

Eden.co.uk - a founder's story

Gareth Mulholland is the founder of Eden.co.uk which has become the UK's largest retailer of Christian books and church resources. As he prepares to launch Churchrooms, a new small group platform for hybrid churches, he reflects on the highs and lows of Eden's early years.

The Founder's Myth

In June 2021 Christianity Today launched a podcast series *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. The podcast takes listeners through the story of the incredible growth and shocking implosion of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and its senior pastor Mark Driscoll.

The podcast dedicated a special episode to explore the 'Founders Myth' of Mars Hill, and how it contributed to the failure of leadership. A founder's myth, which radiates from an organisation's core to the world, is the creation story which usually positions the founder as a hero, with a bold dream revealed through some kind of cosmic or divine revelation. Founders' myths are a powerful communication device which can rally people behind a leader or a cause but which can lead followers to put more trust and confidence in the founder's character and competence than they really deserve.

Some of the most famous founder myths are those surrounding the

hi-tech startups of Silicon Valley. The stories of HP, Google and Apple all feature a garage from where, against the odds, the brave young founders birth world-changing companies against the odds. Years later these stories provide a great setting for the company narrative but they represent a tiny element of a much messier, more complicated and often painful start-up story.

As a founder, I know that the polished one-minute version of my founding story can be leveraged to lend credibility to the organisation I started. In recent years others have heard my story, edited it and presented it back to me as a parallel of the life of Joseph - in which I'm cast as a dreamer who can see challenges coming in the future, prepare for them in advance, and provide a lifeline during a time of famine.

In reality the story of Eden is that of a passionate, determined but naïve and sometimes shy 24 year-old being given every chance to succeed but failing

early in an industrial engineering career; being in the right place at the right time to learn how to build websites; making a small fortune through someone else's poor decision, then risking that capital along with the student loans of his generous fiancée to start a new business that better suited his introverted but entrepreneurial personality. He then stumbled three steps forward and two steps back for 15 years causing his family and team more than a few sleepless nights and skipped heartbeats.

One of the dangers of perpetuating a founder's myth is that people and companies can be placed on a pedestal and too much trust is placed in things that are not real. Another is that others, often younger, hear the origin stories of organisations they admire and assume that they too need a 'divine revelation' before they can leap into starting an organisation.

Isn't the truth for many Christian founders that we look back and see how God has been at work as we



journey through a series of missteps and mistakes, lucky or unlucky timing, painful growth, conflict and even loneliness? It is through those times that God blesses our faithfulness, enabling organisations to flourish and make a positive difference in the world.

I want to make sure that my children and their generation beyond them know the whole truth. They need to see that God can take the five loaves and fishes they carry, and by his grace, make something beautiful that reveals his Kingdom in the world. In the words of Michael Gungor's song 'Beautiful Things':

*You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of the dust
You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of us.*

The True Origin of Eden

It was a warm September evening in 1999 and I was ten months into my first proper job based at the vast ICI Chlorine plant in Runcorn, having completed a degree in Electrical & Electronic Engineering.

My day had been one of the few enjoyable ones spent supervising contractors working in fields near Northwich where the company managed enormous underground salt caverns 'large enough to hold the Eiffel tower'. Perhaps it was these occasional opportunities to be outdoors, away from the noise, steam and smells of an industrial chemical site that reminded me how much I hated most of my job. I would do anything I could to get away from the ill-lit office overlooking steam outlet valves and miles of colour-coded pipework.

"I'm going to start my own business, I want to have more time." I told my church small group when it was my turn to talk. The rest of the group looked at each other, then started to smile. "Let us know how that goes,"

said one of them, laughing in my direction. They all appeared to be sharing a joke that I simply didn't get. "I don't know anyone with their own business who feels they have more time on their hands," said another.

I was happy for the conversation to move on, needing time to reflect on their reaction, but something shifted within a 24 year-old me. This group of good Christian people spent a lot of the 'sharing time' talking about their unhappiness with work, with disagreeable bosses, colleagues, and work without purpose or fulfilment. They accepted it as 'just the way life is' but I had a sense that something wasn't right. Surely 'life in all its fullness' must make a difference during the next 40 plus years of working life?

Making the Leap

Even though I was employed by ICI I was already in business through a side-hustle, buying and selling domain names, creating and hosting websites for friends, family and local businesses. My main interest was building websites and through experience I had discovered my passion was using technology to create interactive experiences.

Shortly after handing in my resignation and setting up my new company, *Eden Interactive*, I was put on the spot in the middle of a church service at

Holy Trinity Platt, Manchester by the vicar Rev Tony Porter. During the church notices and without warning Tony walked down the aisle, stopped at my pew and asked me to stand up. "Tell everyone what you're about to do Gareth" he said. I said I had left my job and was starting a business building websites. "And what is it that you're trying to do?" he probed. I don't remember exactly what I said but in essence I made a commitment

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"It's going to be a company that people love to work at, and clients love to work with." And with that I established my purpose.

The Early Years

For the next four years I continued building websites, setting up hosting, registering domain names and email accounts with help from freelance designers living locally. Then, in 2003 I was approached by a computer science graduate who was returning to Chester to live near his aging parents and had been directed by a local vicar to come and find me in the Chester Enterprise Centre. In every sense of the word, Stuart was a godsend. Although I will never forget the enormous weight of taking on a first employee I sensed that God had brought just the right person into the business, at just the right time.

Stuart and I worked together for a year or so maintaining and building websites, but together we sensed that our time was going into mundane projects which involved easy and repetitive work which wasn't tapping into our passion, even if the work was very profitable. Financially these were the best of days due to the limited supply and high demand for our services. I didn't recognise it at the time but we had incredible gross margins of 80% and attracting new business was easy.

Clarifying our Purpose

Word-of-mouth recommendation led to a large number of Christian charities, colleges and businesses giving us work, and through this we started to see recurring patterns in the problems they faced and the solutions they needed. Generally what they really needed was beyond their budget, so they rarely achieved the outcomes they were really looking for.

We were finding it difficult to justify selling solutions we didn't believe in and instead began to wonder how we could provide Christian organisations with access to the online audience

and interactions they needed in an affordable way. This thinking led us to the idea of building a marketplace, or platform, where thousands of Christians would pass through every day, and while doing that they would be able to interact with any of the organisations we are working with to make a donation, subscribe to a newsletter or something else – a virtual *Christian Resources Exhibition* of sorts.

At some point the idea clicked into place that an online Christian bookshop stocking every available book or product, regardless of denomination or theological perspective, would provide something of value to Christians across the church and would also provide us with data that would help those parachurch organisations to reach the right Christians based on the kind of books or products our customers wanted to buy.

My first personal experience of Christian bookshops had been through the Faith Mission bookshop in Belfast in the 1980s. As a child I navigated through the Faith Mission shop with my mum to buy Bible reading notes, or to collect resources for the Holiday Bible Club at our church. In Faith Mission there was a sense of abundance – they stocked something for everyone, with plenty for everyone and its coffee

shop was a meeting place for Christians from across the city.

Through our understanding of search engine behaviour and optimisation, we confirmed that a lot of people were trying to find and buy Christian resources online but no-one, even Amazon, was offering the breadth and depth of products that I knew we could. After some research, and success as an affiliate for another online retailer, we decided to launch our own e-commerce site, hoping to create a digital experience to rival the one I'd experienced in Faith Mission.

Initial Opposition

Eden.co.uk was launched on the internet in July 2004 and the first orders came in from family and friends who were looking for resources that couldn't be found in their local bookshops. Using two IKEA Billy bookcases and a low-rental franking machine we started posting out orders on a daily basis. Nativity plays for schools, Hillsong CDs, Bibles and books for children were among the most popular categories.

In those early days we were fortunate that customers could only judge our capability and reliability by the quality of our website, which

was very well-designed by 2004 standards. Our scrappy operation in the Chester Enterprise Centre was hidden from view, and we leveraged the design of our website to build trust and confidence, using language, typography and design elements normally associated with more established businesses.

The only downside of this approach was that we generated strong negative reactions from several Christian bookshops who posted in online forums that ecommerce and Eden by association were fundamentally unethical and unfair. In response, some suppliers kept a distance from Eden to avoid being branded disloyal to their core high-street market. This predictable opposition only strengthened our resolve to develop an online experience that customers would judge to be better than their high-street alternative.

Hubris Born of Success

Looking back now I can see that the success we experienced in website design – with 80% gross profit – led to hubris. I had shifted from one business model and industry – with great margins and a higher demand than supply – to another with tiny margins and much great competition



Eden's offices in Chester

Photo: Eden

without ever considering what it would take to be successful. E-commerce definitely opened up great opportunities and potential for influence, but at a massive financial risk which I did not understand.

It was a few months before our first child was born that my accountants asked for a meeting, as they prepared the latest year's accounts. He wanted to know if I realised we had lost over £100k. I was in shock, and felt sick as he explained what was going on - cash from growing sales and supplier credit was enabling us to continue trading despite underlying losses. If that wasn't bad enough I had to go home and tell my wife, who was now on maternity leave, that my business was no longer working.

I knew I needed to provide for a growing family and staff and the shock soon transformed into action driven by my 'won't be beaten' spirit. I had to admit my mistakes to our small team, who then rallied around the call to understand and control every detail of the business - understanding individual prices from multiple suppliers, how to predict postage cost of each item and any combination of items.

Within a year we were profitable, and understood the reason for the phrase "retail is detail".

In Jim Collins' book *How the Mighty Fall* he identifies "hubris born of success" as the first step towards failure. Within a couple of years of our own experience, we witnessed a number of other organisations in the Christian retail and publishing sector collapse, and in

each case it appeared over-confidence, or *hubris*, was a leading factor in their eventual demise.

Learning how to Grow

Over the last ten years, God has been teaching me to be content with steady but solid growth in the business. We made the decision to become a 'real living wage' employer early on, and have maintained our commitment to being a good employer. We have expanded the skills and level of responsibility within the management team and the business now employs 50 people and our annual turnover peaked last year at around £8m.

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Occasionally my in-built tendency toward dreaming & reinvention has led us down rabbit holes we should have avoided but on the whole we have kept focussed on doing better at the job this year than the one before.

I've learned to 'count the cost' before embarking on new ventures, and to accept that 'great' ideas usually have significant flaws which need ironed out along the way. I now accept that I'm naturally optimistic which means that everything takes longer and costs more than I expect it to.

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I've learned to accept that God often wants to work on us, while we think we're working for him. This can take longer than we like but seems to be an essential part of His process.

COVID as a Catalyst for Innovation

With the aim of giving the business a life beyond its founder I appointed a CEO to run the business in January 2020 and then within weeks the Covid pandemic hit. At Eden it led to a rapid shift to remote working for all office staff, unprecedented sales volumes, followed by challenges in the international supply chain and increased operational costs.

In truth, letting go of the business during this time has been the most stressful and testing experience I can remember. Although I believe God wanted me to appoint a CEO to replace me and brought the best person I could imagine into the role at the right time, it has been challenging. (As it happens, after almost two years away, I have recently returned to the CEO role but God has been at work on me so I'm not the same person I was before.)

As churches around the world recalibrate and adapt in response to the pandemic, the need for greater investment and use of digital technology has been accepted. Using the resources and skills available to Eden we are launching a new platform called Churchrooms which could best be described as the 'Netflix for Small Groups'. It's a platform allowing virtual, in-person and hybrid groups to learn together in a way that maximises the transformational potential of studying the Bible in a small group.

Our hope is that Churchrooms will be an even more successful business than Eden and that more lives will be transformed around the world. I expect we'll face different challenges, but I hope we'll get to write the story of Churchrooms and look back on how God takes our five loaves and two fish, and multiplies them for his glory. 



Gareth Mulholland is the Founder and CEO of Eden.co.uk <<http://Eden.co.uk>> and Churchrooms.com and a passionate supporter of the adoption & fostering charity, Home for Good. He was born in Canada, grew up in Belfast, studied Engineering in Manchester and now lives in Chester with his wife Rachel, two birth children and an adopted daughter.