

# A Purposeful Retreat

*Chris Gillies was Rapporteur for the recent Faith in Business Leadership Retreat, which this year was held online on 8th and 16th April. The retreat, entitled 'On purpose – what is business for?' offered an approach to thinking about personal and corporate purpose, augmented with insights from many Christian business leaders, with space for personal reflection.*

Thanks to the pandemic, this year's Leadership Retreat lacked both the rarefied atmosphere of a Cambridge college and the ability to retreat physically to a space that is distinctly separate from work and home life. It was therefore with some trepidation that I screwed up my faith to try this shorter, online experience, sitting in front of my computer at home. However, I need not have been concerned because the care, preparation and creativity that the team invested in curating the retreat website and the accompanying resources meant that – although different from a physical retreat – this was nonetheless a most valuable, thought-provoking and moving time.

Following an introductory meeting on 8th April to help familiarise participants with the many online resources and tools available, everyone was encouraged to contribute information about themselves to the website, and daily emails prompted us to pray for named participants every day between that introductory meeting and the retreat afternoon on 16th April. The ground had also been laid by Peter Heslam's two-part article 'What is Business For?'<sup>1</sup> which reconsidered and reframed the purpose of business. This was supplemented by a series of videos featuring entrepreneurs and business leaders talking about the purpose of their business and how purpose shapes the way they go about their work.

Over the years, I've attended many courses for continuing professional development, as well as a fair number of retreats. Often the specific knowledge that is shared can be forgotten quite quickly, but the best events usually leave

me with one, very personal insight that changes the way I think about my work. Like the pearl of great price in Matthew chapter 13, such insights provide a glimpse of God's Kingdom that takes my business practice to a new level. This is what I and many other participants were seeking, that through the many different voices we heard in presentations, discussion groups and plenary sessions, we might hear God's voice speaking to us personally and specifically.

A key theme emerging from the opening session was the importance of finding congruence between our personal purpose and the corporate purpose of the organisation in which we work. What is my purpose? How does God want me to live my life and carry out my daily work? How can the passions God has placed in my heart be pursued in the workplace? If I'm the owner or founder of a business, then maybe it's easier to achieve a sense of synergy between my personal purpose and the purpose of the business I founded and own. But as business leaders we must recognise that most employees will need to find ways consciously to connect emotionally and rationally with the purpose of the business, recognise it as worthwhile, perceive their work to be meaningful, and find resonance with their own personal purpose and values.

Another theme that emerged was the importance of diversity. Although congruence of purpose was considered important, another equally important requirement was felt to be the need to foster different perspectives and voices within the business to facilitate better decision-making. In other words, we need congruence of purpose, but we also need to foster diversity of thought

and lived experience within the context of that purpose if we are to deliver the best outcomes.

A great strength of this retreat, after so many exhausting Zoom meetings during the past year, was the space deliberately created for personal reflection and prayer, including a virtual 'Purpose Walk' around the prayer labyrinth of Westminster College, thanks to drone technology bringing each step of the labyrinth to our computer screens. The time and space provided at the heart of our retreat enabled each participant to think deeply and pray about our personal purpose, how that fits with our business purpose, and whether any changes need to be made.

In the shared learning session that followed, many participants recognised the inevitable tensions between a long-term, eternal perspective and the short-term steps with which we are faced this week, next month and later this year. In short, how do we reconcile where we are with where we'd like to be? Participants shared some helpful insights: like a lighthouse shining in the distance, God shows us the epic picture into which our lives fit, how each member of the body has a part to play;<sup>2</sup> at the same time, God's grace is like a lantern that has the potential to illuminate each step we need to take<sup>3</sup> if we are willing and able to be attentive to His leading. This led us to ask, 'Father, what am I holding on to that claims my affection more than you?'

Reflecting on some of the other resources shared at the retreat, such as Peter Lupson's documentary of the Victorian entrepreneur William Pickles Hartley<sup>4</sup>, the founder of Hartley's Jam, we were reminded that many

business leaders in the 19th and 20th centuries translated their personal faith in God into a corporate purpose that emphasised quality, honesty, dealing fairly with customers and treating employees well. Helped by a positive customer reaction to their integrity, the businesses of these entrepreneurs flourished. In a sense, their understanding of purpose lined up perfectly with Jesus' summary of the Law and Old Testament commandments<sup>5</sup>: our personal purpose may be expressed in many different ways, but it should centre upon the importance of loving God; whilst a corporate purpose that treats customers, employees and other stakeholders well centres upon the importance of loving our neighbour.

In the 21st century, we are seeing the emergence of new expressions of ethical business – community interest companies, certified B corporations, triple bottom line, and business statements of purpose, to name a few. This is a tremendously encouraging recognition – that it makes sound business sense to look beyond shareholders and secure a sustainable future for people and planet. We also hear many voices urging leaders not to return to a pre-pandemic business model, but to take the opportunity to evolve and develop new business practice based on the learning of the last year. But where is Jesus in all of this? We rejoice in this fresh emphasis on ethical and sustainable business, which means that many Christian workers will discover increasing congruence between their personal purpose and the corporate purpose of their employer. However,

for a business that seeks to put godly principles at its heart, is this enough? Is there perhaps something beyond ethical and sustainable, is there maybe something *redemptive* that might prove to be the hallmark of a godly business? What might a redemptive business look like?<sup>6</sup>

As we were sharing our thoughts during the plenary session, two people commented – such was the quality of the drone filming – that they had been able to make out a butterfly fluttering past as they took the 'Purpose Walk' around the labyrinth. This butterfly became a metaphor for thinking about re-purposing our lives and our businesses. Butterflies frequently symbolise metamorphosis, personal transformation, beauty, lightness, vulnerability, pollination and resurrection. This inspired us to allow God's transforming power to highlight areas in our lives and in our businesses that would benefit from fresh purpose.

We recalled a comment from the first session in which Paul Valler had encouraged us to consider the purpose of business in the context of human flourishing. Ultimately, businesses should have as their purpose a goal that can be framed in the context of helping human beings to thrive in the widest possible sense. This led to a recollection of some thinking from Jeff van Duzer, provost of Seattle Pacific University and former Dean of the Business School there, who suggests that God cares deeply about business and the way businesses are built. Van Duzer proposes that God's purpose for business is twofold: firstly, to provide meaningful work for humans

to express their God-given creativity; and secondly, to create valuable goods and services so that we can build a fruitful, flourishing society<sup>7</sup>. When managers pursue these goals for their companies, they participate in God's creation mandate, engaging in work of intrinsic and not just instrumental value. Of course, these are generic purposes of God that apply to all businesses, but they can help us test whether the specific purpose statements for our own business cover the right kind of territory.


The retreat drew to a close with a time of collective worship. I was personally very moved by the prayers as well as a new song and video entitled 'We Seek Your Kingdom'<sup>8</sup> commissioned by LICC and Thy Kingdom Come. It seems fitting to conclude this review by reproducing the song lyrics here:

*We seek your kingdom throughout every sphere  
We long for heaven's demonstration here  
Jesus your light shine bright for all to see  
Transform, revive, and heal society.*

*Before all things, in him were all things made  
Inspiring culture, media, and trade  
May all our work serve your economy  
Transform, revive, and heal society.*

*Peace, truth, and justice reigning everywhere  
With us be present in our public square  
Fill all who lead with your integrity  
Transform, revive, and heal society.*

*Forgive us Lord, when we have not engaged  
Failing to scribe your heart on history's page  
Make us again what we were made to be  
Transform, revive, and heal society.*

*Faithful to govern ever may we be  
Selfless in service, loving constantly  
In everything may your authority  
Transform, revive, and heal society. *

1 Peter Heslam, 'What is Business For? Reconsidering the Purpose of Business', Part One was originally published in FiBQ 20.4, pp 35-36 and Part Two in FiBQ 21.1 pp 35-36.  
2 Romans 12: 3-8.  
3 Psalm 119: 105.  
4 Peter Lupson, 'William Hartley: In God's Company (2019)' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teGlyZmCrPc>  
5 Mark 12: 28-31.  
6 For a deeper exploration of how faith calls us to take redemptive action in the world through entrepreneurship, creativity and sacrifice, see 'The Praxis Course' <https://course.praxislabs.org/> featuring talks from Jon Tyson, Andy Crouch and a number of entrepreneurs.  
7 Jeff van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God (And What Still Needs To Be Fixed)*, IVP Academic, 2010, p. 42.  
8 Lyrics by Noel Robinson, Andy Flannagan & Graham Hunter, sung to the tune of 'Abide with me' by Henry Francis Lyte. <https://licc.org.uk/resources/we-see-your-kingdom/>



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