

From Handouts to Handshakes: Enterprise Solutions to Poverty

Earlier this year, Faith in Business partnered with TEN (Transformational Enterprise Network) in an event to explore enterprise solutions to Poverty. Jerry Marshall reports.

In the end, it felt like a miracle. *From Handouts to Handshakes* is the TEN biennial London conference, this year in partnership with Faith in Business. But as organiser, I was already lacking in faith that we would cover costs when a tube strike threatened to mess up everything. I don't know whether it was writing to the union RMT and Transport for London, or the prayer and fasting, but thank you God! The strike was called off and costs were covered.

The event brought together entrepreneurs, investors, business professionals and development practitioners to explore the question: how can enterprise alleviate poverty in ways that are sustainable, relational and transformative?

I was thrilled with the response. One delegate described it as “one of the most thought-provoking days I have ever experienced.” Another commented on “the wonderful blend of showcase, honesty and collaboration.” Several reflected on the warmth and relational atmosphere, including one who said “Do you ever walk into a room and think, ‘this is my tribe?’”

Setting the Tone

We began with an introduction from our Patron **Lord Dr Michael Hastings CBE**¹. He spoke about the need for integrity, courage and imagination in Christian engagement with economics and public life. He highlighted the importance of leaders being willing to work across sectors and cultures, and challenged delegates to think beyond charity alone towards systems and structures that enable people and communities to flourish.

Peter Heslam's Challenge

The keynote address from Peter Heslam was the intellectual and

theological foundation for the conference. Peter argued that many Christians lack a coherent theology of business. In some church contexts, commerce is viewed with suspicion — tolerated but rarely celebrated as part of God's mission in the world.

Drawing on biblical themes of creation, stewardship, creativity and human flourishing, he suggested that enterprise can be a profoundly constructive force when rooted in justice, service and responsibility. Business, at its best, does more than generate profit. It creates jobs, develops skills, builds relationships, enables innovation and contributes to social stability.

He acknowledged the damage caused by exploitative economic systems and the reality that business can also deepen inequality. But he argued that disengagement was not the answer. Rather, Christians should help shape forms of enterprise that reflect Kingdom values.

A key insight concerned dignity. Traditional aid models can sometimes unintentionally reinforce dependency, even when motivated by compassion. Sustainable enterprise, by contrast, can enable participation, agency and long-term resilience.

That theme — moving from dependency towards participation — resurfaced repeatedly throughout the day and several delegates described Peter's contribution as foundational.

Stories from Practice

We grounded the theology and broad themes with case studies from different contexts.

Karen Davies from Purple Shoots (small ethical loans provider) spoke

about the challenges faced by people in the UK who are excluded from mainstream financial systems, and the possibilities opened up through accessible microfinance and relational support. Her contribution illustrated how relatively small interventions can unlock entrepreneurial potential among people who would otherwise remain overlooked.

Simon Levell (CEO of MiKashboks)² described the rapid roll out of his brilliant app, MiKashboks, which enables savings and loans groups in Africa to use mobile money, improve control and connect to the formal banking sector.

Many will know **Matt Parfitt's** inspiring Grace Enterprises story and enjoyed the biscuits (remembering that the biscuits are only ‘Half the Story’).³ He is changing lives by giving supportive work to those finding it impossible to get back into employment. **Alex Lloyd Davies** spoke on Just Earth, of which she is part-time CEO, highlighting the importance of locally led development, long-term relationships and practical collaboration.

I used my presentation on Transcend, a business I co-founded in Bethlehem, to say that with God's help, anyone can do this. For me, the difference between starting a regular business and an “impact business” like Transcend was the starting-point. The question was not, ‘What will be the most profitable enterprise?’ but ‘What business best uses local assets (language and IT skills) and best mitigates local challenges (movement restrictions) to meet local needs (resilient jobs and hope)?’

A recurring point across the case studies was that meaningful

transformation is often slow and messy. Delegates seemed to appreciate this honesty. One attendee said it was valuable to hear not only “the inspiration” but also “the perspiration” involved.

Redemptive Enterprise

Stephen Hunt (Carsis Consulting) was part of a panel exploring the idea of redemptive enterprise. **Sas Conradie** (Tearfund) and **Sylvie Bracquiné** (Sinapis) were also on of the panel covering thorny issues that were later picked up in small groups: how businesses can grow beyond micro-enterprise, the “missing middle” where businesses are too large for microfinance but too small for mainstream investment; and how to minimise power imbalances between partners in the global North and global South.

There were no clear answers but a framework of questions. What does it mean to build businesses that restore rather than exploit? That create dignity rather than dependency? That take relationships, local leadership and long-term flourishing seriously?

There was a healthy realism in the discussion. But also a shared conviction that Christians involved in enterprise have both an opportunity and a responsibility to think differently about how business is done.

AI and Emerging Possibilities

A lively section of the conference focused on artificial intelligence. The discussion explored how AI tools might support start-ups and microbusinesses, particularly in under-resourced settings. Participants shared examples ranging from business automation and

funding analysis to research tools and coaching systems. Transformational Enterprise Network (TEN) members and partners in Africa are already enthusiastically integrating platforms such as ChatGPT into entrepreneurial training programmes.

There was enthusiasm about the potential of these technologies, but speakers consistently returned to the importance of wisdom, human judgement and relationships.

One contributor described software engineering as a “sacred vocation, just like preaching or growing vegetables”, capturing our wider emphasis on work and enterprise as spheres of Christian calling.

Relationships Matter

Arguably, the greatest value of the presentations were the way they stimulated discussion and reflection. We allowed generous time for this and for networking, important because many were not just looking for contacts but also for collaborators, partners and fellow practitioners.

One person joked that I had done a shout out for most people there, but in a way, that was the point. One attendee described the event as “done in a spirit of mutual benefit... rather than promoting firms or companies.” Another appreciated “the emphasis on community and application.”

There were numerous practical follow-ups emerging from the day: conversations around funding partnerships, agricultural projects, AI collaboration, training resources and regional networks.

International participants also contributed substantially to the discussions around entrepreneurship and poverty alleviation. The exchange of ideas between practitioners in

different settings was a rich aspect of the conference.

A Continuing Conversation

Looking back, perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the conference was the sense that an important conversation is continuing to grow. Enterprise is recognised as a means of creating sustainable livelihoods, strengthening communities and enabling long-term flourishing. I think we were quick to acknowledge complexity, failure and unintended consequences but there was also genuine hope. Business can be shaped by values, investment can be relational rather than transactional, and Christians in business can see their work as vocation. One delegate summed it up succinctly: “Came away encouraged and motivated.”

From the beginning, we stressed that the event was not about having an enjoyable day with good food, but to hear, ‘What is God saying?’ and ‘What are we going to do about it?’.

I see TEN as a subset of Faith in Business, those specifically called to enterprise solutions to poverty. And whatever your path – starting a business, training, mentoring, sharing professional expertise – we can support you with resources, networks, an online support and accountability group and ‘expo’ trips to the Global South.

Thank you, Peter and Faith in Business for joining us!

The conference slides and recording, and free business start-up and other materials, are on our website, <https://www.tencommunity.net/>. Contact me if you want to know more. 

1. Michael Hastings is Chairman of SOAS, University of London and Professor of Leadership, Stephen R Covey Institute at Utah State University; Governor of the MPESA Academy in Nairobi, Kenya and VP of UNICEF. Formerly he was Head of Citizenship at KPMG International and the BBC’s Head of Public Affairs and Head of Corporate Social Responsibility.
2. Simon was previously an Investment Director at Capital Group.
3. Richard Higginson interviewed Matt Parfitt about Grace Enterprises in FiBQ 21.4, pp.17-20.



Jerry Marshall is a serial impact entrepreneur and founder of Transformational Enterprise Network (www.TENcommunity.net), a Christian community that uses business to fight poverty. He lives by the River Weaver in Cheshire with his wife Sue, who thinks they have too many boats.