

Entrepreneurship

Spring Conference at Ridley Hall 2009

by Sally Orwin



Sally Orwin

This year *Faith in Business* celebrates its 20th Anniversary. Sally Orwin reviews the annual conference held at Ridley Hall in Cambridge in Spring 2009. She finds that entrepreneurship is alive and kicking in diverse ways, and that Christian entrepreneurs are having a significant impact in growing economic, social and spiritual capital to bring hope in testing times within the global economy

An Introduction to *Faith in Business*

The Christian church has had an uneasy relationship with business and entrepreneurs over the years. At its most cynical, the traditional church congregation might identify the entrepreneur as the person who will sign the most substantial cheque towards the fund for the repair of the church roof. Entrepreneurs have been associated with the vices of egoism, moral short cuts and ruthlessness. Attitudes are changing, however. Significant research is being carried out into entrepreneurship in both 'sacred' and 'secular' contexts. Entrepreneurship is being recognised in relation to its role in creating economic well-being, and the traditional divisions between 'sacred' and 'secular' are breaking down.

On 27 March 2009 delegates gathered at Ridley Hall in Cambridge for the 20th Anniversary *Faith in Business* conference. *Faith in Business* has been running enjoyable, informative and productive events, including several conferences, throughout the twenty years of its existence. It was fitting to focus the anniversary conference on the theme of entrepreneurship, particularly in this year of challenge and moral crisis within the global economy

Richard Higginson has been Director of *Faith in Business* since its inception. In his introduction to the conference, Richard describes entrepreneurship as *the practice of starting new organisations or revitalising mature ones, particularly businesses, as a result of*

identifying opportunities. In one way or another (and frequently several) entrepreneurship involves innovation: the development of a new idea, product, technology, system, source of materials capital resource, market or industry. Entrepreneurship is often associated with the qualities of vision, passion, risk-taking, persistence and decisiveness. Entrepreneurship is an ongoing social necessity, even - arguably especially - during time of economic downturn.

The conference was run in partnership with *Transforming Business*, directed by Peter Heslam and also based at the University of Cambridge. Peter has defined an entrepreneur as one who '... taking a step of faith mobilises talent, knowledge and judgement in pursuit of a vision for the sake of a better tomorrow.' The

international audience included entrepreneurs, business leaders, church leaders, academics, and professionals from other workplaces, including many whose 'portfolio' lifestyles straddle a number of these different spheres. There was an exciting buzz to the conference reflecting the nature of entrepreneurial activity which is characterised by a combination of passion and urgency. There were stories to tell and ideas to explore about what a better tomorrow might look like.

The Reality of Being an Entrepreneur

Shai Vyakarnam opened the conference on Friday evening with comment on



■ Shai Vyakarnam ■

'Entrepreneurship at the Cutting Edge'. Shai is Director of the Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning at Judge Business School in the University of Cambridge. He provided insight

into how excellence and innovation in the academic realms of science and technology are converted into commercial products and services through a process of incubation such as exists at the Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning. His use of the term 'porous' was compelling in describing both the nature of entrepreneurs themselves and the processes they go through to convert innovative ideas into commercially viable working reality. He commended what he called an 'eco-system of connections' among entrepreneurs and those in a position to offer moral as well as practical support. He spoke of the interplay of skill, behaviour and emotion which is crucial to building trust in an entrepreneurial environment and in encouraging a healthy approach to risk-taking which, he argued, is typically parented or schooled out of us from an early age. He also stressed the importance of maintaining a focus on the balance sheet of a young entrepreneurial company with a view to growing value to the purpose of the company. This is as important, he argues, as a focus on generating appropriate levels of profit.

Common themes ran through the very different stories of David Runton, Sally Orwin and Flint McGlaughlin who took the Friday evening slot after supper. David, founder-owner of FTL Holdings, an engineering company based in Leeds, spoke of his long-term commitment to a vision in the light of constant change both within and without his business as well as the desire to demonstrate a very real commitment to and

investment in people. His threefold premise was that entrepreneurs are impelled by desire, 'keep bashing on, continually learning new tricks', and work hard at reducing risk to



■ Arca's award-winning Silver Café in Morecambe ■

minimize the prospect of failure. Sally, a consultant in personal and organisational development, spoke of her experience in setting up and managing an architectural practice, Arca, the purpose of which is to produce beautiful buildings with integrity. She showed us a selection of pictures of these. Flint, CEO of the MECLABS group of companies which provide research-based services in internet marketing, spoke of his becoming and then continuing as an entrepreneur almost against his will; it is a vocation he has pursued alongside that of being a pastor. Both Sally and Flint explored the concepts

of grace, beauty and imagination in the life of an entrepreneur. They also explored the spiritual dynamic at work in the world in the light of the great Christian hope.

What is an Entrepreneur?

On Saturday morning Rick Goossen, who is based in Vancouver where he combines



■ Rick Goossen ■

entrepreneurial and professorial roles, explored what makes for a successful entrepreneur. He highlighted innovation as the difference between an entrepreneur and a plain businessperson. Noting the surprising lack of agreement about how to define entrepreneurship, he considered some of the better known definitions including those by Drucker and Mintzberg, and then proposed his own. A successful entrepreneur is one who is able to 'commercialise innovation, blending science, art and practice in a reflective process of gathering resources and providing a good or service

needed in the marketplace in a new or different way'. He made the interesting point that entrepreneurs are not necessarily very good at analysing their success; sometimes others can reflect on entrepreneurs' practice better than they can themselves. Rick also made a valuable distinction for Christians who look to find a meaning *to* work rather than a meaning *at* work. He encapsulated the differences between the 'self' narrative of the secular world defined by horizontal relationships (attributes) as opposed to the God narrative which focuses on the vertical relationship (virtues). He focused on the distinctive Christian use of the term 'calling', identifying 'purpose' as more in line with secular horizontal thinking based on self-help rather than divine help.

On Being an Entrepreneurial Leader

After coffee, Herta von Stiegel, chairman of Ariya Capital Group, explored entrepreneurship through the prism of providing influence and hope. Drawing from her own experience as an investment banker in the City of London and in New York, as well as the challenge of leading a team of disabled people on a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, Herta offered ten points of practical wisdom for entrepreneurial leaders. She talked about steering a course on the fine

line between success and failure, 'failing forwards' with a constant need to balance vision and action to avoid merely dreaming or killing time. Based on Matthew 6:33, 'Seek first the kingdom of God', Herta encouraged entrepreneurial leaders to question themselves continually: 'for what or whom am I building?' She highlighted how grace, not rights, is characteristic of the wise entrepreneurial leader, manifest in: a refusal to accept stark choices between safety and ideals; in being available; in dealing wisely with confrontation and criticism; in building diverse teams; in identifying in humility when to cut one's losses; and in treating money as a good servant which should never become a master and allows for meaningful choices to be made.

Enterprise with Ethics

Saturday evening was devoted to 'Enterprise with Ethics' in which Richard Higginson and Peter Heslam outlined their research projects for the future. Richard spoke of the changes to the *Faith*



■ Mount Kilimanjaro ■

in *Business* project over the years since 1989, when it began as the 'God on Monday' project. The thrust for *Faith in Business* over the next few years is twofold: understanding and learning lessons from the global financial crisis, and exploring and spreading the practice of social enterprise.



■ The Quaker Entrepreneur Edward Pease ■
 ■ who financed the first passenger railway ■

In his role directing *Transforming Business*, the primary thrust of Peter's work is to explore what causes wealth. Among those who seek to alleviate poverty, he thinks too much attention is customarily given to understanding the causes of poverty as distinct from understanding what has made some nations wealthy. His research is directed to understanding how institutional, relational, moral and spiritual capital might be integrated into the fabric of life through building effective and fruitful businesses which help to deliver prosperity

and well-being. Peter defines this well-being in terms of the biblical *shalom*, the wholeness and integrity which the Bible speaks about from the beginning of creation through to the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation.

Kingdom Entrepreneurship: Building Social, Economic, Institutional, Relational and Spiritual Capital

The theme of capital ran through several presentations. On Saturday afternoon Bill Bolton, an international consultant in enterprise development and entrepreneurship, took a broad historical and geographical perspective in looking at the role, purpose and motivation of the entrepreneur. His examples ranged from 18th century Quakers in Birmingham to late 20th century Silicon Valley; motives included the desire to prove others wrong and being dyslexic.

Bill used the example of Richard Branson who was not able to excel in the academic environment of the education system due to dyslexia. He has nevertheless achieved spectacular success as an entrepreneur and is an admired role model to younger entrepreneurs.

Bill spoke about the spiritual transformation which the Christian entrepreneur can encourage through drawing on all the riches of the Father available to the disciples of the Jesus through the Holy Spirit. What

God does *in* us, he argued, is more important than what he does *through* us. In the subtle process of paving new ground, we must be alert to following his plan and make sure it is not simply my plan. Given that the natural habitat for the entrepreneur is turbulence and change, the entrepreneur who is also a Christian focuses on the heart of discipleship. There is a need to curb the ego and seek transformation in the world. Bill referred to the model of the Trinity. He encouraged entrepreneurs to be mindful of working to what he called a trinitarian dynamic. He argues



■ Richard Branson ■

that work for entrepreneurs, as for all disciples, should be in cooperation with the Father, in faith through the Son and alert to the working of the Holy Spirit. Before our final worship in chapel on Sunday morning, Jerry Marshall explored the idea of Kingdom entrepreneurship – a concept that for him links



■ YWAM ("Youth with a Mission") in Indonesia reaching young people through surfing ■

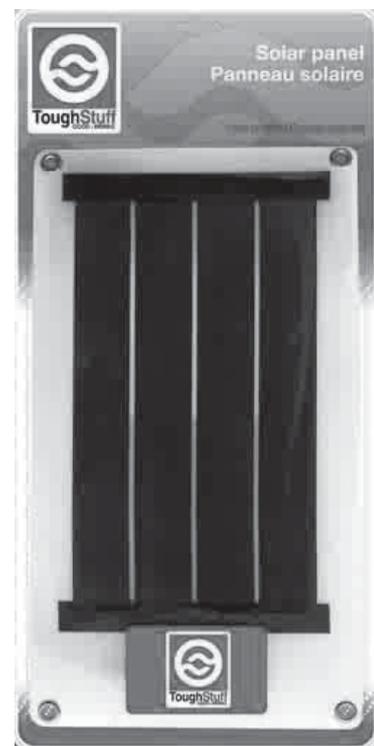
together those with an apostolic calling, social entrepreneurs and for-profit entrepreneurs with a Kingdom perspective. Working at the coal-face of entrepreneurial mission as General Manager of Transformational Business Network, Jerry describes himself as a 'serial entrepreneur' who set up his first business venture in the playground at primary school. He skilfully drew connections between mission, para-church organisations, kingdom business and not-for-profit organisations. He explored how the different strands might be integrated to work more creatively together in the process of building social, economic and spiritual capital.

To this end, Jerry encouraged the church to have increased impact on the marketplace through identifying, affirming and harnessing entrepreneurs in the separate areas of church, secular charity and secular business. Increasingly, those of an entrepreneurial disposition are identifying opportunities in the areas of overlap between these

spheres: he gave examples of entrepreneurs expressing their vision in fresh expressions of church and church planting, para-church organisations such as YWAM sitting in the overlap between church and secular charity, and not-for-profit kingdom businesses such as TBN straddling secular business and secular charity. Jerry touched on the reality that church pastors are not natural risk-takers in that their role by its very nature means they often pick up the pieces when things have gone wrong. Like Herta, he encouraged the concept of failing forward. He used the analogy of a boat on which the rudder only works if the boat is moving forwards.

Whilst encouraging entrepreneurs to consider a time span of at least twenty years for a business to thrive and produce fruit, Jerry challenged the delegates to balance the long-term with passion for the here and now and to 'try one audacious new thing each year'. Jerry

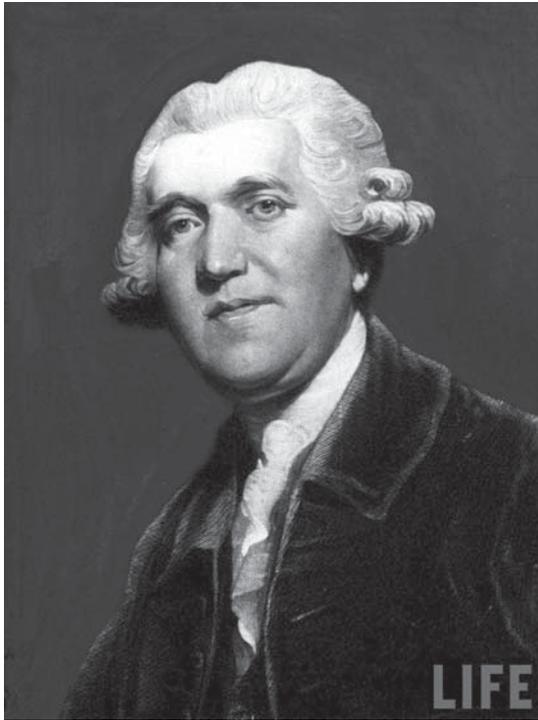
encapsulates some of the traditional secular hallmarks of the entrepreneur, but is drawn into channelling these into Kingdom work to bring community transformation: know yourself, believe in what you and God can do together, be prepared to pay the price for your goals, try things, be pro-active, be passionate and give away power. Exercising these virtues is delivering tangible improvements in health, such as the social enterprise Tough Stuff, run by Andrew Tanswell. This is providing, for example, affordable solar-powered products to replace expensive, dangerous and environmentally damaging kerosene lamps and batteries, and water filters resulting in clean water and therefore improved health, for low income people in East Africa.



■ "Tough Stuff" Solar Panel ■

Conclusion

In summing up the impact of the conference, I refer to four key characteristics of entrepreneurs summarised in Richard Higginson's presentation: integrity, industriousness,



■ Josiah Wedgwood, archetypal Christian Entrepreneur - ■
 ■ integrity, industriousness, innovation, and inspiration to others ■

innovation, and inspiration to others. Whilst entrepreneurs have typically been identified as dangerous visionaries, there was a clear focus throughout on the positive impact of entrepreneurship on all aspects of life, and not just the economic. Bill Bolton and Herta von Stiegal spoke of the particular spiritual challenges faced by the entrepreneur: to maintain a focus on vision, and to that end, by grace, to keep the ego in check. There was much evidence of hard work in the face of serious challenge; of being

persistent in the pursuit of innovation, and of the sheer creative joy which entrepreneurial activity affords.

There was an understanding that in his creative and redemptive purposes for his creation, God is at work in the process of bringing about transformation, in bringing in the shalom which he intended from the beginning. Bill Bolton referred to 'greedy risk takers' as masking the true purpose of the entrepreneur which is to create economic, social and spiritual capital. He stressed that there is no 'hierarchy of virtue from spiritual downwards'. The true entrepreneur challenges the traditional assumption that the spiritual virtues are superior to social and economic virtues.

Entrepreneurs are at work across the range of human activity, as those who 'habitually create and innovate to build something of recognised value based on perceived opportunities'.

I suggest the conference provided a significant milestone in (i) bringing together those who work across diverse areas which have traditionally been labeled either as sacred or secular with a view towards integration and (ii) building momentum in the process of encouraging more entrepreneurial activity within and

across these different spheres under God's sovereign purpose for redemption and transformation. In a plenary session at the end of the conference, each delegate shared something they had decided to do as a result of the conference.

The overwhelming message was one of both encouragement and challenge. There was heartening evidence that in this world of turbulence and change, vision, courage and endurance are being applied by entrepreneurs and that their efforts are producing fruit in the form of economic, social and spiritual capital. The challenge is for the church to continue in the process of understanding and encouraging entrepreneurial activity in all its diversity. God's people thereby work in collaboration with God himself to build the better tomorrow - a process which is not just desirable but essential. ■

Sally Orwin lives in Manchester. She works as a consultant in change and development to a wide range of charities, individuals and small firms there following ten years as Practice Director of Arca, an architectural practice she co-founded with her husband, John Lee, in 1998. Her expertise lies in supporting organisational and individual performance through professional and personal development. Sally has degrees in History and Psychology, and enjoys handknitting and learning to play the piano. Her daughter is studying Maths at University College London, and her son specialises in jazz drumkit and percussion whilst studying for A levels at Chetham's School of Music in Manchester.