably during this fine summer. It was wonderful that so many friends who were present in the early days of Faith in Business made the effort to come this year. These included James Allcock, David Murray, David Runton, Jim Wright and John Lovatt. There were also people who were present for the first time and they departed saying that they would definitely be returning to Faith in Business in its new form – which was equally encouraging. 



Presentation to Richard and his wife Felicity