

What happened when God turned up at Work

Peter Riley tells the inspiring story of practical Christianity in action in a manufacturing company that was twice on the verge of failure. He reveals how apparently hopeless situations can be dramatically transformed into new life – a familiar Christian theme... An honest and caring relationship, with notable contributions by some key employees, made all the difference, and brought the company into profit after many years of losses. Peter sees the creative work of the Spirit at work, but also Christ using Peter's mistakes to bring about His Kingdom, and a loving Father's hand throughout.

Just three weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War, a solitary Jewish refugee called Hans Neuhaus founded a business in a sleepy industrial town on the edge of the

Pennines. Separated from his wife and son who were living in Nazi Germany, he could have had no idea that his new enterprise would one day become a test-bed for

‘what happened when God turned up at work’ which is the subtitle of a book I have written called *The Anglo Files*. A brief overview of the Christian theology of work might suggest a



Anglo Felt factory in Whitworth near Rochdale

Photo: Simon Macaulay

steady progression of thinking during the last 50 years. In 1974 Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones acknowledged: 'Christianity is not confined to Sunday; it is something that manifests itself in the whole of life'¹ In 2001 Mark Greene wrote 'God is still at work. At work. Using his people as agents of grace, as messengers of the Gospel, as transformers of systems, as entrepreneurs of love reaching out'² and by 2017 Richard Higginson and Kina Robertshaw summarised the views of 50 Christian entrepreneurs by saying that work embraced: 'Four kingdom imperatives: making the world a better place, embodying Christian values, witnessing by word and charitable giving'³. I wholeheartedly agree with all of these distinguished authors but have often wondered if there's something more....

I have become intrigued by the possibility that one of the central tenets of the Lord's Prayer: '*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*' could be tangibly demonstrated through the very nature of a corporate body – for example a business. This is hardly a new idea as 2 Chronicles 9: 12-13 describes how the excellence of Solomon's kingdom was such that: 'All the kings of the earth sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart' (NIV). This earthly manifestation of the Kingdom of God is also prophesied in Isaiah 60:3 'Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn' (NIV). So what if a business owned and/or run by a Christian could be so transformed that it becomes an exemplar of the Kingdom of God?

This possibility takes me back to the story of Hans Neuhaus who in 1939 utilised his skills to start up Anglo

Felt Industries Limited in Whitworth near Rochdale to manufacture felt interlinings for its shareholders who were local footwear manufacturers. Although the company prospered until the early 1970s, the retirement of Hans followed by a rapidly changing marketplace led to desperate times. By 1984 the business had lost large sums of money and in a last-ditch effort, I was appointed CEO as my 'baptism of fire' by the parent company for whom I had worked for seven years as a graduate management trainee. Within two months circumstances became

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even worse following my meeting with our Sales Agent (responsible for around 70% of our turnover). He immediately told all our customers that we were closing down and offered a competitor's product at a cheaper price resulting in the loss of 30% of our sales and forcing a price reduction to remain competitive. So to summarise the situation I was then facing:

- Substantial losses for eight years (equivalent to nearly £1million in today's money)
- Further 30% loss of turnover and price reduction owing to Sales Agent defection to Competitor
- Very low productivity and morale, high absenteeism and labour turnover in a unionised workplace
- Antiquated production machinery with no capital for investment and very high fixed costs
- Manufacturing within a dilapidated multi-level Victorian Mill with severe damp problems
- Imminent threat of closure under a 'Sword of Damocles' bimonthly review by Parent Board

Only just turning 28, I felt completely unqualified for this position: I had

never run anything, knew nothing about the product and lacked any formal management training for this role. What happened next was so outrageously improbable that it seems to me that God in His goodness 'had to pull out all the stops' to save the business and why I believe this story can offer a blueprint for business transformation by Kingdom principles. Let me relate what happened in terms of an unfolding of divine interventions and the release of human potential:

1. Divine interventions

Two very practical problems faced me immediately: I knew nothing about how to make felt and nothing about how to sell it. The answer to the first problem appeared in advance as the Company Chairman had obtained a 100% grant from the government for a leading expert to spend 15 days analysing our production processes and make recommendations on the improvements required. I was therefore able to shadow one of the most knowledgeable people in Europe on the technology and processes of non-woven textiles including felt. Resolving the problem of understanding how to sell felt took only a little longer. Following the defection of our Sales Agent, we received an unsolicited approach from David Taylor whose claim to fame was as the first-ever carpet underlay sales representative in the UK. He joined us on a self-employed contract and whilst he only stayed for about four months, his input had far reaching consequences. He taught me a tremendous amount in a very short time and initiated our first ever exhibition stand at the International Carpet Fair (ICF) in Harrogate. The ICF brought us to the attention of the industry's trade journal, the Carpet and Floorcovering Review which published an excellent article that captured the essence of what we were setting out to achieve. This raised our profile enormously leading to contracts with three large PLCs



Manchester Woolworths fire

Photo: Manchester Evening News

including the development of a boot-lining for the Ford Sierra and Rover 200 models.

In my first year we completed what was to prove an incredibly significant product development. Flammability performance of home furnishings was becoming an issue following events such as the tragic Manchester Woolworths fire of 1979 when ten people perished. We conducted our own tests on a 20%hair/80%jute felt mixture and found it could be attacked with a blow-torch and whilst local charring occurred, the felt self-extinguished when the source of ignition was removed. Independent testing proved it exceeded the BS4790 flammability standard, so we decided to introduce this underfelt into our product portfolio and the question arose as to what we should call it. At this point in my career I hadn't received any marketing training and didn't appreciate the need for customer-focused products. However, in what I believe was a moment of divine

inspiration I came up with the name FR (short for fire retardant) and our new range was launched. This product went on to become the company's best seller and more significantly the prefix 'FR' became a generic name throughout the industry.

The Company had previously recognised the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) which in the 1980s had a reputation for militancy and consequently industrial relations had been acrimonious for many years. At my first wage negotiation meeting in September 1984, I proposed a radical new Bonus Scheme aimed to encourage productivity. The local Union Representative, notorious for his intransigence, had suddenly been taken ill and his last-minute replacement must surely have been the most reasonable TGWU Official in the whole organisation! He listened carefully to my proposals, discussed them and then suggested a compromise. The general scheme

was accepted but the payment curve was to be levelled off, giving more security to the workers and consequently a reduced bonus as productivity improved. I can't tell you how much of a favour this man did for the company. If we had stuck with my original scheme the remarkable 60% productivity improvement that followed would have proved impossible to afford and bankrupted the business!

For many years one of our main production lines had suffered from severe waterlogging. This area of the factory was about 2.5 metres underground and water poured relentlessly through the rear wall, undermining the foundations of the machinery and saturating the blended fibres and completed rolls leading to considerable wastage. Having tried everything we could to identify the source, I invited a local structural engineer who diagnosed it as the inevitable effects of the water table. However, shortly afterwards I received a letter from the regional

water authority advising they were starting a £30m sewer replacement scheme, part of which ran alongside the problematic wall at the back of the factory. An engineer visited, I alerted him to the problems and whilst excavating they discovered a mains water pipe adjacent to our wall discharging thousands of gallons every day. Within a few days of capping the pipe the damp completely disappeared. Considering sewer pipes are only re-laid every 100 years or so, what a happy coincidence for us that it happened at just the right time.

After my first year-end in March, the Annual General Meeting was held on 30 August 1985. The Boardroom accommodated a large oval table around which all the Directors of the parent company were seated to discuss our previous year's trading. Directly opposite the Chairman, at the bottom of the table was Mr Fred⁴, who had previously retired as a Director but for some unknown reason had come along one final time. The Chairman opened the meeting by proposing the motion: "Anglo Felt has been losing huge sums of money for 9 years. I believe we have delayed the decision for much too long and that the only possible course of action is to close it down." Despite my pleadings to be given more time, one by one the Directors seated on my side of the table confirmed their agreement with the Chairman. It was then Mr Fred's turn. He addressed the Board by saying, "I've really no business being here as I'm no longer a Director and don't feel I should say anything." The Chairman responded, "Mr Fred, with all your experience we're always glad to hear what you have to say". So Mr Fred replied, "Look, we've already deferred the decision to close for many years. Peter is clearly working hard and doing everything he can to

turn the business around by developing new products and reducing costs and so in my opinion it should surely be given one last chance." After this brief statement, all the other Directors responded with one accord: "Yes I agree with Mr Fred!" Thanks solely to a man who shouldn't have been there, the Chairman's motion was consigned to the rubbish bin of history, which was exactly where it belonged.

Jute was the main ingredient of most of our felt products and late in 1984 I was contacted by a young man named Martin Cleghorn who had inherited

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his father's business collecting and cleaning waste material from the jute mills still remaining in Dundee. I was pleased to buy as much of his production as possible, as jute was in short supply and up until then our only source was from two local processors whose machinery recycled hessian sacks to

their constituent fibres. Martin's business came to supply 30% of our growing jute requirement but one afternoon in May 1985 I received a telephone call telling me he was closing down. The following day I jumped into my car and made the 270 mile journey knowing I desperately needed to negotiate a positive outcome if we were to survive. He didn't want to sell the premises and machinery and our Parent Board would never finance such a deal, but he floated the idea of Anglo acquiring his manufacturing facilities to maintain our supply of this vital commodity. So we came to an agreement whereby we leased his premises and equipment and employed the three men who ran it. Despite the inherent risks, the arrangement worked beautifully and

saved the company between £10-20,000 per year in raw material costs. The even greater significance of this acquisition became clear later in the year when the jute supply market entered an unprecedented crisis. For us a stoppage of only a few days would have proved terminal owing to our precarious financial position. In fact every jute-based felt manufacturer in the country had to shut down for several weeks, apart from us and one other who had maintained a large stockpile. As if to illustrate God's gracious providence, all our needs were supplied even though at one point we were literally down to the very last bale!

I wouldn't wish to give the impression that my time at Anglo was only a succession of miraculous interventions. We were in the midst of a battle on several fronts and many a lunchtime was spent walking and 'making my requests known to God....' As a family we were very privileged to be part of a vibrant House Church that was enormously supportive during this period. I remember several occasions when I just wanted to give up and I certainly made plenty of mistakes. Remarkably many of those came good. One which stands out concerns hessian scrimms required for our automotive products that were manufactured in a variety of widths and imported from Bangladesh and India. With a lead-time of 6 weeks, the difficulty lay in trying to anticipate future demand and order stock accordingly. Our main customer only gave us a few days' notice of their requirements in an industry notorious for its fickle and erratic production schedules. I remember mistakenly ordering the same consignment twice, only for there to be an unexpected run on that particular width. On another occasion, a crisis in the Suez Canal resulted in a consignment being stranded for several months. When it did finally land in the UK, guess which particular material was just about to run out?



2. Release of human potential

In Ecclesiastes 3:11 King Solomon writes: 'He has made everything beautiful in its time. *He has also set eternity in the hearts of men;* yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end' (NIV). In the midst of adversity, I found myself uncovering something of the transcendent potential that God has placed within every human heart and I was about to discover that there was a wealth of hidden talent just waiting to be released. This can be illustrated through the transformations of four individuals:

Derek Hall was my brother-in-law and whilst he could be very firm when needed, he possessed a natural empathy and so was ideal as a 'people manager'. Prior to recruitment he had undertaken manual work in a local cotton mill but was eager for a new challenge and I was desperate to begin tackling the many issues which kept productivity at such an unsustainably low level. For a short time Derek worked on the shop-floor learning the production process before I appointed him Works Manager. Derek very quickly

overcame the natural prejudice he suffered for being my relative and soon proved his worth to everyone. During his time in charge and without any capital expenditure, productivity rose by a staggering 60% in two years. His style was very much hands-on and he was the type of manager who would never ask anyone to do what he wasn't prepared to do himself. Perhaps having a younger brother with Downs Syndrome had made Derek particularly sensitive to the disabled which was supremely demonstrated when we recruited a new Fork Lift Truck Driver. One of the candidates who qualified for the job was profoundly deaf and mute, but he communicated perfectly through written information. Despite my own misgivings, Derek was determined that we should give him a chance and he proved to be an excellent hardworking member of the team. Derek never batted an eyelid at the extra work created writing down his instructions and we always felt proud that we were able to provide the deaf employee with meaningful employment.

June Lonsdale had started when she left school at 16, met her future

husband Peter and they continued to work together for nearly 40 years in the same office. Her duties were mainly the routine tasks of answering the telephone, typing, record keeping and wages clerk. However it soon became obvious to me that June's talents were being massively under-utilised. She was born to be a manager and was exceptionally good at relating to customers on the telephone. As the business grew and new carpet underlay Sales Agents were recruited, June became their first point of contact and quickly developed an excellent rapport with them as well as our old and new customers. From the customers' point of view she became 'Mrs Anglo Felt' and her natural personality shone through as she always went out of her way to help. June's influence was much greater than just customer care. June, Derek and I developed strong professional relationships and the three of us worked very closely together to run the business. June instinctively knew what was going on and together with her extensive experience proved an invaluable source of information and advice. Within a couple of years



Part of Plant 3, which failed catastrophically

Photo: Simon Macaulay

morale was transformed as a strong sense of trust and mutual respect developed within the company, and staff turnover and absenteeism reduced to practically zero, due in no small way to June and Derek making such an excellent team.

Stephen Bunnell was only in his early 20s but was already a brilliant maintenance engineer. However, spending all his working life constrained by a failing regime had dissipated his enthusiasm for the job until we were able to empower him to start developing ingenious modifications to our outdated equipment. Late one Friday afternoon I received a telephone call relating a disaster on Plant 3, our main production line, which had experienced a catastrophic failure. On hearing this news, I believed we had reached the end of the road. It was the busiest time of year; demand for our products was growing but our production levels

were now going to fall by about 40% for at least six weeks until expensive repairs could be made. Fearing the worst, I enquired if Stephen might welcome the opportunity to do some weekend overtime as I felt this would at least give us a head-start in repairing the damage. So arrangements were made for Stephen to work on the Sunday together with his colleague Roy. It was late on Saturday afternoon when I drove down to the empty factory to inspect the damage. I walked the 80 metres or so to Plant 3 and stood on the small metal bridge that not long before had provided the setting for my photograph in the Carpet and Floorcovering Review. Only this time it was different; when I looked down all I could see was the carnage left by a dreadful accident and all my hopes and dreams began to evaporate. As a result of a component failure, this large machine had fallen from its runners and lay on a lower conveyor belt in a tangled heap. Standing

there, I felt utterly desolated and without hope. I closed my eyes and with every fibre of my being cried out to God for help. I poured out my heart to Him in every way I knew. After about ten minutes I slowly opened my eyes half-hoping that I would see an instantaneous miracle. It hadn't happened, but as I was about to learn, the Lord loves to involve human beings in his acts of redemption.

The following day I made another seven mile journey to the factory to find out if any progress had been made. As I drove into the yard, I was just in time to catch Roy locking the door on his way home. I jumped out of my car and asked, "How are things going?" His reply left me dumbfounded: "Oh it's fine, everything's working again". My response barely disguised my irritation, "Look Roy, I came down yesterday and saw the mess, don't try pulling my leg!" to which he replied,

“Well you’d better come with me then and have a look”. We walked the length of the factory in silence until we arrived at Plant 3. “Watch this” said Roy as he pressed the appropriate buttons on the control panel. There, before my eyes, was a perfectly restored and fully operational ‘cross-lapper’. The expression on my face must have been priceless as I asked what on earth had happened earlier in the day. He explained that when Stephen arrived in the morning he spent about 20 minutes just quietly walking round the disaster area, viewing it from every angle. Having said, “I think we can fix it”, he then fetched an assortment of winches and pulleys and attached them to various substantial girders that supported the roof. Little by little, they worked together and gradually pulled the entire framework of the machine until it was perfectly straight. Even with that explanation, it still doesn’t make any sense to me as steel once bent rarely returns to its original shape, but the proof of the pudding is that the machine is still in operation 30 years later.

At only 19, Stephen Duffy impressed me with his self-confidence, determination to succeed and remarkable technical skills. He was already undertaking re-wiring projects on people’s homes despite no formal training or academic qualifications. After time spent running the Blending Department, it became clear to Derek and me that we weren’t utilising his full potential and were delighted when Stephen was eager to enrol as an Apprentice Electrician, quickly proving to be one of the top three students in the UK. By 1986 we needed a new control system for what we called Plant 4. During Easter 1986, Stephen attended

the 10,000-strong Spring Harvest Festival at Minehead and whilst standing in a large gathering a man behind him remarked, “It’s nice to hear another Northern voice down here!” It transpired that Phil was a production engineer specialising in the use of a new piece of computer technology: Programmable Logic Controllers (PLCs). So Stephen

presented us with a proposal. Although he was still a First Year Apprentice he offered to design, build and install a PLC controlled panel for our newly rebuilt plant. With the reassurance that Phil was available to act as his mentor I decided to give the go-ahead but very much aware that we were taking a big risk. However within a few

months Stephen had completed the complex wiring of the new plant, with all its motors beautifully synchronised and controlled by his panel!

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3. The Outcome and its implications

By March 1987 sales had doubled and the business made a profit for the first time in 11 years. Once profitability had been restored, the Parent Board decided to sell the business and in July 1987 it was purchased by a private individual called King Macaulay who had a background in worsted textiles. I remained for a handover period and then departed in May 1988.

Utilising these experiences as a case study, I have attempted to identify the keys that might lead to the Kingdom transformation of a business and propose three interwoven factors:

1. *Divine interventions* – the faith-induced responses of God’s Father Heart to the needs of his children.

2. *Empowerment and release of untapped human potential* – most of whom don’t need to be Christians.

3. *God’s anointing for the assignment* – see below.

Intriguingly the very first person in the Bible described as being filled with the Spirit of God is Bezalel (Exodus 31: 2-4) for the purpose of manufacturing products! I believe this was the critical factor for me as I was enabled to operate at a level way above my personal skills and experience and like Bezalel my anointing seemed to overflow onto those who worked with me. I believe that for all businessmen and women filled and ‘anointed’ with the Spirit of God, there must be unlimited ways for their businesses to glorify Him as a tangible expression of ‘*thy kingdom come on earth...*’. There have to be as yet undiscovered ways of organising the workplace that cause employees, customers and suppliers to marvel at the wisdom and creativity and thereby prompt questions and responses akin to those of the Queen of Sheba⁵ I believe God is placing a call on Christian entrepreneurs to pioneer radical ways of doing business; exploring off the map in order to provide charts for others to follow. We should be challenged by businessmen such as Ricardo Semler⁶ and more recently Vineet Nayar⁷ who appear to have found unparalleled success by the application of certain Kingdom principles even though they might not claim to be Christians.

4. Epilogue – so what happened next?

King Macaulay had always wanted to run a ‘family business’ and when Simon⁸ his younger son visited, his recollection is of Victorian offices and a mill full of old machines with a leaky roof. Over the next 13 years King (who isn’t yet a Christian) gradually improved the building, reroofing

large areas and redeveloping the offices, but sadly the factory floor steadily degenerated into a harsh, aggressive and godless place. For example one of the crew threatened a manager early in the morning with a metal bar and the factory manager used to spend his Friday afternoons playing cards in the engineers' shop – when he should have been supervising cleaning and maintenance. Shopfloor turnover was very high, morale desperately low and Anglo was once again on the edge. However, on reaching the age of 65 King looked around the family to see if anyone wanted to take over....

By 1998, the timing was good for Simon as he felt he had taken his current employer's business as far as he could. Despite his father insisting on a 50% pay-cut, he wanted to see if he could take the business on. He had done a start-up in his 20s and this business failed so he was keen to put himself to the test again! Simon really appreciated that his wife Kate agreed to make the move from her beloved East Anglia and the family settled in Manchester. He rapidly discovered how much he didn't know about manufacturing and the company had three fires in the


first 18 months of his tenure which bruised his self-confidence. However, after attending an Alpha Course, Simon had recently become a Christian and he had a sense that he wanted to bring his faith to work, but wasn't quite sure how to go about it. He drove past a local Baptist Church and was taken by the bright and friendly posters written in everyday English. He contacted the pastor, Ron Philips, who had worked in factories before being ordained. Ron agreed to come in every couple of weeks and walk around offering pastoral support where he was needed; this proved very popular

with the staff. Some 15 years later, things have again changed and the business is transformed into an open, friendly and happy place. Simon relishes coming to work to see his colleagues who have become friends. Six years ago all employees

signed-up to an agreed Company Charter, positioned in reception, which sets out Christian values and standards: to be honest in all our dealings with staff, customers and suppliers. For 15 years 10% of the company's profits have been shared equally amongst all staff who now wear smart company uniforms.

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Now renamed Anglo Recycling Technology, 2017 was the best ever year in commercial terms. A member of the team leaders' group that meets weekly to plan production said recently that she had just attended the best meeting ever: "we are really busy but all members of the group were coming up with ideas as to how they could contribute to meeting the customers' needs". In 2018 there will be four members of staff celebrating 20 years' service. Simon sees the Anglo Family as being at the heart of the Whitworth community. Owing to cut-backs, Lancashire County Council recently announced that they were closing a popular local youth club. Simon set up a charity 'Friends of Whitworth Youth' working alongside Hebron Pentecostal Church in Rochdale and the Lighthouse Methodist Church in Whitworth. A month after closure, the Youth Club was reborn in a new home with a gifted and experienced young Christian, Sarah Corke, as the youth leader. Every Monday evening, Sarah and her 2 volunteers Matt and Jack look after a room full of more than 30 happy children, strongly supported by the local community including Whitworth High School, the Scout Committee and the Mayor.

So in conclusion, I am delighted to report that after 78 years, an enterprise with Jewish roots is now being transformed by a Christian. And that reminds me of another, much bigger story..... 

1 D M Lloyd-Jones, *Life in The Spirit in Marriage Home and Work*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, p.305.

2 Mark Greene, *Thank God it's Monday*, Scripture Union, 4th Edition 2017, p.8.

3 Richard Higginson and Kina Robertshaw, *A Voice to be Heard: Christian Entrepreneurs Living Out Their Faith*, IVP 2017, p.206.

4 Mr Fred Howarth was the grandson of the eponymous founder of Lambert Howarth and Sons (footwear manufacturers) which by the 1980s had become one of the largest employers in East Lancashire. It was a respectful northern tradition in family-run businesses to refer to family members as 'Mr Christian name' as a means of avoiding confusion.

5 See 2 Chronicles 9: 5-9

6 Ricardo Semler, *Maverick! The Success Story Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*, Warner Books 1993.

7 Vineet Nayar, *Employees First, Customers Second: turning conventional management upside down*, Harvard Business Press 2010.

8 Simon Macaulay was one of the 50 Christian Entrepreneurs interviewed by Kina Robertshaw for *A Voice to be Heard*(see Note 3 above)



Peter Riley has over 30 years' experience of both advising and running businesses. In a varied career he has turned around a failing textile business, set up and run one of the first Government-funded Business Links and started his own construction industry and consultancy businesses. His passion is to see the Kingdom of God expressed through the workplace. He can be contacted at peter@integrityplastics.co.uk

APPENDIX

Sales Turnover and Trading Profit/Loss 1977 - 1988

I have obtained the information below from the actual accounts filed at Companies House:

Year	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	Jul-87 ‡
Sales (£000's)	342	368	350	395	518	566	524	550*	500*	700*	1050*	400*
Profit/Loss (£000's)	-5	-16	-41	-60	-62	-112	-31	-45*	-35*	-6*	30*	30*

* From year ending 28 March 1984, the company took advantage of filing only abbreviated accounts at Companies House meaning that sales and trading profits are omitted from the records. Figures shown with an asterisk are my best estimates from the limited information available and memory.

‡ The information in the column on the far right is the trading performance for the 3½ months from 29 March 1987 to 20 July 1987, the day the business was sold. The sales and trading profit generated in this period, if extrapolated for a full year, would have been the equivalent of £1.4 million sales and £100k. profit

