

Imagine! Business as Mission!

Imagine you are in a forgotten country where extended family households scattered across the mountainous terrain have virtually no men-folk present, because they are all across the border in a much larger country with a huge economy, looking for work. While there, they become addicted to alcohol, frequent houses of prostitution, burn up their hard-earned cash instead of sending it home, and catch HIV/AIDS as a bonus. What would you do to tackle the problem? How about starting an adventure tourism company that might provide employment to 50 or more households and give dignified labour to repatriated husbands, fathers, uncles, sons and elder brothers?

Imagine the possibilities for good from establishing an agri-business in one of the neediest countries in the world that would provide training and enhanced income to 1000 farmers, and add to the food security for five to ten times that number – all without handouts, charity or other dependency creating approaches. Add to that the exciting potential for steady, and far-reaching response to the message of the gospel from the mouths of local Christians involved in the business – and how much would YOU give to be a part of it?

Imagine a language institute in a neglected nation, where the ability to speak English is “the ticket” to future job opportunities, where commonly held perceptions of foreigners are tinged by a deep (and sometimes justifiably earned) strain of xenophobia, and where there is no officially recognised church. Who wouldn’t be fired up by the possibility of participating in a business like this, with the opportunity day after day, week after week, and year after year, to work with locals and let them find you as trustworthy, friendly, loving people who pay their bills, keep their appointments and honour their word?

These are just some of the amazing possibilities illustrating a major, global movement of God’s Spirit referred to as “Business as Mission” (BAM). In some circles, the term “business for transformation” is used. In our view, these are two dialects of essentially the same language.

There are a number of good working definitions of BAM. It is real, commercial enterprise that is intentionally (not accidentally) missional and transformational. It is authentic commerce that demonstrates, proclaims, and extends the Kingdom of God. It is business with a God-honouring quadruple bottom line (QBL) impact – economic, environmental, social and spiritual. While not exclusively restricted to a particular geography or economic condition, in its most-often practised form BAM seeks to prioritise doing missional business in regions where the least-reached and most-marginalised are to be found. BAM practitioners are, for the most part, cross-cultural business men and women, whether nationals or expatriates, sent by the Body of Christ, to reach those with otherwise limited access to the gospel.

BAM companies are almost as varied as the entrepreneurs and professionals who create and work in them. Nevertheless, there are good business practices which are widely recognised as being essential in order to achieve the desired Christ-honouring outcomes. These best practices include visionary and executable answers to the following question:

- Does the business model Christ-like servant leadership in the marketplace?
- Does the business strive to be profitable and sustainable in the long term?
- Does the business have a Kingdom motivation, purpose and plan that is shared and embraced by the senior management and owners?

- Does the business aim for Biblical wholistic transformation of individuals and communities?

The church has often been suspicious of profit-making business. Christians have reacted against the colonialism of the past which often was combined with mission activity assisted by commerce. More recently they have watched in dismay at the exploitation of the poor by unethical multinational corporations, concerned at the apparent failure of globalization to equitably deliver on its promises.

Unfortunately, this attitude overlooks the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of ethically-run businesses led by godly women and men, to the great benefit of millions of people. Business can and should be ethical, and, indeed demonstrate the truth of Christianity in genuine love of God and neighbour.

Businesses are an essential and indispensable part of society. They will continue to be, whether Christians participate in them or not. Why shouldn't they be part of Christian missional activity? The redemptive power of the gospel influencing every part of society, including the business environment, like salt and light, is intrinsic to the very nature of our ministry as Christians. Business does not only serve the goals of ministry – it is ministry!

We believe that facilitating Christians in business is part of God's plan for world mission today, and we are engaged in strategic initiatives to enable us to respond to this challenge. Among the many reasons for this conviction are the following:

- providing capital to neglected markets, and creating meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities is a demonstration of human kindness, grounded in the just and creative character of God; the prophetic admonition to love justice, do kindness, and walk humbly with our God is a foundational plank for our practice of business as mission;
- modeling successful business grounded in God's truth is a tangible witness to the transforming character of the gospel; we live in a cynical age in which the "power of God unto salvation", the gospel, must be demonstrated for its proclamation to be believed;
- increasingly the "ecclesia", the people of God, are to be found on the shop floor, in factories, and in other work settings, especially in countries where suspicion and hostility to the gospel is strong, and the building of official places for Christian worship has no government sanction or protection;
- the most natural and credible opportunities to evangelise – "gossip the gospel" – and to disciple men and women, are among employees, suppliers and customers of businesses led and participated in by committed Christians.

In summary, we are committed to business as mission in a dignified, credible, and sensitive manner, so that the church of Christ might be established and strengthened for His glory.

The author of this article has been involved in a professional, business and global mission capacity on six continents for over 40 years. The true scenarios cited have been made deliberately generic for security purposes. It is our desire to see greater understanding of BAM (sometimes called 'Business for Transformation') and its important role in global missions.