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# The irreconcilability of capitalism and the gospel

## Christianity versus Capitalism (Part 4)

by Jonathan Cornford

In the previous four articles in this series, we have been gradually trying to unpack an understanding of the capitalist economic system, its history and its effects in the world. All the way through, I have been suggesting there is a fundamental tension between capitalism and Christianity, but I have not yet actually laid out that case. Today, we get to the nub of the matter. It is time to lay out in as bold a statement as possible the essence of the two systems, stripped of all the complexities that obscure our comprehension.

R.H. Tawney, the great English economic historian and Christian thinker, famously stated that, 'Compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman Empire'. Tawney was a man who worked at the coalface of the economic problems of his time, engaging workers' movements, industry, government, academia and the general populace. He was a pragmatist who knew that trying to address social and economic problems involved uncertainties and complexities and invariably required compromises, and all his life he was involved in the messy, hands-on work of trying to improve the lot of Britain's downtrodden. And yet, despite this strong strand of pragmatism, he never wavered from the view that capitalism and Christianity were incompatible.

In the years since Tawney (he died in 1962), there have been few public figures in the English-speaking world who have been able to maintain both his gritty, worldly understanding of economic and political realities, alongside of a prophetic vision of the Christian task in relation to capitalism. In the Christian world today, the questions posed by capitalism have become decidedly more muddy and most Christians are ambivalent as to what the Christian attitude should be.

In my most recent article (Dec 2017), I argued that, contrary to the dominant claim that capitalism is lifting the world out of poverty, the actual human and ecological cost of capitalism has in fact been unconscionable. But that is a debate dependent on sifting and interpreting vast masses of data and it can be argued back and forth endlessly. In this article, we turn to the deeper and more substantive matter of capitalism as a mode of being. Jesus described himself as 'the Way': following Christ is not a programme of action, but rather a way of being in the world. Capitalism, too, can be described as a way of being in the world and I will argue here that these two 'ways' are not only incompatible, they are antithetical. As Tawney once stated, and as we shall see, capitalism is, in fact, a counter-religion to the Christian gospel.

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## Capitalism as Mammon

Recognising the fundamental tension between capitalism and Christianity is not exactly theological rocket science. All you need to come to this conclusion is some familiarity with Jesus' teachings (and those more broadly of the New Testament) on money and wealth. I have written at length on this subject in a series of four Manna Matters articles between May 2015 and May 2016, but to summarise briefly: (i) Money is named by Jesus as Mammon – a primal spiritual force in direct opposition to God; (ii) the New Testament maintains an almost univocal warning against the perils of accumulating money and wealth. Put like that, it seems a very stark assessment indeed, raising a whole host of questions about how we are to live in a world where money is essential. This is a complex question and it is maybe worth reading the final article in the series, 'Money in the Kingdom of God' (May 2016), for a fuller discussion; however, the upshot is that, once we dig deeper, we find that the teachings of Jesus are surprisingly positive and life-giving. Our present question, though, is to ask how these teachings bear on our view of capitalism.

I have described capitalism as the system of endless accumulation and relentless commodification – the process of continually monetising more and more dimensions of life so that they can be traded on the market. You do not need to be an Oxford theologian to realise that this bears a pretty close correlation to the idol of Mammon that is so powerfully named and denounced by Jesus.

Essentially, capitalism takes *means* – money and the production of goods and wealth – and turns them into *ends*. Even more that, it bestows the forces that do this work (especially the market) with an almost irresistible and reverential quality, even though it is merely a human creation. We are being continually told that, whether we like it or not, the market is something that must be obeyed. This is a good definition of idolatry.

While it is reasonable to equate capitalism with Mammon, it does not follow that Mammon should be equated with capitalism – Mammon is a far broader and more subtle force that exists in all human systems and contexts, whether capitalist or not. The core temptations of money – the illusion of self-sufficiency and the power of self-gratification – remain true of life in the Roman Empire, the Islamic Caliphate, feudal Japan or even Soviet Russia. If Mammon is

an archetypal genus of idolatry, capitalism is merely one sub-species. Nevertheless, once we have equated capitalism so closely with Mammon, as we must, the verdict is clear: 'You cannot serve both God and Mammon'.

## Capitalism as a Power

Once we have identified capitalism with Mammon, it also brings into view those teachings in the New Testament that discuss what Paul refers to as 'the principalities and powers'. In advising the Christians in Ephesus to put on the 'armour of God', he reminds them that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph 6:12). It is not exactly clear what Paul means by this, but many scholars suggest that Paul is not referring only to some purely supernatural satanic forces, but rather he is describing both the actual human structures of power (in this case, those of the Roman Empire) and the spirit that pervades those structures. Paul insists that these human and spiritual structures must be resisted by those seeking to follow God and that it will take the whole armour of God to do so.

Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the 20th Century, has described these as the 'lordless powers'. They are powers of an ultimately human origin, but which have denied any recognition of a higher

authority. Barth identified the two archetypal lordless powers as Leviathan – the myth of the sovereign state – and its close ally, Mammon. These become lordless powers when

two necessary components of human life – political authority and economic systems – begin to take on their own laws and become forces which exert pressure on humanity to submit in obedience. Mammon is most virulent as a power in its most abstract form: money – the ultimate measure of value in modernity. For Barth, the obedience that Mammon can command makes it an 'absolutist demon ... not to mention what happens when Mammon meets and joins with that other demon, Leviathan'.

In the first article in this series, I argued that ever since a capitalist world-economy came into being at the close of the Mediaeval Age, it has been an ungoverned system that has itself largely governed governments and under which the forces of capital – abstract money – work largely symbiotically with the sovereign state.

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Capitalism takes *means* – money and the production of goods and wealth – and turns them into *ends*.

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Just think of the extent to which, during the Global Financial Crisis, the most powerful nations in the world were beholden to the power of the finance market and how prepared governments were to sacrifice spending on health, education, welfare, aid and the environment in order to appease its demands. If this is not a lordless power, I don't know what is.

### An economy of desire

Just as Mammon has its own laws and theology, so too, we can say that capitalism has a theology. Daniel Bell has written an insightful account of the theology that underpins capitalism in his book, *The Economy of Desire*, drawing out the implications of a capitalist system for how we understand the identity and nature of both humanity and God, and how we understand the concepts of sin and salvation.

Bell argues that at the heart of a capitalist mode of being is the autonomous, independent individual who has an unfettered ability to make choices guided by no other purposes other than those coming from within the self. The capitalist creature is self-made, self-directing and self-governing. The capitalist creature is a possessive creature – he/she is defined by his or her possession of things and driven to accumulate more things. The desire to accumulate is insatiable and the capitalist creature only meets limits in coming up against other capitalist creatures seeking to accumulate. The capitalist creature is, therefore, from his or her own perspective, in a struggle against other creatures.

It is this perpetual arms race of competition that drives the capitalist to new accomplishments. Capitalist creatures can and do cooperate with one another too, but it is the cooperation of the faction, not the cooperation of fellowship: they work together while their interests coincide, in their struggle against another faction of capital. Thus, Bell states, people, things, other creatures and the Earth, are all used by the capitalist as instruments towards his or her own ends. They have no intrinsic value in themselves, other than the pleasure they may bring or the advantage



they may confer. Other than the self, there is only one thing with intrinsic worth (literally, that which deserves worship) and that is capital in its highest and most abstract form: money. Money is the measure of all things.

Of course, in real life there are very few people who actually behave fully like this hypothetical capitalist creature. The latent humanity in most people (which is their latent divinity: the image of God) is simply too powerful not to recognise the intrinsic value of the other (or of some others, at least). However, what has been described is the direction in which a capitalist logic schools us and, as we have just admitted, it is a direction in conflict with our created being. Bell argues that capitalism is, in fact, a school of desire: it trains us to want certain things out of life and how to behave to attain those things. Not only are we trained to desire, more than anything else, the gratification of self through the accumulation of things and experiences,



we are trained to never be satisfied with the things and experiences we have to hand, but to always desire more of them. Thus, the Christian philosopher, Alisdair MacIntyre, is led to the conclusion that ‘Capitalism is bad for those who succeed by its standards as well as for those who fail by them’.

## A new god

It may seem that in the capitalist cosmos there is no role for a god, other than the gods of self and money. But the full brutal logic of capitalism is just too harsh for society to accept, so a ‘god’ has been invented to make it more palatable. That god is the Invisible Hand of the Market and his prophet is Adam Smith. The story market economists have told us repeatedly is that, via the mystery of the market’s power to allocate resources, when we all pursue our own self-interests, we are, in fact, bringing about a social system in which everyone is better off, even though (*sotto voce*) some are better off than others. It is hard to overemphasise the extent to which this story has come to dominate the public imagination and the political discourse of our country. Indeed, it is widely now considered to be not merely a theory, but an established fact, largely accepted by many Christians in the West.

The empirical truth of this claim has been challenged in the previous two articles (Aug and Dec 2017); here, we need to pay attention to its theological implications. The self, acting for the interests of the self, is a pretty good description of the essence of sin. It represents a fundamental rupture in the order which God intended, which is a creation of relationship and covenant between God, humanity and Creation – the great communion of love. At the heart of the gospel, revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus, is the way of self-giving love. Sin is that big little word that describes every movement and impulse in the opposite direction – towards self. And the attainment of that goal – the attainment of an independent and self-regarding ‘me’ – is perhaps a reasonable definition of Hell – the place of unending torment. In the words of George MacDonald, ‘The one principle of hell is – ‘I am my own!’

Christianity is, above all else, a religion of salvation: salvation from sin – the bottomless chasm of torment that is the self alone in the cosmos. And salvation fundamentally means restoration into the great

communion of love, which is the only viable habitat for life, ‘the life that really is life’. That is why, properly understood, salvation is not something that happens after death, but must begin here and now. (I have written about this more extensively in *Manna Matters*, Nov 2010).

The story we have been told about a capitalist society (and which many of us have accepted) is effectively that sin is not something we need to be saved from, but rather something that can be *managed* via the market to bring about the common good. That is, we are given great reasons to travel further down the path of self. Here, in a nutshell, is why the relational, social, political and ecological fabric of the world seems to be unravelling all around us. The position which we have been brought to by the ever-deepening processes of global capitalism is one from which we truly and profoundly need salvation.

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What has been presented above leaves little room for wriggle and that, I think, is consistent with the approach of Jesus. This will undoubtedly make some readers uncomfortable as it is set out in fairly black and white terms, yet

the world as we encounter it is by no means black and white. I have attempted here to describe an economic system, complex though it is, in its *essence*. As the religion of the Incarnation, there is little doubt that Christianity calls us to get our hands dirty in all the messiness and mixed-ness of the world. But to do so in a way that is true to the gospel also requires a deep clarity of sight as to what constitutes the good. Before we can act well in the world, we must be able to see clearly and name things aright.

It is a mistake – and one that is all too often made – to assume that coming to such a decisive position on the spirit of an economic system flows naturally into a decisive view of what we must then do in response. That is not the case. For the real world, as we encounter it, is indeed mixed and messy. What could it possibly mean to come to such a complete rejection of capitalism when the whole fabric of our world is so profoundly enmeshed in a capitalist economic system? It is to this question that we will turn in the next and final article of this series: ‘Christian witness in the midst of capitalism’.



# The experience and reproduction of poverty

by Dave Fagg

George Ellis is short, Cornish and a ball of energy. He's also Long Gully's resident historian. He was born and bred with the smell of the mines in his young nostrils and grew up to be a firefighter in one of Long Gully's fire brigades, now long gone. I've sat many times as George has recounted the houses, businesses and dynamism of a neighbourhood that I never knew and find hard to imagine. George is a memory-keeper, and, as well as writing several short books on Long Gully's history, makes it his business to erect monuments on vacant pieces of land, thus keeping alive some of the history of Long Gully. Many of the monuments are to the miners and the hardships and poverty they suffered to make Bendigo rich. I'd like to be able to tell the story of poverty and my neighbourhood with as much energy and insight as George tells its history. Indeed, this series of articles aims to help us see the poor clearly and to respond as the people of God.

Yet to see those who are poor clearly is not an easy task. The view is obscured. First, by the need for poor communities to demonise themselves in order to get help in the form of funding or other government assistance. It's the 'squeaky wheel' factor; community workers need to say what's wrong in order to get anyone to pay attention. Our eyes are further clouded by the voyeuristic gaze of the mass media, for whom 'poverty news' is a genre with unchanging characters, plot and setting. Mark Peel wrote 'The Lowest Rung', a powerful reflection comprising the stories of 300 people from Inala, Broadmeadows and Mount Druitt. He recounts:

For people living and working in suburbs such as these, describing disadvantage is always a dialogue, albeit one in which they never have the final say... [The media] won't listen to you anyway, because their answers are already in place, and their images of your life - a few used needles, tattooed teenagers and the only smashed-up house in the street - are already on the videotape. If they're not, they'll be cut in from last year's expose.

In both these cases, complex realities are obscured. Obviously, Christians need a different way of seeing, and in a previous article (Oct 2016), I proposed seeing those who are poor through the lens of the image of God; that is, through the eyes of Christ. In this second article, I will attempt to communicate the human experience of being poor in my neighbourhood and the way it is reproduced in our culture. However, I am not poor and never have

been or will be and it's likely that most of you, my readers, share those characteristics. Hence, my writing may fail to adequately convey the reality of poverty. In the case that it does, I recommend taking Shane Claiborne's message to heart: 'The great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor, but that rich Christians do not know the poor.'

## Poverty and the poor

Poverty in Australia is not really about money. Of course, lack of money is a common problem. Late in 2017, the Social Policy Research Centre estimated the budget needed by low-paid and unemployed families to lead a 'fully healthy life'. Leaving aside philosophical considerations of what constitutes a 'fully healthy life', they found that money is extremely tight. For example, a low-paid couple with one child would be \$10 short of their weekly budget, which increased to a shortfall of \$90 with two children. For the unemployed, things were really tough: for example, an unemployed couple with two children has a shortfall of \$130 per week.

So what do I mean when I say that poverty is not really about money? I mean that money is only one part of the complex machinery that keeps poor people poor. In what follows, I hope to introduce not only the personal side of poverty, but also the ways that poverty is reproduced because of economic and social structures.

If this were a more formal essay, I would begin my exploration of poverty by defining terms. What is poverty? And that is exactly what I intend not to do. So much of the research into poverty is consumed with defining and measuring it, which in a way makes sense, rather like a doctor diagnosing a sickness before recommending treatment. But here, the eradication is not what I have in view, though that may be hoped for, but that the Church may find her true place as companion of the poor. And that needs a different approach; one in which we meet the poor, rather than measure them. That's the approach Jesus takes when the scribe asks him, 'But who is my neighbour?'. Instead of giving the scribe a detailed and abstract description, he tells a story, the moral of which should drive the questioner to meet the poor.

## Andy

Andy (I am not using people's real names in this article) is a case study of life for some young people in Long Gully. I met Andy when I volunteered to help the



local neighbourhood centre run some youth activities. Already intimidating at 14 years of age, Andy modelled his masculinity after a big brother who liked to throw his weight around. His family home was loving, but overflowing with siblings and other relatives, so Andy spent a lot of time on the street. Eventually, he committed some petty crimes, which led to a spiral out of school and off the path that leads to employment. In this respect, he was simply following in the footsteps of his father and uncles. Functionally illiterate, he entered adult prison when he committed a violent crime. I kept up contact with him while he was in prison and my son sent him a drawing with one of my letters, which he treasured like a child.

What's the future for Andy? He spends his time, and the little money he has, fixing up an old car at a mate's property and continues to live at his parents' house. A son from a short-term relationship hovers on the edge of his consciousness. On the surface, his predicament seems of his own making. But there are economic and social factors that perpetuate poverty in Andy's life.

In older times, despite his lack of education, Andy could have entered a semi-skilled manufacturing industry and served an apprenticeship, learning skills and gaining qualifications along the way. But neighbourhoods like Long Gully are the product of economic and political forces far beyond the control of individuals – in particular, the subordination of the needs of society to the demands of the market. From the late 1970s, economic reforms in Australia began to copy those overseas: markets were opened and 'free trade' was the mantra. This philosophy has been variously named neoliberalism and economic rationalism. The logic of the market would naturally lead

to prosperity for all, as a rising tide lifts all boats. There would be some collateral damage along the way and those who relied on government support would need to get with the program as state funding for manufacturing industries fell away. This is the actual story of neighbourhoods like Long Gully, populated with the working class for whom skilled industry was literally their bread and butter.

Andy's life is profoundly shaped by these economic forces, but also by social factors that drive poverty at a more personal level. For example, his geographical location in a public housing estate severely restricts his social relationships, which are limited to others who are unemployed and suffering poverty. This restricted horizon, present from childhood, also restricts the possibilities that Andy sees as viable. When your parents, and the parents of your friends, are unemployed or in low-paid jobs, it's difficult to imagine a different future. In addition, the simple lack of connections in poor families into the world of work leads to a lack of the necessary knowledge and skill to navigate it. By contrast, middle-class children grow up with a large social network of employed and educated family and friends. Who will have an advantage in the job market? The likely outcome is that, in order to live with this disadvantage, Andy will internalise this limited social network as simply 'the way things are'.

## Cameron

Cameron was born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) and displays many of its symptoms: stunted physical growth, intellectual delays, distinctive facial features and impulse control difficulties. FASD occurs when the foetus is affected by alcohol consumed by the mother during pregnancy. Cameron is one of five



siblings. His mother has partnered with a series of abusive men who have robbed her of confidence and parenting authority and given Cameron a deep mistrust of men. Being diagnosed with FASD means Cameron struggles with the demands of school education and his mother finds it difficult to advocate for him in a health system that does not have much understanding of his condition, nor how to treat it.

If Cameron was born into a middle class family, or one with a supportive extended network, his life would be much easier. His family would be able to pay for immediate paediatric care, rather than waiting three months in the public system. Uncles and aunts would take him for weekends to give his Mum and siblings a break. Cameron's life would have some hope.

Instead, Cameron is caught in a cycle consisting of two powerful social dynamics which perpetuate his poverty. One is the trauma of poverty over generations. Not only is economic poverty inherently stressful, it is traumatic. Cameron has been damaged by stress, misfortune, sickness, hunger, shame; not only in the present time, but generationally. In his case, this generational dimension has been passed on biologically though FASD, but for others it is passed on socially and emotionally through the experience of being constantly in the presence of violence, relational dysfunction, hunger, and need. The damage of poverty creates difficulties for Cameron when he tries to engage in the world of education and employment.

The second dynamic is that of shame. Shame is, on its own, a powerful social factor in Cameron's poverty. Shame is the emotion triggered by the disgust and stigma communicated by others in his social world. Cameron's condition, as well as his poverty, often leads to a response of disgust on the part of others in his world, such as teachers, social workers and neighbours. Richard Beck argues that this response of disgust occurs because people like Cameron are a symbol of everything we are afraid of happening to us: need, sickness, helplessness, oppression. Cameron and his family cannot hide their need as we do and thus they become objects of our disgust. That triggers a response of shame on the part of Cameron: he has not measured up to the standards of goodness in our culture. This is not positive shame in which an offender is shamed into admitting his guilt and is re-integrated back into a community, but destructive shame that is not acknowledged and where there has been no offence and where the 'offender' is shunned and avoided and ignored. Living with a sense of shame perpetuates the fatalism about poverty that characterises many poor neighbourhoods.

## What then should we do?

Through these short descriptions of Cameron and Andy, and the forces that reproduce their poverty, one thing is clear: to the majority of Australians, the poor as found in neighbourhoods like mine are the stranger, those to be guarded against, the symbol of all we fear and thus what we need to reject. This is perhaps more true of poor white people than others. Zadie Smith writes:

In this process, everybody has been losing for some time, but perhaps no one quite as much as the white working classes who really have nothing, not even the perceived moral elevation that comes with acknowledged trauma or recognised victimhood. The Left is thoroughly ashamed of them. The Right sees them only as a useful tool for its own personal ambitions.

Even the Church, in its congregational forms, has trouble seeing the poor as brothers and sisters. To be sure, church-linked welfare agencies do fantastic work, but the welfare system is part of the problem, one that I will address in the next article. Overwhelmingly, actual congregations of Christians in Australia are placed in more affluent locations, which makes meeting the poor as people difficult. There is a need to see the poor, again, through the eyes of Christ. When we do so, we begin to do so with 'awe'. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dull-est and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

Can we imagine somehow that this poor neighbour of mine, suffering poverty, is made for glory? That she may be glorious? And that if I had eyes to see, I would see that glory? Such a burden is harder, I find, to shoulder than any project or program of poverty reduction. It relies not a set of KPIs to achieve but on realising that glory is relational; that I cannot be part of helping this person to glory without giving of *myself*, rather than giving my skills and ideas and plans and projects. And that requires repentance: a turning to those who are poor and away from our own addiction to wealth and comfort.



# Turning Waste into Jobs

## The story of Green Collect

by Colin Taylor

As an immigrant from Europe, Ed arrived in Australia with fluent German and plenty of trades experience, but found he was – professionally speaking – back at square one. Not one to sit around and waste time, he charted a new career path which has ultimately led him to a successful transition into Green Collect, a Melbourne-based social enterprise specialising in waste collection, up-cycling and recycling. Ed has now been with Green Collect for more than a year.

Originally from Yugoslavia, he spent 25 years in Austria working as a professional electrician before moving to Australia three years ago. ‘After a while, my job provider sent me to Work for the Dole, but after working for 100 hours there I was sent to Green Collect on placement,’ he said. ‘When that arrangement finished, I was told I’d be very welcome to stay on, so I said yes – I’m not really the type of guy to stay home and watch TV.’

Ed, 56, now works on staff four days a week as a warehouse assistant and has completed a Certificate 2 in the field, but considers himself an all-rounder. ‘Green Collect has really been something special for me – it was a lucky opportunity to learn English, to meet people and experience Australian working culture,’ he said.

‘It’s been a great discovery for me – I call it my “bingo moment”. We’re all together here in the same boat – a small team that works hard. I feel good here.’

Alongside its up-cycling/recycling efforts, Green Collect provides employment and training opportunities for the long-term unemployed, including people who have faced refugee experiences, mental health issues and homelessness. These programs give people the chance to develop new skills in sustainability, the world of business and social equity.

Green Collect operates a store in Yarraville and a warehouse/shop in Braybrook as well as marketing stock online, with an annual turnover of around \$900,000. It’s one of the estimated 20,000 social enterprises in Australia, but one of the few which now manages to pay its own way.

The organisation is the brainchild of husband-and-wife team Sally Quinn and Darren Andrews, Footscray residents for more than 20 years. ‘We started back in the early 2000s when I was studying environmental planning and Sally was doing her Masters in Social Policy,’ Darren said.

‘We were both doing a subject in triple bottom line reporting and separately came across BP Australia’s corporate citizenship advisor, who was talking about what BP was doing in that space.’

‘At the same time, Sally and I had been dreaming about somehow creating an enterprise that worked for environmental sustainability, while also working alongside communities to create new employment opportunities.’





In our previous jobs, we had seen first-hand that it was almost impossible to get secure housing without a job – and without secure housing it was almost impossible to get a job.

‘In considering its role as a corporate citizen, BP had written something of a manifesto that proposed employing people to work in a recycling initiative – just what we’d been talking about. BP subsequently supported us in a pilot program collecting corks from the hospitality sector to be recycled into such products as car gaskets and cricket balls.

‘We later received some federal funding to further develop the idea and were auspiced by Urban Seed during that time. Sally and I continued to build on the idea and developed a “green office” venture, providing waste office audits and recycling mobile phones, printer and toner cartridges. We then established Green Collect Ltd as a not-for-profit social enterprise in 2005 with the objective of alleviating poverty through employment and training activities.’

Green Collect operates under a board of directors which includes Sally and Darren. Sally is the CEO, Darren is operations manager, there’s a finance manager and a passionate staff team. ‘Our purpose is to include people who face significant barriers to employment through environmental work and resource recovery by collecting from office environments to re-use, re-purpose or recycle,’ Darren said.

‘Growth has been steady from the days when three people walked around with postal buggies to today, when truckloads come in and we have our warehouse and retail outlets.

‘Green Collect has partnered with different groups along the way, such as Brotherhood of St Laurence, Bapcare and Urban Seed. Now, as a stand-alone enterprise, Green Collect employs around 30 permanent staff, processing as much as five tonnes [of

waste] a week and offering a paid service to around 100 corporate, government and council offices, with around 25 regular contracted pick-ups and more on an as needs basis.

‘We’re also reviving our waste audit consultancy services for companies wanting to measure the impacts of what they do beyond their core businesses.’ The organisation delivers boxes or cages to offices on either a regular or one-off basis at a cost of \$240 for 100kg, to be filled with electronic waste, stationery and redundant items. When filled, the containers are collected and delivered to the warehouse for sorting.

The niche office items received and processed by Green Collect now fall into 50 categories, from pens, pencils, rulers, batteries, bulldog clips, document trays, magazine holders, tape dispensers, staplers and folders to electrical goods such as fans, kettles, toasters, coffee machines, VCR players, vacuum cleaners and sub-woofers. Add in the thousands of mobile phones and chargers and mountains of cork and computer cartridges and it’s been said the enterprise has saved more than a million items from landfill.

‘In the 2016/17 financial year, total office items collected came to 84 tonnes and, of that, folders accounted for more than 21 tonnes – or 53,210 folders recycled or upcycled,’ Darren said. ‘Mixed stationery accounted for over 30 tonnes. Of those 50,000-plus folders we receive every year, we re-use what we can, but the rest has to be manually separated into cardboard, plastic and metal and recycled separately.

‘Plastics come in many different types and PVC, unfortunately, is probably the worst, both in its production process and in managing its recycling, so we upcycle that into the covers of notebooks.’

One utility company has reported that Green Collect takes 10% of its waste, but costs less than 10% of its waste budget. Everything coming in is weighed and documented, so all corporate clients receive a full report back on what was collected from them, when it leaves the warehouse and whether it was recycled or up-cycled.

Sally said just over half of the organisation’s permanent staff positions were prioritised for people who had faced significant barriers in gaining and maintaining work, whether through homelessness, issues of mental health, disability, disrupted education or the like. ‘That’s an open commitment we have, but we also offer six-month programs for about 30 people a year in training and work experience, either for future placement at Green Collect or as a pathway towards formal training or employment in the warehousing and logistics sector,’ she said.

‘Part of that may mean undertaking a Certificate 1-4 in warehouse operations, but, overall, we want people to experience a positive workplace where they can build their confidence, enjoy a sense of belonging and constructive work relationships and develop further employment skills.’

Green Collect has finally closed the gap on the 20 per cent of its funding it has, historically, had to find through philanthropy and government grants. ‘For the past six months, we’ve actually been meeting all our operating expenses through our trading income, which is awesome,’ Sally said. ‘We’ve been working towards that for 12 years and it means we can now access some of the usual ways a business might grow, such as debt finance as well as grants.’

‘We know we’re now sustainable at our present size, but in order to grow and secure the future of the enterprise, we do need to build on our infrastructure. We now have a diverse and highly skilled board of directors and our plan is to double our revenue and operations over the next three years – and so double our social and environmental impact.’

Another thriving initiative is Upcycle Kids, which offers pre-schools supplies of reclaimed office materials for art, craft and creative play, as well as ‘environmental incursions’, where children attend workshops to ‘create new treasures from old rubbish’.

‘We’re conscious of having diverse revenue streams, which includes a really strong retail arm contributing about half our income,’ Sally said. ‘However, education is another significant component, with kindergartens particularly important because we can use some of the things we don’t have good solutions for – things that aren’t easily recycled. We work with the four-year-olds on thinking of things that are thrown away as being resources rather than rubbish. We have a full schedule of pre-schools we visit – we had 10 or 12 last term and 20 booked for second term this year.’

‘Individuals come in for mentoring and schools and universities send groups at times to see what we’re doing in terms of social enterprise, environment, entrepreneurship, ethical fashion and similar. It’s not always smooth sailing – we often experience tensions holding the balance between how we work with people, reaching the best environmental decisions and growing a viable business.’

‘There are often hard things that happen and questions we ask of ourselves, but we believe the stronger the business can be, the greater outcomes we can achieve. However, we’re certainly no normal business and we put people at the heart of all decisions. As a result, we’re all transformed by this work where things seen to have little value are recognised and given another life.’





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### About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

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