In March 2009, when the country was in recession following the global financial crisis, Faith in Business held a well-attended conference on entrepreneurship. Most of the participants were involved in entrepreneurial activity of some sort. They seemed undeterred by the traumatic events of the previous two years. Their faith in God gave them a confidence that it was still worth investing in exciting new ideas. Banks may have been lending less, but entrepreneurs have ways of finding the investment finance they need, and for small-scale ventures, family and friends often provide the initial outlay. The conference underlined the fact that entrepreneurship is an ongoing social necessity, even – indeed especially – during an economic downturn. Delegates gained encouragement from meeting kindred spirits and drew inspiration from the God who gives us our creative juices.

In 2012 IVP published my book Faith, Hope & the Global Economy. In it I argued that, rightly understood and applied, Christian faith can be an enormous power for good in the global economy, when it fulfils five criteria: stimulating enterprise, reducing poverty, promoting integrity, ensuring sustainability and fostering discipleship. Note the first of these. Enterprise is the mainspring of business. While entrepreneurs have sometimes been branded as dangerous and unscrupulous, luring others to an unpleasant fate like the pied piper of Hamelin, it is by undertaking new ventures, trying out new products, services and processes, and refining what already exists in search of something better, that progress is made. Entrepreneurs – men and women who found and run their own businesses – are playing an increasingly influential role across the global economy. The church should encourage entrepreneurship as a noble vocation that requires qualities of vision, passion, risk-taking, integrity, persistence and decisiveness.

In demonstrating these qualities, we emulate God’s character. My book includes a chapter linking creation and entrepreneurship together, entitled Launched in Hope.

Meanwhile, a new student had come on the scene at Ridley, Kina Robertshaw. Kina grew up in Zambia, one of a large family of 12. At the age of 10, Kina and her cousin were already selling peanuts at the gate of her father’s house. Leaving school at 16, she developed an interest in fashion and worked in retail stores in Johannesburg and London. There she carefully observed the ingredients and working habits that support success in retail, hoping that one day she would have the opportunity to run her own fashion business.

In due course, Kina set up stores both in Lusaka and Johannesburg, including the first independent department store in Zambia. She rose to the challenge, and expanded the business into complementary areas linking with the Zambian fashion and music industry.

Moving with her family to England in 2008, the reawakening of Kina’s faith led to a desire to study theology; she enrolled at Ridley as an independent student in 2010 and was eventually ordained in 2016. During her studies she reflected on her past experience, writing a dissertation on Christian entrepreneurship under my supervision. She then wanted to take this work a stage further, to interview Christian entrepreneurs in the UK and discover what motivates them and makes them tick. What is it that inspires entrepreneurs, frustrates them, challenges them and brings them joy?

RESEARCH PROJECT ON CHRISTIAN ENTREPRENEURS

With its existing interest in entrepreneurship, Faith in Business was happy to support Kina when she made her proposal to interview 50 entrepreneurs. We already had a solid pool of entrepreneurs with whom we were in touch. About 20 of these 50 entrepreneurs were existing contacts; people who have attended Faith in Business events, spoken at these events, or with whom I had a long-standing relationship.

However, we also wanted to branch out and make new contacts. So we set about finding more entrepreneurs. This did not prove difficult. Suggestions came from a wide variety of sources. One contact put us on to another. We came across a particularly strong network of Christian entrepreneurs in North-west England. We could have interviewed many more than 50, and apologise to anyone we weren’t able to fit in who would
like to have been included. The line had to be drawn somewhere! We feel that 50 is a good number in that it amounts to a statistically significant sample. We have been able to identify trends and patterns.

The people we interviewed were at varying stages in their careers, and certainly work in a wide range of businesses. They include architecture, cars, ceramics, construction, consultancy, engineering, fashion, finance, food and drink, hospitality, law, media, product design, property, recycling, retail and social enterprise. The age range of our interviewees spanned at least 50 years, from mid 20s to upper 70s.

A book has grown out of this research, one that Kina and I very much enjoyed writing together: A Voice to be Heard: the Stories, Faith and Challenges of Christian Entrepreneurs. It is due for publication by IVP in September. What I shall provide here is something of a taster for the book. Through our research we arrived at a conclusion we had not anticipated, but one that we now hold deeply: that entrepreneurs have the potential to play a major role in the church's mission.

THREE COMMANDS

God’s mission is often summed up in the key biblical commands that are called the Creation Mandate, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission.

The Creation Mandate – sometimes called the Cultural Mandate – is Gen. 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living things that moves upon the earth.” To this may be added Gen. 2:15, where “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” From these two verses flows the idea of human beings exercising stewardship over creation. They subdue the earth; they till and keep the garden. This mandate is carried out in many different ways by all sorts of people. But in the course of world history, business is the primary vehicle through which the earth’s resources have been developed. In extracting and refining the material resources God has embedded within his world, humanity’s commercial instincts have come to the fore. People have developed these resources into products that enhance the quality of life, from the wearing of precious jewels to the provision of electricity. They have made money out of this. So business has assumed a major responsibility for exercising the creation mandate. It has a mixed record on this score. Often it has fulfilled the mandate selfishly and carelessly. But human beings also have the ability to deliver the creation mandate responsibly, creatively and for the good of all.

The Great Commandment is found in Mark 12:28-34. This is Jesus’s response to a lawyer’s question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.”

In citing the first commandment, to love God, Jesus was following common Jewish practice; the Jews of his day regularly recited Deut. 6:4, which was known as the Shema. In giving special prominence to loving your neighbour, Jesus was being more innovative. Here he takes a commandment that was hidden away in the book of Leviticus (Lev.19:18–19), between some very specific injunctions about not taking vengeance and not letting animals breed with a different kind, and sets up love of neighbour up as absolutely central. He saw love of God and love of neighbour as belonging together; the latter follows from the former. And in the parable he told in reply to the lawyer’s follow-up question, the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), he made clear that neighbour did not simply mean the fellow-Israelite who lived next door. It included the person you were inclined to think of as your enemy. This has important implications for business. Love of neighbour extends to all the different stakeholder relationships: employee, customer, supplier, investor, local community, even competitor. Indeed, precisely because a company has contact with such a wide range of people, it provides enormous opportunity for loving your neighbour.

The Great Commission consists of Jesus’s final words to his disciples. “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matt. 28:18-20)

Christians down the ages have seen this as a command not just for Jesus’ original disciples but for all his subsequent followers. Note how Jesus does not say “Go and make converts of all nations”, even though conversion is an important stage in the process. He tells his disciples to make disciples – in other words, faithful and intimate followers. The disciples are both to baptise and teach others to obey everything that Jesus had commanded them. In short, quality of Christian life
matters. Sadly, over the centuries, all too many converts who are Christians in name have let Jesus down by what they have done. Christians who work in business have a responsibility to be obedient followers, just like Christians in every other walk of life. Entrepreneurs have a special responsibility because they set an example.

FOUR KINGDOM IMPERATIVES

One of the questions we asked the 50 entrepreneurs was: ‘Do you see your work in business as contributing to the advance of God’s kingdom?’ The response was a resounding yes. Our entrepreneurs felt that they were contributing to the advance of God’s kingdom. However, answers to the follow-up question, ‘If so, how?’, varied considerably.

First, there are entrepreneurs who believe they are contributing to God’s kingdom by providing an excellent product or service. They are making the world a better place. They are enhancing the quality of people’s lives, in line with God’s purpose for his world. They are fulfilling the creation mandate by being good stewards.

This is the philosophy of David Ball, founder and part owner of the David Ball Group, which makes industrial sands, cements and concrete. Situated near Cambridge, the company has always been at the forefront of technological improvements.

Cement plays a vital role in construction as a substance that binds other materials together, notably in the making of concrete. However, it has many negative impacts on the environment, producing emissions of airborne pollution in the form of dust, gases, noise and vibration. About 6% of global man-made CO2 emissions come from cement production. But David Ball has now developed a new concrete designed with zero cement. Appropriately called Cemfree, it meets the demands of sustainable structural concrete, which are that it should drastically reduce concrete’s CO2 legacy, provide greater durability, require less steel reinforcement and demand less water.

David has always sought to apply his Christian faith to his work. In developing excellent products, he believes that his business contributes to the building of God’s kingdom. He is driven by three key concerns. David says “The first is a passion for quality, making sure the product is right first time, every time. The second is training and education of our staff, along with the training of our customers into the way things work properly. The third is service, service above self. You put the interest of your customer and your client first”. He believes that commitment to these high standards enhances the quality of life and brings glory to God.

A second group of entrepreneurs saw advancement of the Kingdom in terms of embodying Christian values. The emphasis here is less on the content of what is produced than the way the company is run, and how it ‘feels’ to work there. Many of these entrepreneurs had articulated these values in a corporate mission statement.

Lawsons is the largest independent timber, building materials and fencing merchant in the South East. Simon Lawson is the chairman; he inherited the firm from his father and grandfather. He has modernised the branches and developed a speciality in the loft conversion market.

Lawsons’ strapline is ‘Family values – professional service’, and its mission statement is ‘to make work as interesting and satisfying as possible’. This indicates a strong focus on employee welfare, an embodiment of the Great Commandment. The benefits they offer exceed most in their industry sector:

Simon expresses his role in terms of servant leadership. He connects very much with the story of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and epitomises this in the ‘values lunches’ that he hosts for his staff on a regular basis. These are not given on company premises, but at Simon’s own home; the catering is not outsourced, but Simon himself cooks and serves the food. He invites different employees each time and asks them not only what they would like to eat, but what they’d like to talk about. “I have no agenda, it’s their agenda”. They talk about football, life experiences, how the business can improve the common good, what makes the employees feel valued, and what it feels like working on the front line. In the process Simon makes a conscious effort to be vulnerable. He talks about life challenges he has faced himself, including his experience of divorce and what it’s like being a single father. Putting himself on the spot enables Simon and his employees to build relationships of mutual trust.

The third group of entrepreneurs interpreted the kingdom primarily in terms of speaking about their faith to people in the workplace. Few, if any, saw themselves as direct evangelists; all were aware of the need to be sensitive about time and place. They know too that their words must have credibility, supported by the type of people they are and the things they do. But these entrepreneurs were definitely on the lookout for opportunities to talk about Jesus. Some do so very effectively.

A striking example is Mark Mitchell, Managing Director of the Mitchel Group car dealership. Its five-acre complex at Cheshire Oaks is the home of Lexus Chester,
Mitchell Mazda and Mitchell Skoda. The Group has a turnover approaching £50m and a dedicated staff of 100 people. Mark has taken a stand on Sunday trading. In the entrance to their complex a sign says the opening times are Monday to Saturday, followed by “Sunday. At home with the family”. This stand led to a parting of the ways with a Japanese car company in 2004.

Mark is a born salesman; nor is he slow about sharing his Christian faith. Each Christmas the Mitchell Group celebrates a carol service with about 1200 of their customers in Chester Cathedral. Mark says “customers are invited to sing carols and hear the Gospel presented gently and sensitively”. Groups from across the region visit for a ‘Men and Motors’ evening. After driving a range of flagship models and a ‘behind the scenes’ tour of the premises, a Chinese banquet and drinks are served in the boardroom. The scene turns into an open forum and Mark has “the opportunity to reflect on some of life’s challenges and the joys of being a Christian. I’m constantly amazed at how these ‘no-holds-barred’ times prompt immense openness from so many of these guys, who would struggle to raise issues in other settings”. This is effective Christian witness, a fulfilment of the Great Commission.

The fourth group saw their contribution to the building of God’s kingdom mainly in terms of giving to charitable and Christian causes. Running a successful business often leads to the accumulation of significant personal wealth. This gives entrepreneurs the opportunity to be generous. It recalls the heritage of distinguished nineteenth-century Christian entrepreneurs who were notable philanthropists. It contains elements of the Creation Mandate (stewardship), the Great Commandment (love of neighbour) and the Great Commission (making disciples – through some of the causes supported).

LingLing Parnin is co-founder and Managing Director of Regalstar Catering Ltd. She runs no less than five restaurant outlets in Cambridge, all within the busy area near the railway station. The biggest one is La Maison du Steak. She works alongside her husband Franck, who gives his name to another of the restaurants, Le Gros Franck. She is Taiwanese and he is French, which amounts to a powerful culinary combination! She is a keen member of St Paul’s Church; all her food outlets are contained within the parish. LingLing loves her work – she is always delighted to see customers enjoying their food, especially as part of a family or social celebration. But she is especially enthusiastic about the charity that she wholeheartedly supports, The Saints Project Trust.

The trust supports churches, orphanages, schools and relief work in Africa and India, with a strong emphasis on prayer and spiritual support. It spends money on very practical projects like bicycles for African clergy serving rural parishes, rebuilding of a church burnt by militants, and equipping schools with new classrooms or toilets. LingLing puts a lot of her own money, time and energy into raising finances for the trust, often providing the food at fund-raising events. She has visited several Saints Project Trust projects. She has even had a school in south-west Kenya delightfully named after her: the LingLing Beautiful International Guild Academy. Support for the Trust is the main way she sees herself advancing the kingdom of God.

We believe that the kingdom of God is being advanced in each of these four ways: making the world a better place, embodying Christian values, witnessing by word, and charitable giving. All can be significant ways of bringing God’s world more directly under his rule, of being a power for good and reversing the advance of evil. We applaud what Christian entrepreneurs are doing in each area. What we would like to see is more entrepreneurs having a broad view of God’s kingdom rather than a narrow one. So we urge more of them to embrace all these different categories in a holistic understanding rather than limit themselves to only one. Nevertheless, we were impressed that all of them, in their different ways, related their work to the kingdom. They had identified something they believed was God’s will in their lives and were going for it.

A STRATEGIC ROLE FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Entrepreneurs are influential men and women. The nature of their role is that they touch many people’s lives. They are often outgoing, confident people who are good at talking to others and making things happen. In view of this, it is surprising that entrepreneurs don’t feature more in the church’s strategy for mission.

In A Voice to be Heard we call on church leaders to do more to affirm and encourage entrepreneurs in their congregations. But we wish to go a stage further. We suggest they seek ways to include entrepreneurs in their thinking about mission and planning of mission initiatives. The church needs people who are prepared to think ‘outside the box’, to be courageous and innovative. Entrepreneurs have a proven record in this respect.

In particular, we urge church leaders who are advancing new thinking in mission – as in the fresh expressions or pioneer ministry movements – to take entrepreneurs
on board in their thinking. Sadly, most mainstream theologies of mission accord little place for business. The mission theologian who comes closest, perhaps, is Christopher Wright, in his Biblical Theology for Life: The Mission of God’s People. This includes a helpful chapter on ‘People who Live and Work in the Public Square’, where he says to Christians in the everyday working world: “Your daily work matters because it matters to God. It has its own intrinsic value and worth. If it contributes in any way to the needs of society, the service of others, the stewardship of the earth’s resources, then it has some place in God’s plans for this creation and in the new creation. And if you do it conscientiously as a disciple of Jesus, bearing witness to him, being always ready to give an answer to those who enquire about your faith, and being willing to suffer for Christ if called to – then he will enable your life to bear fruit in ways you may never be aware of. You are engaged in the mission of God’s people.”

We fully agree. But we also feel that the role of Christian businesspeople in general and entrepreneurs in particular deserves special mention. So Kina and I end the book by encouraging Christian entrepreneurs not to be marginalised. If you are an entrepreneur and feel you have an important contribution or insight to make to your church’s thinking and practice about mission, do not be inhibited – keep speaking out.

Richard Higginson is Director of Studies, Lecturer in Christian Ethics and Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. He is an international speaker and writer on business ethics and the theology of work. His previous books include Questions of Business Life and Faith, Hope & the Global Economy. His latest book, co-authored with Kina Robertshaw, is A Voice to be Heard: The stories, faith and challenges of Christian entrepreneurs. It will be published by IVP in September.

To contact the editors please email anvil@churchmissionsociety.org

Photography by Jonny Baker
www.flickr.com/photos/jonnybaker