

Matt Parfitt, CEO of Grace Enterprises

Interviewed by Richard Higginson

Matt Parfitt is the CEO of Grace Enterprises, a charity that is transforming lives through supportive employment in their sustainable businesses. He is also the Managing Director of the two companies started so far: Radiant Cleaners in November 2017, and Jubilee Events in January 2022. In the businesses the key values are Excellence, Employment and Ethics – with excellence first, delivering as a business being the only way that life-transforming jobs and social impact can be delivered sustainably.

RH: Matt, tell us something about your early life and working career.

MP: I grew up in Nottingham, in a great Christian family, but didn't really come to faith myself until I was 21. I went away to university and then had two gap years. I worked as an outdoor activity instructor at a centre down in Weymouth and a Christian Centre in Wales. I then came back to Nottingham to start a PGCE and got married that summer.

RH: You used to be a school teacher. What led you to give that up and go into business?

MP: I was teaching in Key Stage One. It's pretty rare to have a male teacher there, and people thought I was doing a decent job. So I wasn't looking to get out. But at the same time, when I was at church I was getting frustrated that there were people who'd been saved but their life didn't look that different. They had too many bad influences around them, not

enough money, too much spare time. They basically needed a job, but no one at church could employ them. I was discipling someone like that and getting frustrated with God – which is obviously a dangerous game! I was saying to God: “someone needs to do something about this!” Then I felt really clearly that he said: “Well you do it then.” This was on a Saturday in May 2007.

And so on the Monday morning, I handed in my notice. The headteacher was very surprised because on Friday when we said goodbye, I was a happy primary school teacher. Now I was leaving, and he wanted to know what had happened over the weekend, but also what I was going to do – a fair question. I said, “I don't know. But I'm going to be an employer...” and that has lived with me ever since. The reason why I got into business is not because I feel called to any specific business. It's

that this is a way that God's called me to make a difference in people's lives by being a godly employer – and therefore I need to run a good business to be able to employ people sustainably.

RH: You say you feel called to be a godly employer. What do you mean by that?

MP: I would say being a godly employer means treating people really well, treating people like we would want to be treated ourselves. So that is being honest, having integrity, recruiting well and paying people properly – we pay the real living wage, for example. We demonstrate grace when people make a mistake. We want to help them. We're looking for ways to help people improve in their life, to achieve their hopes and goals, rather than looking for reasons to fire them when something goes wrong. For most employers the employee is just doing a job. We are interested in the whole person.



It also applies to disciplinary procedures and ultimately, even to drawing a line in the sand and saying there are things that are acceptable and things that aren't acceptable. And when someone does cross that line – after we've shown lots of grace – actually being prepared to draw the line and ultimately to fire someone in a godly way, shows that loving someone is not just unconditionally accepting any or every behaviour. It also means closing a chapter rather than the book – we have reemployed people when situations and behaviours have changed.

RH: You make a concerted effort to employ people from difficult or troubled backgrounds. Have any of them made life difficult for you as an employer?

MP: The reason I set this up was to provide jobs for people who are long-term unemployed, whom the Nottingham Post describes as unemployable. These are people who have maybe struggled with homelessness, been in prison, have struggled with addiction, survivors of modern slavery, people who've suffered major difficulties with mental or physical health, survivors of domestic abuse... the kind of thing that stops you from getting a job. And that isn't easy.

No one else will employ them but giving them a job is the easy bit. Supporting them to keep that job is the really tricky bit. My wife, Sam (a former GP – that's a whole other chapter in this story!) heads up our employee support. That entails having holistic reviews to really understand what's going on in someone's life. So these 'Living Life Reviews' (see John 10:10) ask 12 questions about such things as housing, finances, autonomy, hope, purpose, and workplace skills.

We see the greatest change in hope and purpose – one of the least is workplace skills. It really isn't about the job! The job is just the vehicle.

In terms of has anyone made my life difficult as an employer? Yes! A lot.

The reason why I do what I do is because of the people; the reason why I sometimes bang my head against the wall or think 'why am I doing what I'm doing?' is because of the people.

I have heard so many different excuses and reasons, over the last 15 years, as to why something's happened, why they can't turn up for work, why they can't do this. I've been told where I can stick my job multiple times. Hollow words and promises. I've worked really hard to cover for people so we can continue to deliver an excellent service as a business. For example, in the gardening business I've been laying lawns until very late on a hot sunny evening, missing my children's bedtime, missing going out and seeing friends because there's a lawn that's got to be laid and watered – and it's a boiling hot day, and the grass would be dead in the morning. All because someone hasn't turned up for work and has let me down.

That is when I'm really counting the cost. And if I'm not careful, I start thinking along the lines that: people are so ungrateful – don't they realise what I have given up for them? At that point I try and catch myself and say hang on a minute. Think about what Jesus did on the cross. How ungrateful I am most of the time for that? And the fact that he has shown me grace upon grace upon grace. And the stories you hear about people's backgrounds and lives. It's really humbling when I realise that I've come from such a comfortable, privileged background and others have been through things I can't even imagine. So both of those get you back on track quite quickly!

RH: Explain the relationship with Grace Church and Grace Enterprises...

MP: Since 2007 I've always wanted to run a business linked to our church. I saw it done in a church in Kenya, which was inspirational, back in 2006. But our church wasn't then in a position to support that. So for 10 years, I ran Fruitful Oaks, a gardening company, transforming gardens, transforming lives. When in 2017 Grace Church said yes to my latest proposal that we start

Grace Enterprises, that was a real joy. There's no legal link but Grace Church started Grace Enterprises, they gave me a salary for six months and they gave me £4,000 to start the first business. It's not a particularly rich church so they weren't going to underwrite whatever we did. I was simply saying that we would start a business. It would be self-sustaining, ultimately end up making a profit and that profit would then be reinvested for social good. There is a real heart alignment between Grace Church and Grace Enterprises.

Now the relationship looks like this. We have an office in Grace Church, and that's brilliant. Really the link comes through the people involved. There's an overlap of Trustees, but also people within the church make up a large number of the mentors for our employees. That's how people in the church can support us and support the employees by getting alongside them and giving them the sort of encouragement, love and support that you would normally get from a family. Clearly many people, including our employees, don't always get that from a family, or their families live far away. Being able to provide 'family' as church is one practical way that people can get involved with Grace Enterprises. And it's the kind of thing that sets us apart from other businesses. A typical cleaning company cannot help with English lessons, or with the support that comes through having a coffee with someone or putting an arm around their shoulder, encouraging them about work, or helping them to deal with whatever's going on in their life. That's well outside the remit of a normal company. So it's the extra, the added bit, that comes from our being linked to Grace Church.

RH: Radiant Cleaners – what made you set up a cleaning company? Great name, by the way.

MP: Radiant Cleaners is named from Psalm 34:5 ("Look to him, and be radiant") – the poor looking to Jesus, finding hope, purpose and dignity and their faces becoming radiant. As well as – obviously – it's a decent, shiny cleaning word too! The reason why

Celebrating a new contract with Wates Construction



we started a cleaning company was pragmatism to a certain extent. The church only had a few £1000s. My original plan A had to be shelved. So we turned our hand to what we could do, got on with it and proved that we could create jobs and run a sustainable business employing the least, the last and the lonely.

So we started Radiant Cleaners and knew immediately it would be able to employ more people than the gardening business I had run before, and with a more diverse range of people. We can now employ the single mum who needs to do the school run and is only available 10-2, or a former addict in their 50s or 60s who wouldn't be able to have done a hard physical day's digging but can clean for a few hours. It's also a service that can't be outsourced - whatever happens in the world it can't be done remotely. So those were some of the reasons why we thought we could provide a service that is needed and people pay for, is labour-intensive, and makes a difference in a sector where we believe it can be done better.

RH: Can you give us a testimony about work experience for one of your employees?

MP: Yes, there are multiple stories to tell! Here's a couple.

There's a lady who works on a construction site for us and she's in

her late 50s. After a long period of unemployment she thought she would never get a job again. She had suffered from domestic violence for 30 years. But it's wonderful to see her working. She is fantastic and the customers love her too! To see her have hope and purpose and dignity is an amazing joy. This is someone who doesn't know God, who wouldn't go anywhere near a church, but is asking questions about why a church would start a cleaning business and why someone would mentor her, why would they care? It's a great opportunity to be able to speak into someone's life about the love of Jesus. And it was a real joy to see her come to one of the church carol services just before Christmas.

Then there's someone who had struggled with addiction for 43 years - and he's only 53! He's come to know Jesus before coming to Grace Church, but has got stuck in here and volunteered and shown how faithful he is. We have been able to employ him and he's fantastic. He works so hard. He's just a great example of someone who is trying to get out of the situation they were in and so grateful for an opportunity. He's still in insecure housing right now. But hopefully through working, he'll be able to take that next step in his recovery journey, and move into his own housing. We have really great hopes for him! He has the potential to be a team leader or even leading a future business.

It's a real joy to see people who thought that all opportunities had passed them by, to encourage them, to call out the potential you look for and see something in them. It's just a joy to be able to say Jesus loves you and has got great plans for you. And to be able to play a little part in helping that happen. It's brilliant.

RH: Radiant Cleaners has won national recognition. What do you think makes it so special?

MP: It goes without saying that what we do is popular in Christian circles. What's not to like about being the sustainable next step on from a food parcel? But in the business world and especially the social enterprise world people really like what we do. Our latest award was at the Social Enterprise of the Year awards on December 21st 2021 in the job creation category. This is the Oscars of the social enterprise world - the sponsors on the backboard, eBay, PwC, Coop, Natwest and other massive national corporates show that. That has come about because we employ people and give them a life-changing job, we measure the impact and we record the change. That can be in terms of stories, but also in statistics. We can prove our impact and prove the difference that a job working for us makes, which is why big companies then work with us. They think: "We need cleaning. Why wouldn't we get Radiant because you deliver a great service and deliver the social impact." It seems an impossible combination to take someone

that no one else would employ, then pay them more than most employers, then deliver a service that is better. I'd put that down to hard work and God and his favour. I can spot an opportunity that others might not see, then I really go for it. I do push hard on doors to open and I am persistent because I believe in what we do!

Ultimately it's because God is with us and he is really gracious and keeps opening things up. That is why it's going so well.

RH: Fantastic. Your new business is Jubilee Events. Tell us about that. Why not just concentrate on growing Radiant Cleaners and making it bigger?

MP: I've always believed we needed to have multiple businesses, even when starting the gardening business in 2007. So it was a real joy to me in January 2022 to start Jubilee Events.

This is an event company that provides marquee hire and/or events management. Think wedding receptions, garden parties or corporate events. The reason for doing this, and not just growing Radiant Cleaners, is because a different business creates different jobs for different people. To elaborate on that, cleaning is often a single person activity, sometimes a team of two, but not very often, and even if they are working at the same time in the same place they might be working in different areas. If you think about putting up or taking down the marquees in Jubilee Events, this will actually be a three- or four-person job. Within that four-person team we can get some people working who otherwise wouldn't be able to go off with keys and alarm fobs and specific instructions to clean on their own. But as the third or fourth person in a team, they can follow instructions that are given face-to-face, and we can do practical things together. We get to sit together at breaks and lunchtimes and have something in common. We're on the same team with the same purpose experiencing the same weather and ground conditions. We can talk about work or we can talk about life

– these are possibly the most valuable times of all.

RH: What is the future for Grace Enterprises? What's the big vision for various enterprises? What has God called you to do?

MP: At the start of Grace Enterprises God gave me a very clear vision (based on Isaiah 41:17-20) and I believe it's for running seven different enterprises. It's just a question of which business in which order!

They will be a diverse group of businesses of different shapes and sizes providing different jobs for different people. Some will be bigger than others, some will make more money than others, some will create more jobs. They will employ different people but all with the same ethos: that we are going to run a business as if God was running it.

- This means treating our customers well, providing excellence and value.
- It means treating our employees well, and paying them properly.
- It means making a profit – because it's a business and that is what a well-run business does.


Money and profit are not bad things in and of themselves. They undoubtedly have the power to corrupt but when handled well we can be a light to the world in this area too. The interesting thing will be what we do with that profit.

The structure so far is that Grace Enterprises, the parent charity, holds the one share in each of our businesses. The charity can provide the support and mentoring for all of our employees, whichever business they are working for. It also acts as an asset lock: any and all profits will be reinvested for social good. No one's getting rich from this. We work to a different model that disrupts industries that aren't great. Cleaning, for example, often doesn't pay the real Living Wage and treats people badly.

The Events industry has some unethical practices in terms of environmental impact and in the way that employees are treated. We feel we can step into

and disrupt an industry, and ultimately show a better way is possible. It shows that when God is working at the centre of something then it is life-giving, it's transformative, and it will bless our employees and the people in our city and our nation.

Businesses create employment and wealth, and the wealth isn't just financial. Business done well can be a force for good. If we can harness that and actually make a profit from a business, then if we double in size, we're making more money that can be reinvested to do more good. A positive loop that creates resources.

When a conventional charity is doing really well, then in order to double its impact it probably needs to double its donations the following year in order to have more impact. This consumes resources. Whereas once our businesses are up and running, they're self-sustaining and scalable and even replicable. We believe we are called to play a part in rewriting the way that church and business and Christians and business can operate together, effectively rewinding a couple of hundred years to the time when Christians (e.g. the Quakers) were actively involved in society. They were making a huge difference, and were seen as a witness, and a light to the hope that Jesus brings. We as Christians and the church seem to have retreated over the past 200 years. At Grace Enterprises we aim to retake some of that ground and prove that it is possible for Jesus-centred businesses to be a beacon of light and to provide employment again. So the vision is to see Nottingham changed, then the UK, then beyond... 

To find out more about the vision of Grace Enterprises or to see how you could support them visit:

www.GraceEnterprises.co.uk

Or to find out more about each business visit:

www.RadiantCleaners.co.uk and
www.JubileeEvents.co.uk

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