

My Faith and Business Story

From a deprived background and with no formal education, Jim Griffiths' prowess with numbers led him into the Guinness Book of Records and a career as Finance Director and then became Managing Director in a number of companies. Coming to faith in his teens, he faced the challenges of being a Christian in a construction industry beset with ethical problems.

In 2024, I began writing my autobiography, titled “Before I forget” and subtitled “Recollections from My Unexpected Life”. Some of the contents of this article have been extracted from the draft of my book.

I grew up in a tough working-class environment and my family situation would today be called dysfunctional and deprived – back then we were seen as a “rough” and problem family. I failed the 11+ examination, despite being a good scholar at primary school; I don’t have any memories of sitting the exam.

During my childhood, I was a largely unsupervised street kid, often getting into mischief and later petty crime. At age 14, along with two other lads, I was convicted of burglary and sentenced to three years’ probation. I left school in late July 1966,

without taking O levels, just a week after my 15th birthday and a week before England’s triumph in the World Cup Final. Just a month later I started my first job as a filing clerk for a retail farming cooperative based in Cambridge.

After four enjoyable years, I moved into accountancy, but without qualifications (or discipline), I struggled to make the progress that my natural skills should have ensured; I went through six jobs in as many years. While working for a provincial newspaper in 1975, a journalist on the paper heard about my prowess with numbers and wrote an article about my abilities. BBC television then picked up the story and sent a reporter and camera crew to Cambridge, and the Guinness Book of Records expressed interest in me.

The fact was that I had always been interested in numbers and could add, calculate and manipulate numbers at high speed in my head. Although my abilities had been recognised to some degree by teachers and peers, I had never really been encouraged, and my gifts had not been developed or applied in positive ways. All this media publicity, together with the huge boost in self-confidence it gave, helped me to get a job the following year, in 1976, as Company Accountant with a young, small and ambitious company in the Construction Industry.

I remained with that business and the many companies that it spawned, as both Finance Director and *de facto* Managing Director, for the next 44 years, and when we sold our core business in 2008, it employed more than 500 staff and had an annual turnover exceeding £50M. For many



Unsupervised street kids, 1960s

Photo: edinburghlive.co.uk



1960s Council house

Photo: Historic England

years we were also involved in the paper packaging industry. We had a sizable property company that had grown out of our core business, and this continued for a further 12 years with me now being the Managing Director, in addition to dealing with financial and legal matters. For those 12 years I was working from home.

Coming to Faith

Against all the odds, I became a Christian in my late teens. I had attended Sunday school as a small child, and I attended a church school at primary level. Even my secondary school had regular assemblies with hymn singing as an integral part, so I knew some of the basic teachings of Christianity. But I had no personal faith or interest as I was growing up, neither did the rest of our strange household, and the life I was living was a very long way from Christian values and attitudes.

Learning how to apply my new Christian beliefs in my fledgling finance career as well as my life generally, was to prove a more daunting challenge than any of the technical issues that I encountered. That challenge became even greater when I secured my first senior position some six years later.

New Challenges and the Building Industry Culture

When I began my first senior position as a company accountant in 1976, I was unqualified. I did acquire a few O levels in my late teens, and I registered as a student for the one of the main accountancy bodies; I bought a correspondence course but struggled with time and motivation and only ever submitted a handful of papers for marking: I never took any examinations and never therefore became qualified.

I married a lovely Christian girl at the age of 21 and we had our first child when I was just 22. Our second child had just been born as the new job commenced, and my wife was no longer earning. We lived in an unmodernised council house with just one outside toilet. I felt somewhat lucky to get this position and I just knew that I had to grasp my opportunity with both hands and make this new job work!

I knew that I would be on a steep learning curve as I was probably not ready for the job and lacked any experience of managing staff. I realised that to make the job work, I would need to work many additional hours. I knew that my days of 9 to 5.30 were over for a while – as it turned out, those days were over for the next 32 years!

Apart from my early discovery that the business was grossly overtrading, with a serious cash flow problem and overstated profits, I saw at first-hand the many little fiddles and dubious practices that were so pervasive in the industry. Under-the-counter cash jobs and cash sales of scrap metal were just two of the areas I struggled to come to terms with.

After much soul searching, I decided that I must first earn the respect of the directors and shareholders, by being a really good and valued accountant, and decided that this would give me the best opportunity of arguing for cultural change. Within two years, I was starting to effect that change; in essence, I argued to my bosses that we didn't need to get an edge by cheating and fiddling: we were too good for that and the risks to our growing and thriving business were too great. I argued that we could be the best because of our ability and hard work, and we should ditch these dodgy practices. Not all colleagues were happy about the changes proposed, but thankfully I had the support of the MD, who was also the major shareholder. The changes and improvements continued over the next few years, and the business became transformed from those early days.

Better Employment Conditions

Back in the mid 1970s, few employees were in company pension plans and even less had proper employer sick pay or medical health insurance. This was especially true in the building industry.

From early on in my career, I assumed responsibility for personnel matters. I was genuinely interested in the question of how to get employees to perform at their best and to feel loyalty and commitment to the business they worked for.

The answer to the question from certain colleagues was to give staff a good rolicking and tell them they would be sacked if they didn't buck their ideas up – often with a few expletives thrown in!

My own judgement was that employees would be likely to perform best when encouraged and praised, rather than criticised or bullied. Of course, there are a minority of employees who will always take advantage of the softer approach, but for the great majority in my experience, praise and encouragement work best, together with advice and training.

As the business grew, I employed trained HR specialists, but I retained

responsibility at director level and worked with the HR manager to produce a set of progressive personnel policies, including employee pensions, healthcare and sick pay schemes.

My Christian faith was always my guide in everything I did in HR, but it was also the case that I really believed that a more progressive and fair-minded approach to employees would work best for the business and facilitate our growth ambitions. I believe that our success over the years vindicated this approach.

Negotiating and Handling Disputes

Few industries, if any, generate the volume of disputes that the building industry does. Most construction projects finish late and over budget and the blame game between the client, the professional team, the main contractor and the many subcontractors and suppliers, can sometimes begin even before a shovel of earth has been raised on the site! All of this results in the industry being highly adversarial.

In our business, we were subcontractors, providing a range of services including heating, air conditioning, electrical services

and control systems. We worked on industrial, commercial and housing projects in the public and private sectors. By value we were always the largest subcontractor and our business size often rivalled the main contractors that we worked for. Nevertheless, in the contractual chain of a building contract, we were invariably working for and under the main contractor and our route to payment was through them!

Early on in my business career, I assumed responsibility for Quantity Surveying and all legal work; I studied the building contracts and Contract Law generally. Thus, I became the senior person that handled all contract disputes; sometimes these would result in litigation, arbitration, adjudication or mediation. Often, I worked with construction lawyers, claims consultants and sometimes met directly with a barrister in chambers. However, I tried hard to avoid the expensive legal route and to settle disputes by face-to-face negotiation.

Our work and services took place on messy and complicated construction sites, and we would usually be working on 50 or more sites at any one time. Often when disputes arose, the trigger event was a withholding



Settling disputes by face-to-face negotiation

Photo: supplychaindive.com

or reduction of payment due, by the main contractor. Establishing the facts about delays and disruption was a very difficult and time-consuming task, even within your own team. Much lying goes on as people try to cover their backs and deflect responsibility on to someone else. I soon realised that many of my own people were just as adept as anyone else at lying or being 'economical with the truth'.

When negotiating a disputed account, I don't think I was ever that confident of what truly constituted a 'fair settlement'. The rules of the game were that the client or main contractor wished to pay us as little as possible for our account and would try to blame us for everything that had gone wrong with the job – at the same time denying or minimising their own failures. On the other hand, I was trying to negotiate the best deal possible for the company, usually without being sure what culpability lay at our own door. Sometimes I believed that we probably had at least contributed to the delays.

I became a very good negotiator, mainly because I prepared well with a good grasp of the intricacies of the dispute and I was quick on my feet when something unexpected arose. At times, I wondered whether I was too good at negotiating – was I achieving a better settlement than we deserved? I tried hard to apply my Christian values, to conduct myself with integrity and avoid the temptation to lie or exaggerate – it was so often apparent that the other party was doing just that. I remember occasions when words from the *Desiderata* came into my mind:

Exercise caution in your business affairs

for the world is full of trickery.

*But let this not blind you
to what virtue there is.*

We were always the underdog in dispute negotiations, mainly because we were much lower down in the pecking order and payment chain. Remembering this power imbalance helped me at those moments when I wondered if perhaps we had achieved a better settlement than we deserved.

Redundancy Challenges and Fairness for those Losing their Jobs

Construction has often been described as a boom-and-bust industry; I sometimes thought of it as a 'feast or famine' industry. When the economy was growing fast (oh – those were the days!), the building industry would invariably grow even faster. In times of economic recession, the building industry usually suffered much worse, with many companies going bust. I don't think I exaggerate by saying that recession for the nation usually resulted in a depression for the construction industry.

The first recession we had to respond to in my time was that of the early 1980s, with five quarters of negative growth. Over the preceding five years, I had placed cashflow at the top of my priorities and this was the reason that I took personal oversight of the Quantity Surveying function, because it is the QS who prepares monthly valuations as the job progresses and also prices any extra work carried out. We weathered that recession very well and continued to grow during that difficult period.

The recession of the early 1990s, also five quarters in length, was

an altogether tougher time for the business. Through the 70s and 80s, we had consciously avoided having 'too many eggs in any one basket' – whether that basket be a particular client or customer, or whether it was a particular sector of the industry. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, perhaps a level of *hubris* had set in and we had allowed the business to become too dependent on profitable Design and Build contracts, particularly speculative office blocks, mostly in and around London. Almost overnight that sector went into total collapse, with many projects in progress shutting down. Clients and main contractors went bust in great numbers, and those that were still around were finding ever more spurious reasons not to pay us.

Financially, our business was very strong and we had excellent cash reserves; however, our order book had dried to a trickle, and we simply did not have enough work to keep the workforce going. Soon it became clear that there would be no quick recovery and several years of pain lay ahead – five years as it turned out!

Redundancies became unavoidable and for me personally this meant trying to ensure that we kept these to a minimum and that we gave employees as generous a redundancy package as possible.

To my great disappointment, I became aware that some colleagues had almost the opposite approach – in some cases I thought they were just stingy, but in other cases, there was genuine concern that the recession in construction might go on for a very long time and we needed to keep our reserves as high as possible.

In late 1991 we made around 100 employees redundant and the financial



1990s Construction Industry Recession:
Abandoned construction site
Photo: pexels.com

package we gave, though less than I had argued for, was I know much better than it would have been without my influence.

At the end of 1992, as the tough conditions continued, we made over 100 further redundancies – our turnover that year dropped by 40% and we simply had no choice. My approach was the same and my Christian faith obliged me to fight as hard as possible in the interests of employees that had done nothing wrong!

Personal Integrity

Most of the senior staff in the business knew that I was a Christian, along with many of the employees that I personally managed. I tried to take any opportunity that arose, to talk about my faith, although I never felt it right that I should be too direct or forceful. I tried hard to be courteous, fair-minded and honest in all my dealings.

I paid for any stamps I used for personal letters rather than use the franking machines as I know some did. I tried to be generous when contributing to staff leaving gifts and I made sure I paid the full cost of any work that was done for me personally.

I am fortunate to have an excellent memory, and I tried to memorise everyone's name and use it whenever I passed them in a corridor, sometimes stopping to exchange a few words; also to remember what their job was and something about them individually. My role with HR and frequent involvement in staff interviewing, also helped.

The other directors, especially our Group MD who was the major shareholder, knew that I was a Christian and knew exactly where I

stood on matters of truth and business ethics and practice.

The business became very successful and grew to become one of the largest building services groups in the UK, receiving recognition and awards at national level.

I always fought and argued for generosity to the staff at pay reviews and annual bonus allocation, trying to ensure that employees at all levels shared in the great financial success that we achieved.

After our core business was sold, 32 years after my joining, I was presented with a book of best wishes and tributes from the staff. Reading those comments was (and remains) a truly humbling and emotional experience; some of the shorter comments by staff that I did not interact with often were particularly humbling because they showed people notice the little things, whether you know their name, whether you smile, whether you show an interest in them, and whether you listen to them.

On a personal level, I was only ever a minority shareholder in the business, and I never sought to increase my shareholding. I never asked for a pay rise or expressed disappointment with a bonus award; I was content to let the major shareholder decide my worth – he knew best my contribution to the business success. However, I became very well remunerated as the years went by. I won't pretend that my high remuneration package was unwelcome, but it was never my priority, and it enabled me to give more away and become involved with social entrepreneurs and a number of charities.

Reflections in Retirement

The skill-set that I acquired over my business career has enabled me to oversee the finances of my own church for over 40 years, including management of a major building project. I was a founder trustee of two major charities based in Cambridge. I have helped many other charities with financial and legal advice, audits and Independent Reviews. I remain the Managing Trustee for a self-administered Pension Scheme that I set up for the business more than 40 years ago.

Over my business career, I felt challenged a few times to go forward for ordination training or perhaps work in the not-for-profit sector. Each time however I felt God saying to me "Stay put – you are where I want you to be. You are my ambassador in this business and this industry, and you are making a difference. If you leave, there is no other Christian here that will have your influence."

I was blessed and privileged to have the career that I had, and to hear God saying to me so clearly "stay put", when doubts and problems arose.

Christians should be out there in the world – in politics, in law, in business, working in the school, hospital, supermarket – and yes, even in the building industry! Christians must never eschew the business and commercial worlds as if they are somehow tainted. Jesus instructed us to "go into all the world". Mostly that means go into your world and go into worlds where people are working and where decisions are made that affect lives – go out and influence – go and make a difference!

I thoroughly enjoyed my unexpected career, and business always gave me a buzz. 



Jim Griffiths was Group Finance Director for a Building Services group and a director of about 20 different companies mainly involved in construction, paper packaging and property. In a few of these companies he was also Managing Director including the property developer and property landlord business, where he spent the last 12 years of his career. He has been Finance Overseer, Treasurer, Churchwarden, Sunday School Teacher, singer in the music group, and occasional preacher and service leader at St. Philip's Church, Cambridge.