

back page interview

"We do what we have painted on our vans: "a more excellent way of doing business"

Chan Abraham
CEO, Luminus Group

Imagine applying for a mortgage to buy a house. You normally have to persuade your bank manager to lend you the cash. Now imagine asking for one to buy 7200.

Luminus Group is a group of social enterprises, established in 1999, with the object of improving private's quality of life by raising private finance to buy all the local-authority housing stock in Huntingdonshire.

I invited the banks to talk, and hired a coach to take them round to see some of the housing stock. To my surprise, all of them were willing to lend. It also meant getting the support of local government, staff and, crucially, the 9000 tenants of 7500 homes. The pivotal issue was whether we could persuade the tenants that it would be a good thing for them.

The most important thing was that it would generate money to carry out people's repairs. There was a huge backlog: these houses hadn't been properly maintained for years. Then people's incomes had fallen by 17 per cent in one year, and 13 per cent in another; so they were getting poorer and poorer. Then, services were declining because there was no money; there was customer dissatisfaction — a spiral of hopelessness in a time when people were encouraged to acquire and possess.

It wasn't difficult to get the local politicians to give their approval — "It's your neck on the block" — but the tenants voted for the scheme, too. I would say it was a guiding power at work — I prayed all the way through.

People could not believe that everyone would benefit. We have got this mindset that there must always be winners and losers. We proved that everybody can win in an ethical partnership of faith and trust. We have 350 staff now, and are confident for the future. Not all are churchgoers or Christians, but the vast majority (and our residents, too) are inspired.

We have set ourselves the programme of changing the spiritual, social, and business life of the nation, through respect and professional standards in the organisation. On Friday and Saturday nights, the major cities are no-go areas for law-abiding citizens, which is a sad indicator of what's going on in British social life. This has got to change.

We seek to encourage residents to look after their homes, and we work with children. We've generated a number of new companies since to build new homes, and set up projects for the homeless, those at risk of offending, those in dire economic circumstances, those who are unemployed. One example is our new

recycling project from high-street stores.

We do what we have painted on our vans: demonstrate "a more excellent way of doing business". Employee well-being is a number-one priority; so we're number two in the *Sunday Times* "100 Best Companies to Work For".

I believe there are better ways of enlightening, envisioning, enabling — yes, even disciplining — people in business, which impact socially for good, but also give great bottom-line results. In all the performance indicators, we are in the top quarter or top ten per cent.

Being a disciple means that I'm here for a specific reason, not here by chance. So, I must make the most of my time, resources, energy, wits, because, in doing so, we serve the Kingdom of God.

I do believe in local government's mandate, but not in its total control of services. It lacks a culture of excellence, customer-service focus, leadership, and the ability to motivate and inspire its staff. There is a wonderful ethos in many of its workers, but the quality of its management has been in decline for a long time.

We set up Transform Work UK a couple of years ago to inspire Christians to transform the workplace. The established Churches have overlooked this major opportunity to engage with life in the UK. When did you last hear a sermon on how to be a great Christian journalist? Or a great Christian fire-fighter?

If your attitude to work isn't different, what does being a Christian mean, apart from the fact that you enjoy archaic rituals?

I was brought up to believe that the noblest part of Christian service is to be a pastor, a priest — it's a lie of the devil. We have seriously shifted our world-view from the place where we can be most effective and where we live our real lives.

The majority of the British workforce says their manager is bad — and 40 per cent of managers say they don't want the responsibility of management. There is a serious leadership vacuum, and not just in the workplace, but in families, communities, and politics.

When you ask people what is the best day of the week, they say Friday. We've turned it round: ask Luminus employees and they say Sunday — before they come to work. We must recognise that British workplaces are sick and deficient, with poor attitudes to service; the first thing you should understand is that the biggest impact you can have on this is through good management.

I'm Sri Lankan-born, and came to Britain in 1969. My father was a British serviceman who fought in the Desert War in Palestine. I started at the Greater London Council in my late teens.

I was the seventh child, and my father died young; so I didn't go to university. I felt the call to preach the gospel, and eventually became an elder in Kensington Temple. After 25 years working in local government, I was about to go to Bible College when a number of people said: "Perhaps God has got you where he wants you to be."

I married Mandy and we have two children, Galen and Bethany. My wife is currently training as a Christian counsellor.

An abiding memory of my brothers



and sisters is of me at four years old, getting hold of my father's Bible, and standing on a chair, preaching to the family. At 14, I thought my only calling was to serve God, as an ordained minister. I've only ever known one thing: that I should have an impact on this world for Christ — knowing the radiance, power, and truth of eternal life, but also bringing a little of it down here.

From my early 20s, I sought to make a strategic plan where I believed God would take me. I would draw it as a mind map — family, health, work, church, prayer. It's a framework to think about and pray about, to give direction. I translate this into business — and there's been many a napkin seized in a restaurant with a potential plan of life sketched out for someone.

THE world changed for the worse when it began to talk of time instead of distance. When it said "Twenty-four hours" to Sydney instead of "Thousands of miles". Six hours to Edinburgh. The word "diary" descends from the Latin *diarium*. This became "journal", a day's account; and "journey", a day's travel.

When my mother sailed to Sydney in the 1950s, it took her six weeks to cross the earth. Now, it has taken "a handful of dust" to dethrone travel time and to re-instate travel distance. People who have forgotten miles are astounded when they have to deal with them — that everywhere is a long way.

Previous to the object lesson thrown up in Iceland, the difficulties of getting from Italy to England were, for most of today's travellers, puzzling. We have all sat next to some time-trump on a plane as he whines about our being an hour late. Now, in the planeless world in which I am writing, lateness has become irrelevant, and roads humbling. To get anywhere except by air, we learn, is exhausting and very expensive. And yet something is gained — travel as distance.

I thought of J. H. Newman, aged 32, stranded in Sicily, and more upset than he thought he would be by parting from his friends the Froudes, who were going on, as they say. It was all arranged, this break. Newman became delirious, to weep and yet to assure his servant, "I shall not die, for I have not sinned against the light." It was late May 1833, and he kept saying that he had work to do in England.

But Oxford from Castro Giovanni, which we have been estima-

My most important choice was the wife I married. She has been my partner — someone from whom my future is inseparable. The subsequent choices we talked and prayed about together. And when I said: "You, Lord, are in charge of my life" — that shifted the balance of my priorities from doing things for me.

I have lived with regrets over the years. I feel they're part of my life: I need to learn from them. I left school part-way through A levels, en route for Cambridge. Though I studied afterwards, I didn't have time to enjoy university life in that carefree way, perhaps. Still, over the years, I've had some of that given back...

One of the most moving stories in scripture is the story of David, of whom God said: "He is a man after



word from Wormingford

Measure distances in miles, not hours, says Ronald Blythe

ting as a couple of hours, was a huge journey. Newman walked, and got lifts to Palermo, where he had to wait for three weeks before an orange-boat could take him to Marsailles. It is a famous travel tale. While the orange-boat was becalmed for a week in the Straits of Bonifacio, "I wrote the lines 'Lead, kindly Light', which have since become well known. I was writing verses the whole time of my passage."

He was, of course, making a dual journey: one to his mother's house in London, one to Rome. He reached the former in early July. The next Sunday, 14 July, he was in Oxford to hear John Keble's electrifying sermon.

"Lead, kindly Light" caused as much questioning as devotion

my own heart." Yet David made so many mistakes. It would be a good way of finishing strong. A lot of my anchor-points are in the Psalms and Proverbs: they're so descriptive and directly relevant to what goes on in our lives, and powerfully prophetic. I do believe the Christian life can be lived prosperously, victoriously, joyously — but it is inevitably woven with sorrows.

My wife gets me the Fairtrade caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee.

In 2006, we went to Sri Lanka, and spent Christmas Day on the back of an elephant. Generally, we're a very sporting, active family, and always want to be where there's a gym. And I think we need a good bit of exposure to the sun once a year.

I'm not given to anger — but I do get angry at a deep level when I see suffering caused by sin. It steals my determination to push forward on all fronts to make a difference.

I'm happiest when my family are together, though those times are rare now the children are young adults.

Beyond the family, I pray for the transformation of communities in our nation. If we don't see results, what is the point of our faith? (Though it's not for us to demand the headlines, to be aware of what's going on, to ask God for evidence of his presence.

I'd like to be locked in a church with the most significant church leaders in Britain so we could have a good discussion. Mind you, after ten minutes they might want to find a way out, or throw me out of the window.

Chan Abraham was talking to Terence Handley MacMath. www.luminus.org.uk

when it reached the hymn books. Especially the line, "And with the morn those Angel faces smile." Were they poor Mrs Tail's five children who had all died in the spring of 1856? She was the wife of the Dean of Carlisle, and the tragedy had swept the Church of England.

Newman refused to explain. He said: "Anyhow, there must be a statute of limitation for writers of verse, or it would be quite tyranny if in an art, which is the expression, not of truth, but of imagination and sentiment, one were obliged to be ready for examination on the transient states of mind which came upon one when homesick or seasick..." William Barry said of "Lead, kindly Light": "this most tender of pilgrim songs may be termed the March of the Tractarian Movement. It is pure melody, austere yet hopeful."

What were the other poems Newman wrote on the sluggish orange-boat? What did the Sicilian sailors make of him, this upset young Englishman?

Printed by Mortons Printers and Publishers, Newspaper House, Morton Way, Horncastle, Lincolnshire LN9 6JL, registered as a newspaper at the Post Office

ISSN 0009-658X

