

Dilemmas in Business conference

A short report by Richard Higginson

James Featherby spoke on issues in Financial Services at the Dilemmas in Business conference, which took place at Ridley Hall over the week-end April 12-14 2013. The event was a great success. Delegates enjoyed stimulating input from all the speakers, peppered them with questions, and enjoyed times of deep fellowship and mutual support. Existing friendships were strengthened and new ones were made.

Reflecting on the conference six 'big ideas' stand out. Conveniently and I hope not too artificially, they all begin with 'c':

Complexity Some dilemmas in our richly variegated but deeply fallen world are extremely complex. We need every ounce of God-given wisdom and understanding to get our minds around them. This is especially true of certain 'macro' dilemmas faced by political and business leaders.

Character In dealing with dilemmas there is no substitute for character. We develop character by the practice of good habits, regular encounter with God and his people, and making wise decisions in the small matters of life. This equips us well for the difficult dilemmas on which a lot hangs.

Creativity In thinking about dilemmas it is easy to assume that there are only two alternatives, neither of them desirable. But there may be others. We need to be imaginative and creative in entertaining a range of possibilities.

Context Several speakers emphasised the importance of sensitivity to social and cultural context. We need to appreciate the power of peer pressure, of systems and structures which do so much to influence how people decide and behave.

Courage Nevertheless, these 'powers and principalities' may need to be challenged, in the name of God and for the good of humanity. We need boldness and courage to step out in faith and do that.

Community 'No man is an island'. To make a difference in this world we need to find kindred spirits, people we can share with, provide mutual support and join in taking a stand. Many of us experienced community and entered into deep fellowship with others on the conference. May those relationships develop and bear fruit.

Welby, Work and Wonga

To have an Archbishop of Canterbury whose background is the world of business will we hope lead to new efforts by the Church of England to provide theology and practice in relating faith to work. Not much sign of the theology yet, but on the practical front it was good to see Justin Welby hitting the headlines in July with his attack on Wonga, the pay-day loan company which charges 5853% interest. This is part of the world of work which matters to ordinary people.

The Financial Times duly uncovered the fact that the Church Commissioners had bought a small investment in Accel Partners before they led Wonga fundraising in 2009. The good archbishop dealt with this with characteristic competence and honesty, agreeing he was embarrassed, that they had made a mistake, and promising to correct it.

However, he was impressive in not just criticising, but in beginning a new initiative to combat Wonga and the pay-day loan people. He has launched a new credit union aimed at clergy and church staff, and is offering to encourage credit unions and other non-profit lenders by offering them church premises as a base.

Whether clergy and staff are in the habit of using Wonga seems unlikely, and one major credit union (MCU) has suggested that rather than put credit unions in church halls thus 'sending out completely the wrong message' it would be better if the CofE marshalled its 'enormous riches in terms of personnel and, particularly, the high-level governance of running complex organisations' to be found in the laity. They appeared to mean that credit unions are complex organisations, and many lay churchpeople have appropriate skills to run them.