

I Believe in Business as Mission

James Holden has recently been made Bishop's Officer to Business Leaders in the Diocese of Coventry. He is also the managing director of the Leader Marketing Partnership, a business he took over from his father, Bryan who founded it in 1965.

Here James explains why he believes that Business is Mission and why he is excited that the Bishop of Coventry, the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth, has recognised the need for the Church to support and encourage its members who are working for the coming of the kingdom through their business activities.

30th May 2021 was a notable day for me. I received notification that I had been formally appointed Bishop Christopher Cocksworth's Officer to Business Leaders in the Diocese of Coventry (effectively the City of Coventry and the County of Warwickshire), ending a programme of formal theological training that dated back seven years. And if this were not a long enough period of training, I had also to consider nearly 40 years spent in the world of business. It was surely an appropriate time to reflect on why I had embarked on this journey and to consider whether it had been and might continue to be fruitful.

Before I first set out, I had read a very helpful booklet by Peter Heslam¹. In the foreword Mark Greene, then executive director of the London Institute for

Contemporary Christianity, wrote:

Business is the dominant institution of contemporary life. As such, it has a huge capacity to bring wealth, heal the planet and alleviate poverty. But it can also bring misery, devastate the environment and promote injustice.

Having been in business for a little more than 30 years at the time – starting as an accountant, converting to a salesman and then working in the family PR and Marketing consultancy – all my experience led me to the same conclusion: business is indeed a double-edged sword.

A Game of Monopoly

Not only this, but just a couple of years before the 'Crunch' I had something of an epiphany that alerted me in an

emotional and spiritual way to some of the failings of our system. I went on a Christian internship. At the heart of the programme was a visit to Ciudad Juárez, a large city in the Mexican province of Chihuahua.

In 2006, economic migrants from all over Mexico were rushing north in their thousands, drawn by demand for labour in the assembly plants that had sprung up to take advantage of wage differentials. Whilst we were in Juárez, we lived on a rubbish dump with families from the women's group of a local church: the poverty, the inequality and the sheer unfairness of an apparently heartless system were there for anyone with eyes to see.

Whilst on the Mexican side of the river there was rampant crime, no job security, no union protection, no



minimum wage, and enormous poverty, in El Paso, literally just across the river from Juárez, there was only newness and shiny plenty. We stopped in a park in the well-watered suburbs of this desert city, and I looked out across the Rio Grande. Through the smog I could see the radio mast atop the dump where we had lived.

My strongest recollection was of a game of Mexican monopoly we played one night when our hosts Francisco and Patricia celebrated their eldest daughter's birthday. Monopoly is of course not only a popular game, but also an almost perfect microcosm of capitalism or at least of what has been called rentier capitalism. I am ashamed to say that I completely wiped out my Mexican hosts in little more than ten minutes. Rather than competing with me they tried to help me by offering complementary properties at silly prices.

And of course, those that had helped me landed on my developed property which soon led to their comprehensive defeat. And yet still they were kind to me and insisted on sharing birthday cake and other festive treats that they could so ill afford. On reflection I was ashamed of myself. For sure it was only a game, but in a prophetic way it symbolised how the capitalist system can work when some are trained and skilled at manipulating the rules whilst others are by comparison innocent and untutored.

Human and Institutional Sin

My own interpretation of my time in Juárez, reinforced by the experience of the Credit Crunch, is that the real problem with the way that markets work is human and institutional sin on both sides of the Rio Grande and beyond. The world-famous missiologist David J. Bosch nailed the issue for me when he wrote presciently in the early 1990s:

'In the West we live in a totalitarian society, but it is not seen as such....Its presuppositions and spin offs include centralization, bureaucratization, ecological damage, manipulation and exploitation of human beings, relentless consumerism, and chronic

unemployment. It is a permissive society, without norms, models, and traditions – an immediate society, people seek instant gratification, or in parts of the third world, survival just for today....'²

Strangely perhaps was the fact that for me, Bosch's answer to a related question was in some ways more worrying even than this damning indictment of our Western society. He asked: What is the church's response? 'It seems to respond' he writes, 'by digging trenches and preparing for a long siege – hoping the threat will go away'³.

Well, of course the threat will not go away and yet the church seems to treat its laity who are businesspeople with either a lack of understanding or an indifferent tolerance for their lives outside family and church. The fact is that all this is not simply a threat; it is also a huge opportunity. Seeing Business as Mission, working with the markets for the purposes of human flourishing rather than worshipping, hiding from or fleeing them, is key to understanding how Christian spirituality can seize the opportunity.

And so I began my formal training with a sense that somehow, I was called to help the church to support its laity in their business lives, to see their work as their mission.

However, the more I trained, the more aware I became of the void that existed between the world of church and the world of business. I came to understand this as a kind of mutual solipsism; two worlds sealed off from each other with very limited opportunity to develop understanding.

So you can imagine my delight that when I was made deacon in 2016, thanks to the initiative of Richard Cooke (director of the Coventry Diocesan

Training Partnership) I was given the opportunity to begin to address this under Bishop Christopher's authority by seeking opportunities to close this gap; to explore ways in which the church could encourage the faithful to see their business lives and work as their mission. And by mission, I mean the fullness of the word as exemplified by the five Ts – telling, teaching, tending, transforming, and treasuring⁴.

Research

I began by researching the business landscape of Coventry and Warwickshire. I quickly determined that my target was the 50,000 people who were owners, directors, or partners in the 34,000 or so businesses in the area. These were the people who were responsible for corporate governance and policy – the people with the de jure power to use their businesses as agents of transformation.

I well knew from my membership of leadership organisations such as the Institute of Directors (IoD) that most of these people were not and perhaps never would be Christians. I also knew that many of them felt isolated, stressed, and lonely. I reasoned that it was very likely that those Christian leaders that did exist would almost certainly

feel even more lonely and isolated in their work; not least because their churches were ineffective, unable, or unwilling to support and endorse their ministry through their work.

By degrees it became clear to me that what was needed were Christian missional communities for business leaders. A missional community for me is a group of people through which we intend to fulfil a vision of sending out the people of God into the mission of the world. Just as people gather in worship, receiving, empowering, renewing and equipping so they scatter into the world, reaching out in groups of

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common vision. The key therefore was to pioneer a pilot scheme – to attract Christian business leaders to a missional community where they could help each other to live out their Christian spirituality through their business lives. For me it was vital that any such group should be an ecclesial sign that business mattered to the people of God and so I was delighted when Bishop Christopher agreed that we should call our first gathered community a Bishop’s Missional Business Community.

From a standing start in October 2017 when the first BMBC met over supper in the upper room of St Michael’s Budbrooke church centre, there are now four such communities – in Coventry, Rugby (with CBL⁵), Warwick and Leamington – meeting every single month despite the discombobulations caused by Covid 19. Each community has between 10 and 15 members with most meetings attended by eight to 12 people. Over a meal, members essentially help and encourage each other to use their businesses to help to build the kingdom of God, which for me is just another way of talking about Business as Mission.

The maths is on this basis very simple – BMBCs are gathering up to 50 plus businesspeople every single month and the impact that is being made is already very significant if the views expressed by the members themselves are anything to go by:

Charles Innes, a credit director at Lloyds Bank:
‘The guidance and experiences offered and shared by the group has enabled me to learn and apply improved knowledge and judgment to my everyday business decision making and conduct at work in a Christian way....

‘The BMBC document ‘Rules for the Conduct of Business Life’ has drawn attention from colleagues (I leave it

on my desk). I’m pleased to say that it is consistent with our ‘Values and Behaviours’, against which we are measured on appraisal.

‘I count myself as slightly ‘out of the norm’ compared to most of the group, in that while I am a believer, I do not worship at church with any regularity. So not only does it help existing, established believers, but there is a considerable opportunity for those, such as myself, whose faith is less developed.’

Paula Hall, director of the Laurel Centre which provides support for people addicted to pornography, a burgeoning problem in our society:

‘Joining the BMBC has been a fantastic experience for me. As a Christian running my own business, there are often few people to share and pray with in my church community who understand the pressures of the business world and how it influences my spiritual life, nor indeed how my spiritual life influences my business....I see the group as essential for me continuing to grow spiritually and enabling me to develop a business that I can feel confident is within God’s will and can contribute to His kingdom here on earth.’

Simon Wade who runs a Double-Glazing business in Rugby:

Looking back into history there are so many Christians who have used their influence and money to transform society: caring for the sick, providing orphanages, schooling, better working conditions for employees, contributed to local and national society through philanthropy, fought oppression, set up provision for the poor etc, etc it is my dream that out of this group a movement will be created to give something back and use the skills we have to further God’s kingdom in a practical as well as spiritual way.’

A Personal Dimension

For me too, the BMBC journey has had a profound impact on the way that I operate as a business leader. Very early I realised that I could not expect to encourage others to operate their businesses in a kingdom manner unless I was prepared to model this in my own business.

Over the years we have enjoyed considerable success acting for major brands, including the likes of Greggs the Bakers and various Madame Tussauds attractions – especially Warwick Castle. I like to think that we’ve always had strong values, not least because Dad had a strong sense of customer service and a genuine commitment to staff and their wellbeing.

However, by the time I had finished training for ministry, Leader was not in the best of health. There were a number of reasons for this, but mostly it was as a result of neglect. The arrangements I had made to cover my absence had not worked out and the staff – particularly the senior staff – were feeling disconnected. After 50 years of successful trading the situation was ominous.

However, my engagement with BMBC encouraged me to fight on: to work without payment for several months, to address the feelings of disconnection and to seek to re-invigorate the business with a new vision. I was inspired by the largely Christian concept of distributism so beloved by the likes of GK Chesterton. I was surprised to learn just how much encouragement there is for business owners to enable their staff to become owners after the fashion of the John Lewis Partnership.

Suffice to say that Leader, despite the complexities of the Pandemic, is once

again a healthy, growing business with a committed and engaged staff. We have renamed ourselves 'The Leader Marketing Partnership' and are well down the path to becoming a business where the staff own the majority of the business through an employee trust. For me staff being owners rather than hired hands is potentially very kingdom-oriented and I regard our future as an Employee owned Business as something of a laboratory and tremendously exciting.

Hopefully, it can be seen from all this that the BMBC movement, young and relatively unproven as it is, is beginning to make a worthwhile difference not only to the Christian spiritual quest of its members, but also to the well-being of those touched by their business activities – staff and their families, clients, suppliers and indeed the wider community. It is an exciting journey to be sure and I hope that, with the continued backing of the Bishop of Coventry, we will be able to double the number of BMBCs in the next couple of years or so. I sense that with the ravages of Covid 19 the demand from people to join is higher than ever – so too the need of society for business conducted in a kingdom manner.

As I look to the future, I continue to be struck by the views of the banker and Anglican priest, Stephen Green⁶. I am referring particularly to his view that we engage with markets (and therefore business) because we have no choice if

we wish to try and transform the world, but that we need to do so constantly bearing in mind three ambiguities:

- the imperfection of the world
- the nature of the ends of human progress, and
- the nature of hope itself.


The second of these ambiguities is in my view rather more complex and arguable than the other two; but the first and third are uncomplicated. Simply put, the first ambiguity would say that however much work we do we cannot achieve perfection. We strive in the power of the Spirit to conform business to Christ, but until the Parousia itself we must always accept that as humans we cannot create perfection. This is not negativity – it's basic doctrine and applies to every sphere of human activity.

Having accepted this however, hope is essential and by hope I do not mean optimism. The very opposite actually, because in my experience optimism will always lead to disillusion. The hope I speak of is the theological virtue that enables us to go on believing that things can be better, to go on striving for them to be better even in the face of unpropitious circumstances.

In conclusion therefore, I believe that the BMBC movement in Coventry Diocese has been fruitful and offers a low cost, exciting and ecumenical way for the Church to encourage and support business as mission through its lay leaders.

In summary I would offer four reasons as to why other Anglican Dioceses, and indeed other institutional churches, should seriously consider developing something similar:

- a. bad business practices are causing lots of problems in our world.
- b. For reasons of human flourishing, we must work with the market and seek to conform it to Christ.
- c. It can be done by Christians as history has shown and indeed growing numbers today see the task as their vocation; and
- d. it is a genuine mission field in the sense not only of making new believers through engagement with them at the workplace, but also by seeking to make the coming kingdom of God more visible in the shape of a better world.

A final word of caution is perhaps appropriate here. I hope the Church does not try to facilitate Business as Mission by seeking to incorporate it into the parish system. My thoughts are very provisional, but for me the key lies in appointing lay people who are accountable to the church for sure, but more importantly they would be people who are Christian business leaders themselves with a strong sense of the identity of the people they are appointed to serve – their fellow Christian business leaders with a vocation to work for the coming kingdom through their businesses. 

1 Transforming Capitalism – Entrepreneurship and the Renewal of Thrift by Peter S Heslam (Grove series E156).

2 David J Bosch, *Believing in the Future -Towards a Missiology of Western Culture*, ch. 1.

3 Ibid

4 In their fuller exposition the five Anglican marks of mission are enumerated as: To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; To teach, baptise and nurture new believers; To respond to human need by loving service; To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation; and To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

5 Christian Business Leaders is an organisation founded in the 2000s by James Shand in Oxfordshire that shares many of BMBCs values and objectives. See <https://www.cbl-uk.org>.

6 See Stephen Green's book written at the time of the Credit Crunch: *Good Value – Choosing a Better Life in Business*.



James Holden joined his family's marketing business shortly after leaving university in 1983. He came to faith in the late 1990's and began training for the Anglican priesthood in 2014. He is currently managing director of The Leader Marketing Partnership and Bishop's Officer to Business Leaders in the Diocese of Coventry and a firm believer that the market place needs to be conformed to Christ.