

GOD'S BUSINESS?

STEPHEN NEWTON, INTERVIEWED BY CHRIS SUNDERLAND



Stephen Newton, Director of Clifton Joinery

AS I DRIVE ACROSS THE SOMERSET LEVELS TO WORK, I BEGIN TO PRAY. THE SCENERY IS INSPIRING, BUT IT IS NOT LONG BEFORE THE DAY AHEAD BEGINS TO LOOM LARGE. The VAT bill must be paid today and there is not the money to do it. We have already delayed a week by offering to pay online. Now the day has come and the money we are owed has not arrived. We will have to pay late and take a surcharge. Cash flow is an endless struggle as deadline after deadline hits and we have to deal with wages, retentions, deductions, VAT, PAYE, contractors discounts, overheads, pension schemes and construction industry schemes.

I arrive at work and have a word with my production manager, Richard. He is worried about a problem last Friday. Our fitter left the site early and the job had been done wrong. The client is chairman of a big organisation and future work could be threatened. Our fitter's wife then phones in to ask if he has come to work. Problems at home, I wonder? I get round the staff myself this morning. I do that as often as possible. Just a chat, an "Alright?" or an "OK?". I had my fingers burnt with staff in the early days, trying to be a bit too kind I guess and not aware enough of the demands of running a commercial business. I even had one supposedly "Christian" keeping my books, who ended up embezzling serious amounts of money and took a trip to South Africa on the proceeds! Anyway this fitter is going to be alright. He is a good worker going through a hard time.

Then I get out to see a customer. This is the part I really enjoy, particularly when the customer is satisfied. With seventeen staff now we can take on some really big projects. Of course, perfect satisfaction all round is an ideal in our line of work. With technical, financial and time critical constraints on every job it can be really hard to get the balance right, but I feel privileged to have been awarded the contract to make forty oak doors for the House of Commons and to have been commissioned to carry out the window restoration at Stowe School. Stowe is a sister building to Buckingham Palace and on the "World's Monuments Fund" list. Nevertheless, it is not always plain sailing, as they say. At the end of last year we had a sizeable project in line. We were to supply and fit out a public building. We had done a lot of preparatory work, the technical drawings had been finished. We were ready to go into production, when the main contractor suddenly withdrew from the contract. It seems likely that something untoward has gone on but there is little that one can do. For us this has had serious consequences. We had effectively lost two weeks production. I went round the staff telling them about

the situation and inviting them to take holiday during the period when we would have no work. I brought other work forward as much as I could, and at this moment we are getting through, just. The staff are good like that. There is a strong sense of team work and loyalty. Our foreman has been with us ever since he left school and several other staff have remained loyal even when approached by other companies. On Monday mornings we all meet to discuss the weeks work needs and catch up on anything that anyone wishes to discuss. I also say a short prayer, which they accept.

When evening comes round the staff all leave by about five, but I am often still there. I finally leave at about 6.30pm, arriving in my Somerset home at 7.30 or 8pm. Home is a busy place and I am met by my wife Debbie and our four children aged between six and eleven. It is always nice to back with my family. Over the years life has been equally as busy at home. We have recently completed an extension to our two bedroom cottage. I have been grateful to have had help from my brother in law and a few other friends and family. Over a period of three years we have managed to build a lounge for family and home-group gatherings and more room for ourselves. The children have all sorts of amusements like a zip wire and trampoline, electric guitar and drum kit. They also have an extensive menagerie consisting of five rabbits, five guinea pigs, twelve ducks, three hens, two cats and a big Newfoundland dog. So there is always plenty going on.

I used to rush out to PCC meetings after I arrived home and was even churchwarden for a time. That would sometimes mean no supper and not seeing the children before they went to bed. In the end it did not feel to be a good use of time. We seemed to spend a lot of time talking about what seemed quite trivial things like issuing guidelines about plastic flowers on gravestones! Other aspects of life were more important. I have always sought to be a loyal member of church, but there have been moments when I have been put in a very difficult position. I remember once when the company suffered from a "professional non-payer" who was an eminent member of a wealthy congregation. I soon realised that this person made a habit of not paying bills and there were several others who had suffered from his tactics. I brought this up with the church leaders, as I believe the Bible tells us to do. Sadly, although they were aware of the problem, they were unable to deal with this despite the clergy saying that they themselves were saddened to see the same person remaining in the pew but repeating the same behaviour.

Looking back on it I realise that I never consciously set out to run a company at all. It just sort of happened. I was working in a previous workshop with another joiner. He was short of work and I had too much, so I gave him some of mine. That was how it all began. Even this first attempt at employing someone else was a considerable learning experience, particularly when I realised he was doing my work on Saturdays while stealing my customers with tempting offers to fund his own work on the other days and using my materials. He was also messing up the workshop. I realised that I had to stop employing him and ask him to vacate the workshop along with a 7.5 ton lorry full of his bits and pieces. In the end I had to hire a lorry and deliver his things to his house for him. To add to the awkwardness he was very big. By good fortune, or God's grace, a friend called Paulec happened to be visiting us from Cambodia. He had been part of the underground church there during Pol Pot's reign of terror. Well, Paulec just turned up one day on his way to Paris, heard about my plight and came with me in the lorry. So there we were, with the lorry filled with the accumulated mess from the workshop and heading for a confrontation with its owner. Paulec was praying all the way. We arrived. It was not easy, but let's just say that we managed to leave without any bruises and I am still in touch with the guy now. In fact you could say it was remarkable how well it went.

Despite these and many other escapades that have kept the adrenalin flowing, the company has remained in existence for 21 years. I am pleased to have had the experience of these 21 years and all that God has been teaching and is still teaching me. There have been many miracles on the way, but I can see that what has been achieved has been through God's grace and I am grateful to God for seeing me through.

My brother advised me last year before leaving for Equatorial Guinea with Wycliffe Bible translators that we and I should pay attention to the "margins" of life. I have found that running a business, bring up a family, house renovation, trying to help in the community and being involved in a church has meant that there has not been much room for a margin. It is now early evening and after picking up my son from football training I hope to be home before 9pm. I find myself now positively looking to make some space but also pleased that we finally have a lounge and hope to have an Alpha course starting in a few weeks. ■