

Christian social entrepreneurs measure success by a different yardstick

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A growing number of Christian businesspeople—who see entrepreneurial ventures as missional opportunities—believe doing good and doing well don't have to be mutually exclusive.

These Christian social entrepreneurs are committed to using their business skills to organize, create, manage and monetize a venture to improve society in a holistic way—doing what they call “kingdom work.”

Baptist layman and social entrepreneur Sam Say started Bolaven Farms—a for-profit organic coffee-growing business.

“A motivating factor for me was that I was involved in bringing together a team in the United Kingdom to create a campaign to address the demand side of human trafficking called The Truth Isn't Sexy,” said Shannon Hopkins, co-founder of Sweet Notions, a business in England that sells used fashion accessories donated by individuals and stores around the world.

“We were very successful impacting both government and the culture. But finding seed money for innovative new ventures is very hard. So, that is the kind of work Sweet Notions wants to support—seed money primarily for new work that can be leveraged to bring big change.”

About 10 years ago, Hopkins served on the team that helped start Soul Café, a postmodern Christian community in Kerrville. Later, she worked in student ministry at Schreiner College and as a consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Hopkins launched Sweet Notions with Jessica Stricker last year out of a “desire to see both personal and community transformation,” she said.

“Our faith has been a motivating factor in starting Sweet Notions. But along with faith, there is actually a recognition that social enterprise offers a unique opportunity for kingdom work today,” Hopkins said.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiZ3Gmpy97s>

“We are measuring our impact on a quadruple bottom line—measuring our success not only through the economic capital we create, but also measuring the environmental, social and spiritual capital that is generated through Sweet Notions.”

For Sam Say, a Baptist layman in Hong Kong, the starting point in launching a social venture enterprise was asking how to “capture kingdom dollars for kingdom purposes.” In his case, the answer was simple. Christians buy coffee. His plan focused on developing a way they could buy a product they already planned to purchase from a provider who could help poor farmers in his native Laos improve their lives.



During a two-year residency on Bolaven Farms, landless farm families learn sustainable agricultural skills while earning a living wage. Graduates of the program qualify for matching loans to start their own family farms.

Less than two years ago, he launched Bolaven Farms—an organic coffee farm that markets its product to churches and individuals in the United States who subscribe to the service. Subscribers receive two half-pound bags every month.

The farm is located on 410 acres of fertile land on the Bolaven Plateau of southern Laos, bordered by mountain streams on the north and southwest. About 100 acres are devoted to grasses and legumes to restore nitrogen to the soil and provide fodder for livestock. The remainder is devoted to coffee growing.

Bolaven-grown coffee beans are hand-sorted to ensure quality before they are roasted, packaged and shipped.

Bolaven Farms is “a for-profit business with the mandate to act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God,” Say explained.

He also has created a companion nonprofit organization—Just Grounds—that relates directly to churches and recruits short-term missions volunteers and prayer partners.

“We want people not just to buy our coffee but to adopt Laos and to commit to praying that God will do amazing things there,” he said.

Say hopes Just Grounds can directly benefit sustainable community development through loans, village school construction, scholarships, mobile clinics and water purification projects.

About 110 people—80 adults and their children—participate in Bolaven Farms’ resident program that allows landless families to work on a demonstration farm two years. Graduates of the program can qualify for matching loans to establish their own small-scale family farms.

A nonresident program at Bolaven Farms offers short-term training for farmers who already work their own land but need to learn additional skills to maximize crop production in a sustainable way.

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Sam Say, an ethnic Laotian from the US, founded Bolaven Farms, a project that aims to reach out to the farming poor in Laos by teaching them farming techniques and providing them with microloans to start their own coffee farms on the fertile Bolaven Plateau.

Christian social entrepreneurs who launch legitimate businesses with missional objectives are qualitatively different than missionaries who use

business as a “cover” to enter countries closed to traditional missions outreach, said Bill Tinsley, leader of WorldconneX, the missions network launched by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“In recent years, Christian missionaries attempted to enter closed countries posing as legitimate businesses while, in fact, having no business expertise or interest. This has proven to be unfortunate in most cases and counterproductive to the gospel. Honesty and integrity cannot be discarded, even when the ends seem to justify the means by giving Christians a foothold in a hostile country,” Tinsley writes in *Finding God’s Vision: Missions and the New Realities*.

In contrast, many countries “offer an open door” to Christians who have entrepreneurial ability and genuine skills to create successful businesses that benefit society, he notes.

“This may be the most revolutionary missions development in the 21st century,” Tinsley writes. “Professional, fully funded missionaries are still needed and will still be sent by existing denominational and parachurch mission boards and agencies. They might even add to their numbers. But the missions impact of entrepreneurial Christians who capitalize on the global economy and the new realities could be exponential by comparison.”