

## Church-based Entrepreneurship

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Not just in the USA but around most of the world people are struggling to find jobs. Some of this unemployment challenge is due to technology replacing human labor with machines. Some of it is due to social and political breakdowns such as warfare, violence, and corruption. Some of it is due to famine, disease, and natural disasters. Some of it is due to ignorance --- not knowing how to work. And some is due to the lack of a good work ethic --- motivation, honesty, diligence, responsibility, and so on.

The absence of jobs and work is a huge factor in poverty of course. It is a survival issue. People need work to be able to eat and find shelter and basic necessities. But unemployment or joblessness also brings with it a loss of human dignity and a squandering of gifts and abilities God grants to each of us. Every man, woman, and child on earth was made in the image and likeness of our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer God and is dehumanized if not able to do some creative, sustaining, redemptive work of some type. We need jobs to be able to survive and provide for our families. We also need jobs to be able to create goods and services that meet the needs of the people and glorify our Lord. All of us need jobs simply to express who we are as men and women made in the image of God the Creator and Redeemer.

Neither government programs nor trickle-down business growth will ever be able to create enough quality jobs for our communities. Rather than just looking to existing businesses or to government agencies to create jobs, let's ask "what can the church do?" Rather than blaming Washington or Wall Street let's rise up with God's help and do something in the church! Within our churches are simultaneously many who need and want to find meaningful work --- and others with skills, experiences, networks, resources to help their brothers and sisters find or create new business and work opportunities.

### Training Seminarians to Coach Entrepreneurs

With the generous assistance and vision of the Kern Family Foundation, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's Boston campus (CUME --- "Center for Urban Ministerial Education") has recently completed the second year of a program to train current and future church leaders in "church-based entrepreneurship." What follows is a description of that program and its results to date. We see this as a great model for other theological seminaries and Christian educational institutions. But we also see our ultimate goal as mobilizing local, parish churches to undertake similar initiatives and make them a regular, long-term, ongoing, vital part of their ministry. Just as churches can help provide some primary and preventative health care to their congregations and communities, just as they can provide some basic educational and skills training, just as they can step forward with sports and music and arts programs in their communities, churches can bear witness to the Gospel by efforts to create jobs and businesses.

Our course "Entrepreneurship in Church and Community" was co-led by David Gill and Larry Ward the past two years. Gill has been a serial entrepreneur for decades, mostly in the educational world. He is a professor of workplace theology and business ethics but has long experience working as an MBA ethics teacher and small- and medium-size business consultant. Ward is long time pastor of Abundant Life Church

in Cambridge but has years of experience as a credentialed entrepreneurship trainer, especially working with urban young people. These two lead instructors did most of the teaching and coaching but occasionally brought in guest expert presenters to talk about financial and accounting systems, using technology and media, or other topics. They also brought in both recent and veteran entrepreneurs to share their experiences and counsel. The course used three basic reading resources: (1) the inspiring best-seller, *The \$100 Start-Up* by Chris Guillebeau (2012), (2) the big manual *Start Your Own Business* (Entrepreneur Press, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2010), and (3) the Bible.

We had roughly a dozen students enrolled in each of our semester-length courses that met for one three-hour session each week for twelve weeks. We think that our Saturday morning version worked a little better than our Tuesday evening one. Our officially enrolled students were primarily seminary-degree seeking students but we also had some alumni and special non-degree students who were part of our course. Since few seminary graduates were ever able to take a course like this during their own seminary days, we believe that bringing veteran church leaders and alumni back for courses like this is every bit as important as enrolling current students. The Kern Family Foundation provided tuition grants that covered at least half the normal cost of a course like this.

### **Characteristics of High Potential Entrepreneurs**

At our first class meeting we met our students, reviewed the jobs and employment challenge and the biblical basis for our response. Then we reviewed the characteristics of a promising entrepreneur. This is what each of our students should look for in their prospective entrepreneur, someone in their church or community who wanted to start a business. Someone who is most likely to succeed as an entrepreneur, starting a new business or organization will have many of the following character traits:

1. Creative. Lots of ideas. Thinking “outside the box.” Innovative. Inventing a “third way” when others seem stuck on two undesirable alternatives.
2. Determined. Dedicated, persistent. A real “pit bull” who won’t give up even when the going gets tough. Even when you are alone and it’s all on you, you keep plugging away.
3. Passionate. Invested. Totally “into” the project with blood, sweat, and tears. This is your baby, your reputation at stake. You willingly accept responsibility.
4. Risk-taker. This is new. You are out there on a limb. No guarantees. Not reckless or foolish but still reaching out and taking the right risks.
5. Prayerful. You need and want God along to guide and help at every moment, every step of the journey. You pray daily. You ask your pastor and church and friends to pray for you.
6. Integrity. Totally honest, transparent, above board. No games, no patience with unethical, wrong, cheating, dishonest people and practices.
7. Teachable. Always eager to learn something new every day from every possible source: people, reading, competitors. You are a life-long learner. You know you don’t know everything.
8. Team-builder. You can’t do it all by yourself. You gather an informal “posse” or “kitchen cabinet” around you. You partner with or hire quality people with complementary gifts.
9. Detail-fanatic. You can’t tolerate sloppiness or careless mistakes or shoddy financial records or less than excellent products and services.
10. Communicative. You engage people with a smile and tell them the honest good news about your business, products, customers, and plans. You own up to the truth. You are respectful.

We gave our students a simple application form to use with their “wannabe” entrepreneurs to make sure they understood the nature of the challenge and were seriously committed to the project. We reviewed

these applications and approved the entrepreneurs: one entrepreneur for each enrolled student who would serve as mentor and coach for the entrepreneur.

### **Basic Training for Entrepreneurs**

By the second or third week of the course we urged our entrepreneurs to come to class alongside their mentors. Having both the mentor and the entrepreneur side-by-side in class really facilitated communication. Every week we spent time in some Bible study and prayer about different aspects of faith at work. We prayed together at the beginning and end of each class. Honestly, our class meetings were much more than business training --- they were often full of passion and energy and even worship.

The Kern Family Foundation gave a small grant to help each start-up get off the ground. We helped each of our entrepreneurs set up a dedicated business checking account (we did not allow the start-up money to be mingled in with other household money and bills). We only released the grant money when a start-up business plan with a detailed budget was approved by the mentor and the instructors. At the end of the course we required a detailed accounting of the launch phase finances.

For eight weeks we laid the foundations for entrepreneurship in serious biblical study, theology, and ethics. What does the Bible teach about the reality and purpose of work, leadership, money, communication and related topics? And what does Christian ethics teach us about building a healthy workplace culture, resolving difficulties, and doing the right thing in God's eyes? Based on this robust theological foundation we got into the practical "nuts and bolts" of starting a new business.

1. Introduction to Course; Recruiting A High-Potential Entrepreneur
2. Mission, Products, & Services: Figuring Out What Business To Start
3. Business Planning: Sketching Out How to Make It Happen
4. Money & Finance: Funding, Budgeting, & Accounting
5. Marketing & Advertising: Promoting and Selling
6. Computers & Technology: Minimum, Basic Needs to Get Started
7. Human Resources: Hiring, Training, Managing, & Leading People
8. Legal Matters: Permits, Business Structure

At the ninth session we had a great party and celebration as each entrepreneur came in dressed to impress and prepared to announce and describe the new business and, with just a few power point slides, sell us in ten minutes on the new business. At our launch day celebrations we invited friends, pastors, even local news media and others to join us to hear the presentations. Then in weeks ten through twelve we met weekly for news updates, trouble-shooting, and guest entrepreneur presentations. After the three-month course (stage one) was officially completed, we required a (stage two) four-month business plan and we arranged monthly, voluntary breakfast meetings to stay in touch and be available to help each other. After that four month stage two we gave four prizes of \$500 each to the best performing start-ups at that point.

### **What Businesses Got Launched?**

Here are some examples of the businesses our program started and nurtured, with a comment on their status. First of all, from Spring 2013:

Six of our 2013 businesses are moving along in great shape a year after launch. Derek Canton launched "G1G" ("God is Good") a branded/message line of clothing and wearables (mentored by Ron Cousineau of

Liberty Church in Shrewsbury). Derek has won awards and competitions for G1G and is one of our biggest success stories. The Rev. Sharyn Halliday of Bethel AME in Lynn mentored one of our star entrepreneurs, Julie Phillips, whose “Jesigns Graphix” graphic design business is booming and making us all proud. Victor Cubi, mentored by Michael Boyce of Christ the King Church in Dorchester, turned his odd job career into a more organized, formal, profitable “Victor for Hire” landscaping and handyman business. Victor’s start-up grant improved his tool chest, got his truck running, and produced some helpful PR material. Jennifer Dhanjee, mentored by Mayra Anthes of Park Street Church, has done a wonderful job launching and developing her vocal training school “Lift Up Your Voice.” Daryl Best, mentored by Jackie Cooper of Abundant Life Church, founded “Best Media” which is slowly but surely taking shape as producer and vendor of Daryl’s new photo-sharing app. Pamela Cazeau, mentored by Yasmine Campbell of Abundant Life Church, has done wonders with her event planning business “Expressions of You.”

Six other of our 2013 start-ups are very much alive but have developed more slowly: Nerissa Clark and Michael Davis have been working to launch “Caribbean Delight” a Jamaican Restaurant, but have been slowed for a year by zoning and licensing hassles. But they have a great plan and a great mentor in Dr. Marilyn Weekes of Spirit of Power Living Word Ministries. Michelle Lagene is making real headway in developing “Michelle Clothing and Accessories,” a Haitian clothing import business (mentored by Marc LeFevre of Boston Missionary Baptist). Huegens Alexis, mentored by David Daniel Nok of Christ the King Church in Dorchester, developed his carpentry skills into “1sq Inch Custom Storage Solutions,” a custom cabinetry and remodeling business. Veronique Francois, mentored by Francois Augustin of Anointed Baptist Church, turned her cooking talents and gifts into “Anointed Catering Services. Walesk Dube, mentored by Samuel Louis, turned his photography talents into “M.A.D. Productions,” a photography business. Sharyn Halliday also mentored Ms. Izetta Jackson who moved from a minimum wage staff hotel worker to proprietor of her own “Mama Boney by Faith Cleaning Service” where she earns a fairer wage and can control her working hours and get to church regularly.

Two of our 2013 start-ups were grounded by circumstances out of their control. Rick Frazier wanted to launch “Jobs Journey Equipping” as a Christian employment search web site but got into it to the point where the upfront capital costs were out of range so he returned his start-up grant. Sharon Walcott was planning “Walcott Global Logistics” an export business aimed at Barbados where she has significant experience and connections. But the primary business partner with whom she was going to work (an airline) changed direction and made it impossible so she returned her start-up grant. These are two great examples of the challenge of launching a business. The businesses did not get off the ground for reasons beyond our entrepreneurs’ control. But the learning was valuable, the integrity maintained, and the future is bright for both Rick and Sharon.

And finally, two businesses and their entrepreneurs gave gone silent and their status is unknown: a Christian “Geek Squad” concept and a Haitian furniture import business concept. These are the only real disappointments among the 16 projects in 2013 but even here, hope is not lost and we look for some evidence of forward steps.

In 2014, our recently launched businesses include the following:

Jinie Yang, mentored by James Choi, founded Olivewood Design, a graphic design and branding business. Eva Clark, mentored by Peter Jenkins, founded L.A.S.T. (Love All Skin Tones) a cosmetic business with a message about rejecting tanning and bleaching and learning to love the colors God made us in a healthy way. Rhonda Gibson, mentored by Kyle Lincoln, founded “Boulder Standards,” a tee shirt and message clothing business with positive, character uplifting messages inspired by those on the boulders of Gloucester’s Dog Town. David Ro, mentored by Guan Liu, founded a non-profit “Chinese Mission for

Ministers” educational support organization to help Chinese nationals while studying in North American seminaries but also in strategic redeployment in China.

Danny Canton, following in his brother Derek’s footsteps a year earlier, mentored by John Maudlin of Christ the King in Dorchester, founded MIND (“my ideas never die”) an ambitious online platform for “creative” to network and collaborate. This is a huge project that will take some investment capital to fully realize. Thaisa Pena’s Quincy Café has been coached and mentored by Virginia Ngai. It is fully operational but facing all the predictable challenges of long working hours and cash flow. Nyjah Wyche-Alexis founded “Spa Kitchen,” mentored by Eli Yusuf Nyuwa, as a source of non-toxic, healthy, custom-made cosmetics. Christine Paige, mentored by Moji Olopade, founded “Bliss Salon,” a beauty and hair salon. Her business is already booming and she has hired or contracted out to some additional hair dressers.

### **It Is No Secret What God Can Do**

There is no reason why almost any local church couldn’t help its members and neighbors to find or create jobs. Most churches have members who know how to create a resume, present oneself in an interview, develop basic working skills and attitudes, and manage basic finances. This is “Life and Work 101.” Our people often don’t get that training at home or school like maybe we did in earlier generations. It’s an opportunity, church!

And beyond those basics of applying for and carrying out a job, some of our people could be helped to turn their skills and abilities and passions into new businesses. At a minimum our churches could create a fellowship for job seekers for sharing and prayer. Then a step further could involve a group study of the basics of starting a small business, along the lines described about. Our churches could recognize these efforts and pray for them in the services, and patronize them during the week. The church could allocate some money for start-up grants.

The Christian life is not just about saving our souls for the afterlife in heaven, as important as that is. It is about making Jesus Lord of our lives 24/7. It is about salting and lighting our lost and dark world. Taking some steps to help people find work should be part of what followers of Jesus are known for in our world.