

Lesson Learned from Social Enterprises that Put the First Thing First

By Eva Lam

Earning big bucks and serving the Kingdom's interests simultaneously often do not seem to go together; the trend of a growing entity called social enterprise, however, might be one of the solutions. Neither a "non-profit" nor a "for-profit", social enterprise is frequently known as "for-purpose" that straddles two worlds: business and community transformation. Starting a social enterprise is not easy to begin with, yet more than a few have undertaken this venture and determined to get the job well-done despite the foreseeable challenges. By putting the first thing first, the process of establishing, operating, and maintaining a social enterprise become a light burden and a beautiful manifestation of God's gracious and powerful navigation down the line.

Challenge Within a Challenge, yet a Prerequisite for Experiencing the Deepest Joy

Not only do Christian social entrepreneurs have to compete, attract customers in innovative ways, face similar risks and challenges that traditional businesses face, they must also satisfy their additional bottom line—creating social value and staying faithful and joyful in hardship. Agreed by two well-known Christian writers, John Piper and C.S. Lewis, believers' lives are not supposed to be caught up by life's vicissitudes and adversities, but they are commanded to rejoice in challenges, knowing these are opportunities in which God will teach them how to pursue and experience, in greater depth, the immeasurable joy He offers. As 2 Corinthians 4:17 illustrates, all sufferings are "an opportunity for great joy" because they are "light and momentary". Jong Lee, the founder of Bonham Strand, a brand of quality bespoke menswear and a productive social enterprise aimed at restoring the legacy of Hong Kong's fine art of tailoring and suit-making, pointed out that problems such as fiscal and operational difficulties are, in fact, good problems to have since one is led to rely on God entirely. Similarly, Martin Radford, the current executive director of Taste of Grace, a mission-oriented, six-month catering training course to empower South Asian ethnic minority community, agreed that despite the unstable finances and insufficient human resources compared to his previous well-paid and stable job, there is nothing more joyful and rewarding compared to putting God's heart first, embarking on this adventurous journey with the Lord while witnessing God's provision and life transformation.

Different "How", Same "Why"

With that being said, different people were interviewed regarding how to keep the first thing first. Through different paths, they have pressed on to accomplish the same goal, which is

the Great Commission, the Lord's heart, and their own distinct destiny. Beth Uy, Partner and Director of Operations Sowers Exchange (a social enterprise that provides solutions to companies and individuals who want to establish or expand their Social Impact Initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region) said that they "will not only set apart time to pray and seek God's guidance but also a day to fast every quarter in order to get direction from God".

In academia, Jacqueline Q. Ronan, Board member of the Island Christian Academy (ICA), emphasized that by basing the Board's vision statement on 1 Thessalonians 5:21—"but test them [prophecies] all; hold on to what is good," it helps the whole institution keep the first thing first. Beginning every board meeting with prayerful devotion and instilling Biblical values into every part of the curriculum serve as a good reminder that no matter how different opinions between board members may be, it should not become any kind of roadblock that would hinder the relationship amongst them. Unity between brothers and sisters of Christ is essential in the Kingdom of God.

These people are responding to God's calling and the intricate complexities of our social ills, despite the barriers. Beyond embracing the sustainability agenda, they are committed to making business profitable and, at the same time, redefining society's value by not losing sight of the mission that first inspired them. People's recognition towards their courage and accomplishment notwithstanding, God's sovereignty over every detail of their enterprise is magnified in the midst of different tests and rough patches, through which the wise are humbled, the weak are made strong, and the tears are evolved into joy. Those who believe in Him and do His will do not only come out with a stronger faith, but also have a deeper understanding that the hands that made this universe are the same hands that sustain them. Their job is simply to rest in His presence, realizing that every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the glory of Christ.