

CABE Network 9 July 2008

Dr Michael Schluter, Executive Director, The Relationship Foundation gave talk entitled "**The Contact Lens: why and how to see business from a relationships perspective**".

Michael trained as an economist before working as a consultant with the International Food Policy Research Institute and the World Bank in East Africa. He is now a leading campaigner and social reformer. In 1982 he established the Jubilee Centre, a Christian think tank focusing on social and economic issues. He also launched the Keep Sunday Special campaign against the deregulation of Sunday trading in 1985, causing Margaret Thatcher's only defeat in Parliament. In 1994, Michael launched Relationships Foundation, and through this has been instrumental in setting up Citylife and the charities Equity for Africa and Concordis International. He is co-author of '**The R Factor**' and '**The R Option**' and has contributed to a number of other books looking at social issues from a relational perspective. He is also an accomplished speaker who has addressed audiences all over the world.

Michael spoke about his passion for bringing the Christian faith to bear in the world of politics, economics, business, finance, medicine... and spent much of his career seeking to understand what holds all this together. The answer he suggested from the Old and New Testaments is love – as articulated in the Great Commandment – it is all about what is happening in people's relationships. The Keep Sunday Special Campaign, the South African Land Reforms, the debt crisis all have a profound impact on relationships – family, community, business etc. He made the point that the credit crunch is the result of a breakdown in relationships, where the lender and the borrower have been separated through the process of securitisation.

Michael went on to talk about how the relational context helps us understand what is going on in a business context as any business is a matrix of relationships – with management and employees, owners/shareholders, suppliers, customers... who is meeting who and with what effect. One of our greatest challenges is how we use our scarcest resource time. There are not enough hours in the day to spend the time we want to or need to on our relationships. As Christians we need to look at why Jesus never felt hassled by this. In his close walk with God he learned that events that come unexpectedly come from God and are not an accident e.g. on his way to Jairus' house he was interrupted and stopped to listen to the woman (who was haemorrhaging)'s story. Perhaps next time the unexpected happens to us we should stop and examine whether God wants us to be interrupted. Jesus also spent all night praying before he made a significant decision about who he should spend time with (who to appoint to be his disciples).

Some things he challenged us to reflect on...

- How often do we spend time in prayer about how to spend our time – who to spend time with?
- How often do we set our priorities on the short term benefits by spending more time on our work relationships rather than the long term benefits of our home relationships?
- How often do we fail to recognise that there is no sacred/secular divides as our work is a set of relationships and our home is a set of relationships?

- How often do we forget that God is interested not only in our personal relationship with Him but also in our group relationships and our inter-national and inter-company relationships?
- How often do we recognise that the ethos of the company influences the pattern of relationships by its personnel for good or for ill e.g. if a company has a bullying relationship with its suppliers?
- How often are our company's goals more about the means to the end not the end in themselves e.g. customer relationship management? As Christians shouldn't we be concerned about both?
- How often do we stop to recognise relationships as a part of a story, looking for continuity/threads?
- How willing are we to open up to another person, make ourselves vulnerable, to reveal a more of the hidden part of ourselves (cf the 80% of the iceberg below the water)?
- Do we realise that there is no individualism in the bible? It is abhorrent to our Trinitarian God!

His new book "The Relational Lens" proposes a way of deconstructing relationships, 5 preconditions for building trust by working on 5 domains:

- 1. Communication** – *increasing* Connectedness - *through* Directness
- 2. Time** – *increasing* Shared Story – *through* Continuity
- 3. Knowledge** – *increasing* Mutual Understanding – *through* Multiplexity
- 4. Power** – *increasing* Respect and Mutuality – *through* Parity
- 5. Purpose** – *increasing* Shared Purpose and Values – *through* Commonality

The questions from the audience were wide ranging - from the state of the Church of England (following recent synod decisions *which should require an search for a Christian understanding of gender difference*) - to the impact of the internet on the number and depth of our relationships (*the higher the number, the shallower the relationship*). One member of the network pointed out that if we put our relationship with God first, it would positively impact our relationships and avoid breakdowns, and stimulate our desire to be salt (stop moral decay) and light (let our good works be seen for God's glory) in the world. Michael added that we need to spend time ploughing the ground first (salt and light) but not forgetting to sow the seeds (evangelism). We all have a responsibility to engage in transforming the world!

Michael Schluter's talk was recorded and is available for download from the resources page of CAFE's the Principles for Business website:
<http://www.principlesforbusiness.com/resources.php>.

Many of the papers he referenced can be found on the Relationship Foundation's website: <http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org/>