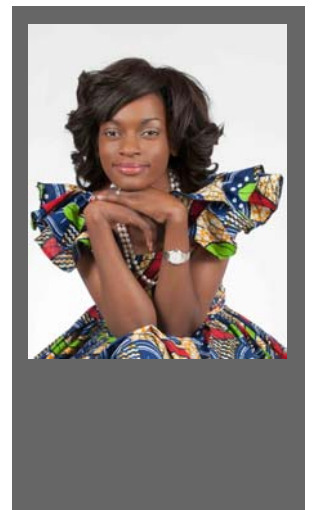


Asking Big Questions Life at the Mitchell Group

■ by Kina Robertshaw

In her research work on Christian entrepreneurship, Kina Robertshaw came across car dealer Mark Mitchell who brings Christ into his everyday business life. His enthusiastic commitment prompted her to ask some big questions about our Christian life and witness at work. Here they are.



How it all began for the Mitchells

The Mitchell group, on a five-acre complex next to Cheshire Oaks in the North West, is the home of Lexus Chester, Mitchell Mazda and Mitchell Skoda. 'All this began with a hamster' says Mark Mitchell. At the age of ten, Mark displayed entrepreneurial acumen by putting his two hamsters in a single cage; he found they quickly multiplied! Mark then turned the pups into cash, selling them in the school playground. By his early teens, Mark had secured a loan of £50 from a local bank to start a motorcycle business, initially selling them outside the school gate. Subsequently, Mark underpinned his entrepreneurial flare by studying economics at Leeds University. From there he joined Austin Rover before moving on to the Ford Motor Company, building up the experience that has helped him in running his own business.

Throughout Mark's childhood his parents provided an environment for spiritual growth whilst demonstrating their own commitment to a Christ-centred life as a model for Mark and his brothers to follow. Despite being raised in a Christian home, Mark narrates 'We gave our Sunday School teachers so much grief', trying to distract them from the week's Bible story. Nevertheless, at the age of 11, during a church camp, Mark made a decision to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Mark came to trust Him as his personal Lord and Saviour: "I realised I couldn't rely or depend on anyone else's personal faith but had to make a decision to follow Jesus Christ for

myself and to live life as one of His disciples." Christ says 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him' (Revelation 3:20). Mark responded to His voice, opening the door to his heart, letting Christ in.

In 1988, Mark met his future wife and business partner Anita in church at St Michael-le-Belfrey, York. The couple have two boys, James (15) and Eliot (12). In 1991 the couple invested £50 each to buy a dormant limited company 'off the shelf' and then raised a bank loan of £10,000 to invest in their first petrol service station in King Street, Wallasey. Within a few years, the couple had four petrol service stations. From these small beginnings the Mitchell business was born. Mark recalls 'we worked extremely hard, and by 1996 that



Mark Mitchell and cars

hard work paid off with the opening of a Mitsubishi franchise'. Today the Mitchell group has 104 employees, with a turnover of £50 million. The prophet Zechariah urges 'Do not despise small beginnings' (4:10). He notes that there will be rejoicing when the Lord's servant, Zerubbabel, starts to rebuild the temple. What we do, at times, may seem small and insignificant, but God rejoices in what is right, not necessarily in what is big. We are called to be faithful in small opportunities, to begin where we are, to do what we can, leaving the results to Our Maker. ***Do we despise small beginnings?*** ▶▶

▶▶ In the same chapter it is written that great results come ‘Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit’ (v6). Mark and Anita acknowledge that ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’ (Psalm 24:1); and they say ‘at the end of the day, we are just stewards of the business and for that matter our houses, families and cars too.’ Mark and Anita are Christian entrepreneurs who understand that God has dominion over all the earth; the whole creation belongs to Him.

Do we fully comprehend God’s dominion?

Honouring God

Mark lives out his faith in his business. He says, ‘as a Christian, I take a clear biblical approach to business’. While so much of the world is demanding ‘political correctness’ and the need to keep faith as a private matter, Mark sees his ultimate purpose in life as to glorify God in everything he does. Everything must be done in harmony with God’s word; ‘everything we say or do must be weighed against our purpose – does it glorify God?’ Mark, as an entrepreneur with faith, says with his trademark humour, ‘My faith challenges me to always put God first, people second and metal (cars) third!’ One of the most undeniable imprints of Mark’s faith on the dealership is his six-day trading philosophy. For the Mitchell Group ‘Sunday at home with family’ is their strapline; it even appears in adverts and on their entrance way signage. Sadly, Sunday as Sabbath no longer has significance, even for many Christians. Mark made a courageous decision



in 2004 to cut ties with a Japanese company who insisted that all their UK dealerships were to open on Sundays. Mark refused. Despite the brand having been a successful franchise for the group, ‘It was not a difficult decision to make because I was never open on Sundays and I was not going to start’. Reflecting one of Mark’s favourite bible verses, Isaiah 58:13, he says, ‘I believe we are created to work six days’. This is the fourth

commandment, part of God’s will for us, *“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work”* (Exodus 20:8-10).

If God sees rest from work as being holy, how can we not afford not to rest too?

It’s our People who make the Difference

Christianity begins in the home. How we treat our family is the foundation for how we treat others as well. For Mark, staff are part of the family; he believes strongly that the way you treat your employees speaks volumes about your relationship with God. Putting this into practice, the Mitchell Group seeks to serve employees and their families by establishing company policies and a working environment that builds character, strengthens individuals and nurtures families. “At the end of the day there is always time to talk to a member of staff, it’s our people that make the difference”, Mark says reassuringly. “Our employees are more important than our customers. I am afraid the customer doesn’t come first!” Mark recruited all his 104 employees himself; he knows their names, as well as those of their partners and children, and invites all of them to an annual boat trip - even their dogs. One of Mark’s employees I spoke to explained how Mark or Anita pay visits to staff members who have just had a baby, sharing the joyous occasion and giving the newborn a pair of pink or blue wellies and a children’s Bible as a gift.

The company makes a monthly £18 donation on behalf of each staff member to sponsor a child in Africa through World Vision. Then it takes this commitment a step further, taking some members of staff annually to parts of Africa to see the difference their money makes. Mark says ‘it a great encouragement to the employees and everyone comes back a changed person’. Another employee explained how Mark is more approachable than previous directors in his experience. Mark sees dialogue with employees as an opportunity for pastoral opportunity through which he is asked to provide support on marriage breakdown, debt, ill health and ▶▶



Light in the darkness: A Christian business



bereavement to mention but a few issues. God calls us to care for those under our charge (1 Peter 5:2). By caring for our employees, we honour Christ in our businesses.

Do we really care for our employees? If so, how do we show that we care for them?

Other than employees, it is customers who are most likely to judge us as Christians in business. The Mitchell Group prides itself on exceptional service. Despite what he said about putting employees first, Mark also says ‘It is all about customer care’. Such a statement is not unusual in the sales and service industry, but Mark, in his enigmatic style, takes this a step further. Each Christmas Mitchell Group celebrates a carol service with 1,300 of their customers at Chester Cathedral. Mark says ‘customers are invited to sing

carols and hear the gospel gently and sensitively’. Once a month, Mark welcomes Men’s Groups to invite their mates to the dealership for a ‘Men and Motors’ evening. After a few hours of test drives with the latest cars, consuming ‘mountains’ of Chinese food washed down with a few drinks, Mark takes the opportunity to reflect on life’s challenges and the joys of being a Christian. Apart from being rollicking good fun, Mark has witnessed how these sessions helped to open men up, allowing them to express their innermost feelings and grapple with sensitive issues that are troubling them. ***How do we bear witness in the workplace?***

Mark continues to honour the Lord in all that he does, striving to operate his company in a manner consistent with biblical principles, by putting God first, people second and the business comes third. His example provides a set of challenging question for all of us running a business. ■

Before coming to study theology at Ridley Hall Cambridge in 2010, Kina Robertshaw owned My Choice, a department store in Lusaka and was involved in several additional business ventures. She is now researching the subject of Christian Entrepreneurship, interviewing 50 Christian entrepreneurs about what motivates, frustrates, challenges and satisfies them.

Who Paid for Paul’s Travel?

In the last issue I wrote an article about the way Paul and his fellow church leaders travelled around the Mediterranean by ship. A week ago my copy of *Christianity Today* (March 2014) came through the door and I read about the work of Stephen Smith, one of the instigators of the Bibletech conference, a meeting for self-confessed Bible geeks. This led me to the work he has done on the costs of Paul’s travel and below is a quote from the Open Bible project based on the interactive map of the 1st Century world produced by Stanford University. ‘The apostle Paul went on three missionary journeys from A.D. 46 to 57, travelling around much of Asia Minor and Greece. In 60, he was also taken to Rome. ORBIS allows us to calculate how long these journeys would have taken in pure travel time (excluding time spent at each destination) and how much they would have cost.’

Journey	Distance (miles)	Travel Time (days)	Cost per Person (denarii)
First	1,581	53	237
Second	3,050	100	314
Third	3,307	92	481
Rome	2,344	36	699

The geek in me made me wonder what that would equate to in terms of travel today. It would be nearly £20,000 for the trip to Rome, the equivalent of a return first class air fare to Sydney.

It brings into focus why Paul often referred to the generosity of his benefactors like Erastus, Gaius and Phoebe. Mission requires money and perhaps your calling in business is to have enough to give to support those who are in front-line ministry and mission today.

<http://www.openbible.info/blog/2012/07/calculating-the-time-and-cost-of-pauls-missionary-journeys/>. ORBIS is the Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World.

David Parish