

# Richard Higginson profiles Paula Vennells



Paula Vennells gave the keynote speech at this year's Faith in Business conference at Ridley Hall. Here we summarise the main points of what she said, as well as giving a short biographical introduction.

Paula grew up in Manchester and studied languages at Bradford University. Deciding on a business career, she started at Unilever in 1981, and then took on increasingly senior roles at L'Oreal, Dixons Retail, Argos and Whitbread. She joined the Post Office as Group Network Director in 2007 and was promoted to the role of Chief Executive in 2012. She is married and has two sons. Paula combines her demanding business role with being a self-supporting ordained minister to three parishes near Bedford. She often arrives home from a long week's work on a Friday evening and then has to set about preparing a sermon to preach on Sunday. Yet Paula is convinced that both roles constitute God's call on her life.

As she explained in her talk at Ridley, Paula actually finds many parallels between the Post Office and the Church of England. Both are highly valued national institutions providing care, support and services to many communities right across the country. Their presence is also valued by many who never bother to darken the doors of a local church or post office but who recognise the wider social purpose. They both require a delicate balance between central direction and local autonomy. Both need to value their history and legacy, whilst boldly embracing the future. Both face substantial challenges at the present time.


Paula became Chief Executive in the year that the Post Office separated from the Royal Mail. It was experiencing mounting losses and had been closing local post offices at a great rate. Yet Paula faced resistance to change from many different stakeholders: communities, customers, postmasters, unions and MPs. Paula said "We had institutionalised behaviours, outdated practices, political interventions, cumbersome support structures and much, much more".

She explained how she had taken on this challenge, bringing the Post Office to a state where it is now 'past the tipping point'. After years of closures she and her colleagues have stabilised and modernised a network with over 11,500 branches. (There used to be 28,000.) It still has the largest number of branches of any retailer in the UK. 17 million customers still visit a post office very week, and 6 million transactions take place each day. The Post Office is now the high street's biggest provider of

foreign currency services, conducts most of the basic transactions of a major bank, and has set up its own insurance business. It has stepped into the breach created by the National Savings' withdrawal of premium bonds; as Paula says, "I would rather sell mortgages than bonds". 6000 branches have been modernised, the key to this often being to locate post office services within larger retail outlets, such as small supermarkets or petrol stations. This has radically increased opening hours. The government subsidy has reduced year by year, and losses have fallen to the point where the Post Office is now close to breaking even.

Paula has taken biblical inspiration from the young King Solomon, who showed humility in asking God for a wise and understanding heart, so that he could rule his people with justice (1 Kings 3:6-12). Her leadership style has consisted in confronting the problems she faced, setting a powerful shared vision, engaging with all the stakeholders, and widening and delayering leadership. She has sought to improve standards of courtesy and respectful listening in what had often been fraught and ill-tempered encounters between different groups. She has sought to celebrate what is good and deal decisively with what is not. She says communication should be inspiring, but also well structured, and it should not duck complexity – over-simple messages can leave people dissatisfied. In all this she has found inspiration from the person of Jesus.

Paula comes over as a calm, compassionate but very determined person. She has learnt to show confidence in the people on the front line who often have the solutions at their fingertips. Their resourcefulness was confirmed by the recent flooding of a number of branches in Yorkshire – notably the area in and around Hebden Bridge – where local postmasters found ways to continue serving their communities whatever the challenge.

Paula says "My faith does not write the strategy. What my faith does is motivate me around how I deliver it". In particular, she is inspired by the challenge of getting everybody to be the best they can possibly be. The progress made by the Post Office in the four years while she has been at the helm indicate that she is making a very good fist of this. 



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