

Walking on Water in the Clothing Business

Keren Pybus tells her story of founding and running Ethical Apparel Africa, a clothing manufacturing and sourcing business based in Ghana delivering cost-competitive, quality products while ensuring workers are respected, empowered, and paid living wages.

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of his glorious grace.*

A journey through the garment industry

My journey into running my own business did not come from any desire to be an entrepreneur, to be the boss, to invent or have a more flexible lifestyle. Indeed, as I grew up I had little exposure to life working in business as most of my family were teachers or pastors.

Although not particularly academic, I was given the opportunity to do Young Enterprise at school. I was always passionate about textiles and so I studied for a business degree in clothing at University. This led to a career in fashion retail, working first for Marks & Spencer and then for George Clothing (Asda). By my late 20s I had a large house, a BMW and was travelling all over the world.

However, it was during my travels and living in Bangladesh for three years that I was impacted by the people that made up the garment supply chain, what the cost levers were and why there were so many people being treated badly. As a Christian I believe God made everybody unique and special. One's birthplace and socio-economic upbringing should not prevent one from having a worthwhile career. Furthermore, everyone should be treated with respect and dignity and have the opportunity to progress within their workplace.

With the garment industry employing 60 million people globally (70% of them women), I felt that I was a very small cog in an enormous wheel. Even though I worked for the largest retailer in the world, I felt that it was impossible to make any difference at the speed I wanted to. How could I convince the industry that changing the way they operated would be good for them as well as for those on the factory floor? This was certainly something that would need divine intervention.

Whilst deeply deliberating (well actually faffing and procrastinating!) I received two prophetic words within the space of three weeks in January 2014 which said "if you want to walk on the water you've got to get out of the boat". Three months later, after more procrastinating, out of the blue I was made redundant. Even though I was brought up understanding what it meant to live a life of faith, like Peter in the bible story that the prophecy referenced, I began to sink.

God, however, had his hand on my life and during this time, I met an amazing Christian life coach. I had thought that walking on water meant doing something you were terrified of, something where you couldn't have any control, giving up everything you have – and for some that might be the case.

However, I learned that God wanted to use my passion and skills – he did not want me to give those up. He had given me what I needed to fulfil my calling in making change happen in the industry. My life coach had a saying "where your passions and skills meet, therein lies your calling."

Getting out of the boat

And there began a journey to today of miraculous answers to prayer, divine opportunities, faith testing and walking the talk.

After the life coaching, I worked for a US based company that was trying to scale artisan produced fabric to large-scale retailers. I had an amazing few months travelling to remote areas of Laos and the India/Pakistan border plus a life-changing trip to Ghana. God reminded me of my passion for working in

Africa. In 2014 the Ghanaian President implemented a special initiative to kick-start the apparel industry by funding factory growth. Despite initial interest, exports stalled due to the factory's lack of knowledge and skills in being able to manufacture at international scale and quality standards, leaving loads of empty factories. I saw a wonderful opportunity to help make this initiative a reality, but I was not going to be able to do this alone. Whilst on a separate consulting role I met Paloma Schackert

"if you want to walk on the water you've got to get out of the boat"

– Yale graduate, Bain management consultant, experience of working in West Africa and all-round awesome person with a skill base that completely complemented mine.

What followed was a divinely ordained whirlwind week at the end of July 2015 where we registered Ethical Apparel Africa as a business and won an unprecedented grant from USAID to complete technical capacity building in Ghana. We still have today the logo that was hand drawn as a quick fix to get us going!

The Ghana industry was in its infancy but had all the building blocks to grow at a fast rate: An Africa-to-USA unique free trade agreement; fast shipping times to US/UK/Europe; a strong agricultural supply chain which keeps the cost of living low; good government labour policies. Therefore, we could create a baseline of ethical manufacturing, developing an industry from scratch that was going to be right and fair from the beginning. We were able to share God's love by not only treating everyone

fairly but also by creating the best place to work and reinvesting profits back into worker empowerment and education.

I quickly realised that my 'walking on the water' was being a CEO of a company, I never set out to do that, I am not a natural entrepreneur and, in the beginning, had no idea what a balance sheet was, yet alone how to raise investment. I was completely out of my comfort zone and did not believe that I could do it. God provided in incredible ways with volunteer interns, continued and extended USAID grants, and clothing brands that were ready to take the risk of placing business in Ghana.

We rode a wave in those early days, and I began to do things more in my own strength, buoyed by winning orders from previous contacts, by the excitement of doing something different and by the early-stage recognitions we received in the shape of awards from the Ethical Fashion Forum and Ashoka Changemakers.

I have always been an expectant person: I expect others to do their best, to throw

themselves at things with vigour and enthusiasm, to never assume but always to check. I expect things will work out for the best, that the glass is always half full, that there is opportunity and learning in everything. This is also true in my faith – ever since my back was miraculously healed in my twenties, I expect God to do miracles, to see the gifts of the Spirit at work and to expect that even in the most difficult of circumstances God will move the mountain.

Stormy waters

This included the days when the cash flow was firmly headed into the red and we couldn't make the salary bill. God provided the money on the exact day we needed it. The most challenging was when we received a letter from a very large USA client saying they were going to sue us for over \$4 million and stopped all payments to us. We had produced multiple numbers of medical scrubs for them, and they had funded the fabric for those orders. As COVID progressed they ordered more and more and then one



day started cancelling, including goods that were in production, ones on ships and even goods that had already arrived in their warehouse. We tried pleading with them, showing them the impact on our Ghanaian workers, but they were just focussed on themselves. Then one day I realised I was once again operating in my own strength and just expecting God to show up and sort it. Whilst it is good to be proactive in these situations, I had forgotten to throw the weight of personal prayer and prayer support behind it. From this we connected with Advocates for International Development who selectively provide *pro bono* legal support for social enterprises. They provided us with specialist lawyers in the appropriate US state who confirmed that we were in the right, had a watertight contract and would fight for us. Over the next eight months we eventually recovered nearly 90% of what we were owed from the firm and did not pay a penny.

I learnt through this experience that despite all my knowledge and experience of God working miraculously, I had just taken it for granted that he would get us out of every hole. That sometimes meant doing things in my own strength first rather than seeking the God solution. It meant sometimes not being proactive and just expecting God to rescue us. It also meant I was not spending enough time with God thanking and praising him for everything he does, every day: small and big things; gifts he gives us to enable us

to operate in a business environment; for keeping us above the water when we turn our eyes to him and stay fixed on him. I realised I needed to be public about how God works in our business in the same way that someone would recognise a great business coach or a trusted partner.

My faith has been tested many times especially when sometimes it looked like complete failure and I thought the business was about to close. But the rollercoaster journey continues and when I struggle, I try to fix my eyes on Jesus and remind myself that "I can do all things [which he has called me to do] through him who strengthens and empowers me (Philippians 4:13.) This is especially important when I have found myself to be all-consumed, distracted, or over-confident in my own abilities.

Our current situation

Over the last eight years we have grown from making basic products such as medical scrubs and cat toys, to complex insulated workwear jackets and nightwear (see pictures) plus dancewear and underwear. We work with four partner factories as well as owning our own factory, creating 1000 jobs and a revenue of over \$4m through exports which go mainly to the USA. Our vision is to export \$100m by 2030 which is equivalent to 10,000 jobs. We are supported by a team of largely Christian investors who share our vision and values.

We're not only trying to create good quality jobs that are paying people fairly, providing them with benefits and helping them to progress in their lives and their careers. We also want them to feel a sense of belonging, inclusion and power in the workplace and then measure that to help to figure out and contribute to the industry's understanding of good ethical business practices. Businesses work when they make profit, but as Christians how we steward that profit is what makes us unique.

We now have an Ethical Apparel Africa prayer support team that are regularly updated on WhatsApp with praise and requests. The team meets weekly and prays together, even though they are of different faiths, and the factory starts each day with devotions for those who want to join.

We want to try and model a way to ensure everybody who works in apparel manufacturing has a respectable job, a worthwhile job. The grace of God is glorious and turning to Jesus in every situation and gazing at his wonderful face really does keep you walking and puts everything into context. 🙏

If you would like to find out more, please watch this recent short film made by the Seattle Pacific University that sums up our vision and journey -

<https://faithandco.spu.edu/film-detail/ethical-apparel-africa/>



As Co-founder and CEO of Ethical Apparel Africa, Keren Pybus brings over 25 years of experience in sourcing, merchandising, and retail operations. EAA manufactures mass market apparel from their factories in Ghana, mainly for export to the USA. Keren has worked all over the world including living in Bangladesh for three years where she set up and ran the George sourcing office. She has worked with both large retailers such as Walmart UK/South Africa and with small-scale artisan suppliers. She is based in London with her husband and daughter. Keren has been involved with Faith in Business since 2016, inspiring her to develop her theological understanding of work whilst offering shared experiences of working currently in a CEO role and a cross-cultural environment. She is a FIB Trustee and an active part of the FIB prayer ministry team.