

A Passion to Inspire

To find out what lies behind Luminus and its energetic chief Chan Abraham, Clive Price goes to Huntingdon and attends a staff conference.

He was posted to a slum clearance programme in one of the most violent areas of London. His office was in the middle of a half-demolished street. Perhaps it wasn't the best start for a job with Greater London Council.

'I remember seeing people chasing each other around with knives – fighting each other in the street,' said Chan Abraham, then just seventeen. 'The police were there on a regular basis. It really was a war zone.'

From that rude awakening in 1974, Chan has learned and achieved much. A long-time friend of CARE, he now runs a much acclaimed, award-winning housing group – providing homes for nearly 50,000 people.

Based in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, Luminus is more of an experience than an enterprise. They recently scooped national recognition as number two on the *Sunday Times* 100 Best Companies to Work For 2011.

Daring to dream

The company's monthly staff conferences are a blend of business meeting and family party. Dressed in a smart suit on a smart stage, he encourages employees to 'dare to dream', to believe 'something good is going to happen to me today', and to change the world – 'right where we are'.

So how did he get to this stage, as Chief Executive? One of seven children, Chan arrived with his family by boat in England in 1963. He grew up in London, where he enjoyed a grammar school education. Sadly, his father died when he was 15. Feeling a sense of responsibility, Chan went straight into a local government career rather than university. That path took him from the 'micro to macro' level, as he put it, and eventually to Cambridgeshire.

When New Labour came to power, and resources were shifting to urban areas, Chan saw the writing on the wall. He and his colleagues were told there would be no new money for housing. In 1998, Chan decided to set up a social housing company. But he needed to win the confidence of the residents – and the banks – to raise nearly £100 million to buy housing stock.

It took 15 months to reach his goal. 'I was working 18 hours a day to produce an outcome,' he recalled. 'The politicians were very helpful to me. They said, 'Yeah, we're interested in what you're doing, but it's your head on the block.'

Neighbouring authorities tried to pursue similar ideas, but failed. Chan succeeded. 'I can say with great confidence that this is, for me, the evidence that miracles work and happen today, and God is at work,' he concluded.

'My advice to anybody is, use the ordinary things that you have.'

Biblical principles

So what started as an idea for a housing partnership has now boomed into a group of services providing rental accommodation, building new homes, helping to house the elderly and homeless and providing jobs and hope for ex-offenders and some of society's most marginalised people.

'The rest is history, because what we have today is an organisation that is arguably one of the most successful – not only in its own sector – but also right across British business,' said Chan.

'We have the highest customer satisfaction ratings, the most motivated staff, we have the number one award for leadership, and for work-life balance ... it's incredible, they measure all these things.'

He believes the secret of his success is simply about committing one's plans to God, adopting biblical principles and practising 'servant leadership' modelled by Christ in the Scriptures. 'If a person is prepared to lay down their



lives for somebody else and for another cause, outside of themselves,' he explained, 'then if they're in a position of leadership, they're more likely to be successful.'

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'I hadn't planned to go into a career in housing,' he admitted. 'I just wanted to be in some kind of work that enabled me to help people.'

Working in a rough zone, with needy people, was just fine.' People visited his office and shared their problems. Untrained in the art of advising, all he knew was faith. 'While they were in the office I would tell them about the gospel and preach to them,' Chan confessed.

'The essence of it is that it is Christ in me who drives what I do,' he explained. 'Jesus said to me at the age of 14-and-a-half, "you need to follow me". And that was it. Everything else works around that.'

So how would he advise the rest of us to make a difference? 'Open your eyes, because it's right before you,' he said. 'My advice to anybody is, use the ordinary things that you have.' Chan suggested taking up voluntary work, engaging with the local press, and contacting MPs using CARE's resources.

'The ordinary person has tremendous scope,' he stressed. 'The need is there.'

Adam was one of the earliest participants of CARE's Leadership Programme. He has a passion to make a difference and see his Christian faith worked out in the community. He works with Northamptonshire County Council, but talks to *Catalyst* mainly about his experience as a school governor.

I got into school governance quite early - aged 23. Having seen CARE's work on sex and relationship education [SRE]. I saw an opportunity to improve SRE for a specific community. At the time there was a local MP who was trying to restructure primary SRE - dramatically! I had to be very calm in the way I spoke to the group - getting angry could have made things much worse - but eventually the vote was passed not to make the changes.

It was rewarding to be able to appoint a head teacher at one primary school. It is a significant thing to choose someone who could have such an impact on kids' lives.

I was also on an interim governing board of a secondary school that had gone into special measures, but then became an academy - I am proud of that. Many kids in that school have no ambition, no vision of what they could achieve but I hope things will change for the better for them now.

In local government you have the opportunity to influence the lives of several thousand people - you can make a tangible difference!

Anyone considering getting involved must have a serious think about the time they have available. They must also think about the skills they can offer. There are so many places to serve - schools, parish councils, neighbourhood watch groups, local housing associations... They must finally assess their heart: are they doing it for self glorification or in humble service to God?



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