

Book Review – Ken Dickson

The Accidental Social Entrepreneur

By Grant Smith

Muddy Pearl, 2019, paperback, xix + 259 pages, £11.95, ISBN 978-1-910012-50-5

Overview

The Accidental Social Entrepreneur provides a very clear account of Grant Smith's ongoing business adventures as the organisation he founded seeks to become the largest builder of quality, low-cost housing in Kenya. Through stories presented in a vivid yet humble way, Grant gives fascinating insights into his life and that of many of his connections.

Grant's narrative presents a very honest, reflective and vulnerable description of the ups and downs of business life, to which many businesspeople – Christian or not – will be able to relate. I certainly did.

The book's 14 chapters cover themes such as history, people, principles and finance. Each chapter comprises an illustrative blend of stories and reflections and concludes with brief but helpful 'points to ponder'. The excellent final chapter explains very powerfully why Grant does what he does and how, through the Holy Spirit, God has empowered him.

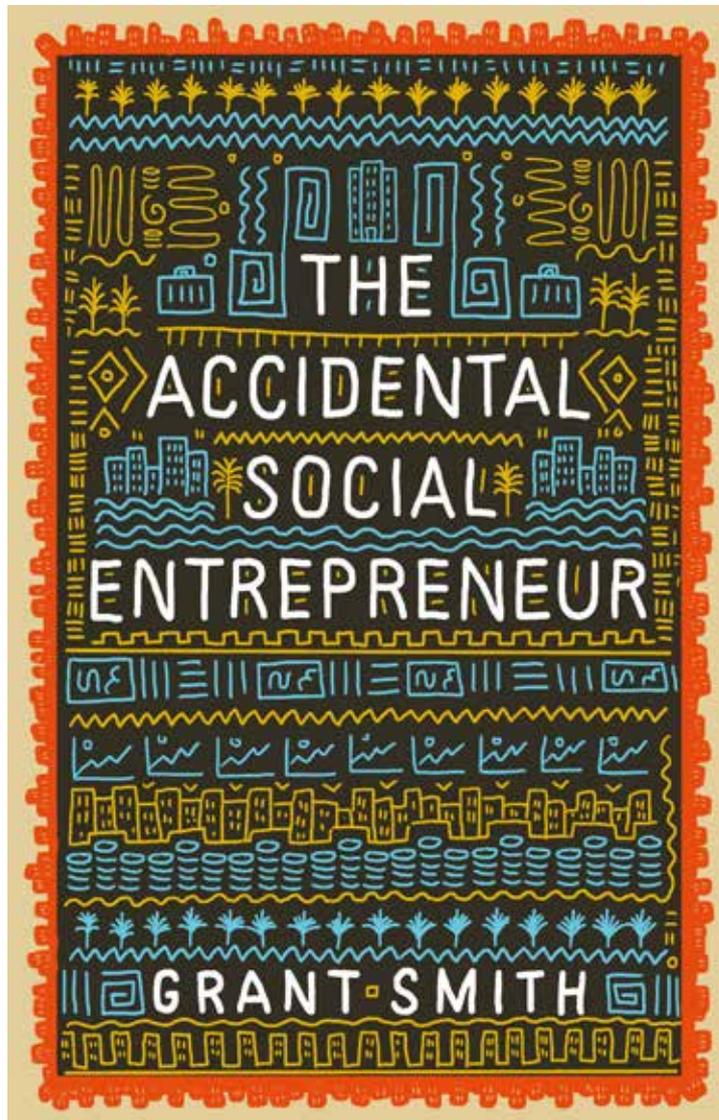
In the telling of his story, the author communicates several useful principles for running business and highlights things to watch out for.

Given my background in (social) enterprises, I related to many of the anecdotes. At times I felt back in the African countries I have been privileged to visit!

Make a difference

The Accidental Social Entrepreneur commences with an overview of the challenges faced by poor people and the problems that these challenges cause. Choosing to make a difference, Grant

amounted to doing some voluntary work for one! This illustrates that those who want to change things get on and do it and are not held back by their lack of experience. Praying and seeking God's guidance is even more important, as the book emphasises.



On p.21 we get an early insight into Grant's worldview: we are all one in Christ; the amount someone is paid does not necessarily reflect their skills and abilities; and being better paid doesn't make that person any better. The practical outworking of this view led Grant to donate several days of his time each week to working for the charity without pay. True entrepreneurs risk their own finances (and more) to help overcome the challenges they see.

Made to trade

The lived experience of business comes alive in Chapter 6. 'I've got an idea' is replete with little vignettes about the realities of working as an entrepreneur and in developing countries. The tales reminded

me so much of situations I have found myself in and people I have worked with. That negotiations can seem to take forever is par for the course¹.

helped to found a charity – Hand in Hand (HiH). His friends asked him to be a Trustee because he “had experience of charities” (p.28) although this simply

me so much of situations I have found myself in and people I have worked with. That negotiations can seem to take forever is par for the course¹.

Grant attests to the importance of having encouragers around you to keep your feet on the ground and to discern which ideas are worth pursuing – no matter how outlandish they may seem. Realism is important and both support and lack of recrimination are needed even more when things don't work out. "We both believed it was an excellent piece of kit, but believing and selling are two totally different perspectives" (p.110). How many entrepreneurs can relate to this?

Accidental?

Social entrepreneurs run businesses that do good. Grant relates how he has done this, but why is his title role 'accidental'?

Originally focused just on the HiH charity, Grant then realised that charitable support was a recurring need. Enabling the beneficiaries to become truly independent required more than charity; it required business. "The need for charity will be reduced because, instead of poorly-paid construction workers and farm workers coming to the charity for support for their children's school fees, they will pay those fees themselves because they are earning sufficient money to afford them" (p.7). Grant reasoned that he could use his skills to facilitate projects that would provide employment opportunities, so he 'accidentally' moved to set up the business side of HiH.

In faith

Of course, God had long ago ordained Grant's work, but God's plans can often only be understood retrospectively. And even if some task doesn't work out as we had hoped, it can still be part of

God's bigger plan. Ben, an experienced businessman, felt God's call to work in Kenya. He and his wife moved there but, after several years following up opportunities without much success, they returned to the UK. Ben's story (pp.119-23) illustrates how stepping out for God can be costly – and yet sometimes there may be nothing obvious to show for it.

There is a need to tell the reality of adventuring with God and Grant has led by example. After all, "Learning to trust [God], whatever the outcome, is what true faith is all about" (p.124).

The Accidental Social Entrepreneur includes many honest reflections. One enterprise failed for several extraneous reasons. As Grant notes: "... it turns my stomach because of the hard work and effort which concluded with pouring that £100k down the drain" (p.209). Those of us who have been on similar adventures with God will fully understand Grant's sentiments. Such experiences build faith, trust and humility, although it also led Grant to question if God really had guided him to do some of the things he had done in response to prayerfully seeking help.

His emphatic conclusion? God can be trusted in all situations²: "Christian faith is a journey and, hopefully, along that journey we learn. If you stick your head above the parapet, you are vulnerable. But don't ever conclude that God can't be trusted. God can always be trusted. The challenge is understanding what he is doing with us" (p.210).

And when things do not go as we would hope, it might simply be we are in the wrong place or at the wrong time!

Finance

Money and integrity are referred to throughout the book. Isaac, a lawyer, offered to buy a house within 30 minutes of meeting Grant. When his speedy decision was queried, Isaac pointed out that he was taking Grant at his word based on the connections he had mentioned (see pp.220-21). Relationships, reputation and integrity are important, so we should aim high. Sadly, not everyone is trustworthy, and another tale explains how slanderous people almost succeeded in destroying Grant's reputation. It's sad, but not surprising, what happens to people when money is involved!^{3,4}

Conclusion

The Accidental Social Entrepreneur conveys the excitement that Grant finds in doing business deals for a godly purpose that will benefit the most needy. A powerful story is recounted about a quality 10-storey office built on land CMS Africa owned. By renting out part of the building, CMS aims to generate \$1m each year. This will triple their previous income from donations and so triple their mission impact. (See pp. 225-30.) Using business to benefit the community will be replicated many times by Christian entrepreneurs who – having read this book – will be further encouraged to carry on with the task God has entrusted to them. And, when they have done that, to wait for the bigger task that He will give them⁵.

Whether read as a biography, testimony or business book, *The Accidental Social Entrepreneur* provides much to think and pray about. I highly recommend it. 

1. See examples in Courtney Rountree Mills '10 Lessons from over 1,000 Kingdom Entrepreneurs in Africa and beyond', FiBQ, 20:1., pp 27- 34 (available at https://fibq.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FiBQ20.1_10_Lessons.pdf).
2. Cf Habakkuk 3: 17-19
3. As 1 Timothy 6:10 makes clear, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."
4. "The enemy will test us and tempt us wherever we are weak, wherever he perceives a weakness, and the area that is most likely to get the entrepreneur is money management." Comment by Simon Berry quoted in Richard Higginson and Kina Robertshaw, *A Voice To Be Heard: Christian entrepreneurs living out their faith*, IVP, 2017, p 143.
5. Cf the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25: 14-30



Ken Dickson founded *Axiom-e Limited* (www.axiom-e.co.uk) through which he works as 'The Financial Doctor'. Via international talks and courses, which emphasise Bible-based principles for business, Ken equips the next generation of entrepreneurs in the UK and Africa to benefit their communities. Contact Ken via Twitter (https://twitter.com/Axiom_e) or email pobs@axiom-e.co.uk.