



AND CHAPEL AT STANLEY PARK
the chapel at stanley park

Rev. Allan Burnett

A beautiful day in the park
and a beautiful ceremony at the chapel
at stanley park

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
biographical information

Interview conducted on December 2, 2006

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Rev. Allan Burnett

Position: Minister, Co-Founder with his wife Betty Ann

Company: The Chapel at Stanley Park

Website: www.thechapelatstanleypark.com

Location: Vancouver, BC

Type of Business: Full-service wedding packages

Number of Employees: 10-15

Status: Private

Years in Operation: since 2001

Approx. Annual Revenue: undisclosed

THE CHAPEL
the chapel

The Chapel at Stanley Park has been a popular wedding venue for couples from all over the globe since April 2001. Located on the edge of the world-famous Stanley Park, The Chapel is the perfect setting for a romantic and memorable day. There are many wonderful features that make The Chapel a unique wedding venue, including the leaded glass windows behind the raised altar, the ornate ivory grand piano, and the cozy bride's room. Rev. Allan Burnett is a man of passion and excellence. He believes that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well, but his real passion and joy comes from seeing people happy and fulfilled. (www.thechapelatstanleypark.com)

GENERAL QUESTIONS
general questions

1. When did you start your first entrepreneurial venture, and what was it?

I grew up on a farm in Alberta and was involved in 4-H, which is an agricultural club where you buy and sell livestock for a profit. I got really into 4-H at about 12 years of age, and learned how to run a business. I started buying cows to have a breeding stock. That is where it all began.

2. What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?

Even when I was a kid, I had that entrepreneurial bent in me.

3. Was anyone a model of inspiration for you, and if so, how?

People ask me, "Did you see that entrepreneurial bent in your father?" No. I had a great relationship with my dad, but if anyone motivated me to become an entrepreneur, it was my brother-in-law. He was really into buying and selling cattle, and I looked up to him. I bet to this day that he has no idea he was an inspiration to me, but he was.

4. Was your educational experience (to whatever extent) helpful?

I do not think my educational experience helped me become an entrepreneur. My post-secondary training was at Alberta Bible College, and after that I became a pastor for 15 years. Interestingly, 4-H had helped put me through Bible College, because I started selling off some of the cows I had bought.

I would have loved to pursue a business or entrepreneurship degree at a university, but that was not an option. Instead, I learned about entrepreneurship from the school of 'hard knocks.'

5. How many different business ventures have you started in the course of your entrepreneurial career?

I've started at least four. Some of them were small, with just my wife and I. Among those ventures, we have had a commercial painting business and a closet organizer business. Now we have The Chapel at Stanley Park.

6. How many of these business ventures were financially successful?

They were all successful, to a degree. Before The Chapel at Stanley Park, though, I didn't have a vision for taking any of the businesses to a higher level; I just wanted to provide for my family. Now, my wife and I have a multigenerational business that we can hand down to our children.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS
questions about your business

7. How did you identify the opportunity that preceded setting up your business?

My family and I were in Hawaii for a vacation. We were trying to take a bus to the mall, and we accidentally got off at the wrong stop. Just after we realized our mistake, however, we saw a cathedral nearby and decided to check it out. We quietly walked into the back door and found out there was a wedding going on in the sanctuary.

After the wedding was finished, we talked to the pastor and he told us that the bride and groom had traveled from Japan to Hawaii for their wedding. While we were talking, my wife and I (both pianists), noticed the cathedral's beautiful grand piano. The pastor invited us to play it, and even joined in. The three of us

got along well together and he and Betty Ann sang hymns.

The pastor then explained that he conducts several hundred marriages a year for people from other countries or states who travel to Hawaii for their wedding. At that moment, the seed was sown. Betty Ann (my wife) caught the vision more than I did. We discussed it on the plane ride back from Hawaii.

When we returned to our house in Northern Alberta, I thought, 'I can't imagine people from any climate in the world traveling to Alberta for their wedding.' But the idea was still churning and incubating in our minds.

A year later, we moved to the Greater Vancouver area. We had sensed God calling us there, but we didn't know why. When we had settled, I started passing out my resume to funeral homes and chapels, hoping to play piano for them.

Three weeks later, I received a phone call from the company that does Japanese weddings in Vancouver—which happened to be the same company that employs the pastor we met in Honolulu. The company wanted me to play for a wedding on a yacht moored at Granville Island (Vancouver), so I did. That was my official introduction to the wedding industry.

8. What were the critical elements you assessed before you decided to pursue the opportunity?

My wife and I diligently analyzed the wedding industry. During that time, we also played piano for more and more weddings with the company I mentioned earlier. We were willing to start a chapel right away, because we were excited about it, but we knew that we needed to study the market.

I began to advertise as an itinerant minister, conducting weddings for Christian couples who were not connected to a church in Vancouver. These couples did not want a marriage commissioner, but their options were very limited. I realized that nobody else in the Greater Vancouver area was filling this gap. All the while my wife and I were researching the realities of starting a wedding chapel: Is it a viable business? Is it profitable? Could we do it full time?

We discovered that there were no other wedding chapels in the Greater Vancouver area. People who wanted to get married had very few options: they could either go to a restaurant, hotel, banquet hall, golf and country club, or a

church. However, in order to get married in a church, a couple would have to become part of that congregation and take several months of counseling from the pastor.

After a significant amount of analysis, Betty Ann and I decided that starting our own wedding chapel, a place where people who were not connected to a local church could come and wed, would be a great opportunity.

9. How much time elapsed between the day you saw the opportunity and your first day of business?

About eight years elapsed between the day we met the pastor in Hawaii and the day The Chapel at Stanley Park actually opened.

After we found the location, it took three years, three months, and three weeks to get the lease for the chapel. From that point it took about ninety days before we held our first wedding. We opened the doors for our first wedding on April 20, 2001.

10. Did you have business partners? If so, who were they, and how did you find them?

My wife and I are partners in this business.

11. Did you have a written business plan of any kind?

We did put together a business plan. We made a lot of mistakes, as many business start-ups do. We did our research and our homework though, and that paid off.

12. What type of financing did you have?

We went into it by faith. We used our own personal savings, and we also took loans from friends. Several people came alongside us to help us start the business.

13. How much capital did your business require?

It definitely took over \$100,000 dollars of capital—we were contributing

every penny we had to get it started.

The lease and improvements were quite a bit more than we had anticipated. With regard to the business plan, our financial projections were not as detailed as they could have been. In retrospect, we should have obtained more accurate quotes from realtors and construction companies.

If I were to give advice to someone starting a business, I would say, 'Really break down your expenses, because they could kill you when you are trying to get your business going. You might have a very viable vision and plan, but going into it under-capitalized can seriously hurt you.'

14. How long did it take for your business to reach a positive cash-flow position?

The first four-and-a-half to five years were a bit of a struggle. We had to stretch our finances every month, right from day one. We officially reached a positive cash-flow position after about five years.

15. If you did not have enough money at the start, or at low points in the business cycle, what did you do to stretch your capital?

We did borrow short-term loans from friends a couple of times. I was very reluctant to take those loans, however, because I have always found them difficult to pay back. Personally, I have tried to make ends meet without having to borrow money, because I do not like to jeopardize relationships.

16. What are the strengths of your venture?

Our venture meets a unique need in the wedding industry, so that is one of its strengths. Also, both Betty Ann and I have very pioneering spirits; we love to try things that have never been done before. That has been a key strength in our business as well.

If your security is really important to you, then you probably will not make it as an entrepreneur. You have to have that adventuresome spirit to break new ground.

Another strength of our venture is the relational expertise we bring to

the business because of our pastoral experience. A critical part of the wedding industry culture is creating an atmosphere where we connect with the couple on a deep personal and relational level as they celebrate the most important day of their lives. We are able to do that very well.

17. What are the weaknesses of your venture?

A weakness my wife and I are dealing with now is our limited experience with respect to building and training a team. As the business grows, training and allowing others to play more prominent roles within the business is necessary, and yet that transition is also very difficult.

We have had a very hands-on business to this point; we have done it all. My wife and I have a vision to grow the business beyond the two of us. We have to stretch ourselves to be capable managers. We also have to train people to do our jobs with the same spirit, heart, and passion that we have. That is our present challenge.

18. What was your most triumphant moment?

Setting foot back in the chapel after we resolved the dispute with our landlord (see 19 below), and being ready to do business again.

19. What was your worst moment?

The worst moment was the cumulative effect of a series of difficult events. About one year into our business, we had a steady—on the graph, without exception—increase in cash-flow and volume of business. The positive results were encouraging, and we were optimistic about the future.

About a year into our business, however, the City of Vancouver embarked on a major construction project that completely encircled our business. They literally put up construction fences all around our building. Essentially, this drained our business dry. We couldn't hold weddings in the chapel when it was surrounded by a construction zone.

The City told us it would take about nine months for their project to finish, but it actually took nineteen months. We faced continual struggles throughout

this period.

At about the same time the City finished, the landlord stepped in and locked us out. That was the climax.

We were three years into the business, we had put everything of our own into it, and we still had some personal debts to pay off. When these disastrous events happened, we began to question our investment.

We still felt very strongly that our business was good, with incredible potential, and that it was what God called us to do. However, it looked absolutely impossible to carry on at that point. I talked to lawyers, bankruptcy trustees, everyone—and without an exception, all the experts said, “Give up; you are finished. Walk away.”

We had already been locked out for 10 weeks at a critical time in the year. Betty Ann and I prayed diligently, and I felt this spirit of faith inside of me that said, “There is no way we’re finished. We’ve fought too hard.”

We were trying to negotiate with the landlord’s property manager, saying, “Just work with us,” but he did not want to go any further. We kept praying. Then, after weeks of fasting and prayer, God worked it out. To this day, we are not even totally certain what happened to cause the property manager’s change of heart.

20. What were the most difficult gaps to fill (or problems to solve) as you began to grow your company?

We’re in the process of growing the company, and our biggest challenge at this time is to keep that pioneering spirit alive and train our staff to do the same.

21. What were the key attributes you looked for in people (partners, advisors, managers) as you grew the company?

We have about ten to fifteen people on our team, and all of them share a passion for their work. There is an incredible feeling of community among our staff at the end of a labor-intensive wedding reception. Most hotel employees would probably be anxious to get home, but our staff just hang out together. Sometimes I have to remind them that they can go home. That enjoyment of the business is one of the main things I look for in personnel.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

reflective questions

22. What have you found most personally rewarding and satisfying as an entrepreneur?

I have found it rewarding to pioneer something that nobody has done before, and also to do something that a lot of people said we could not do. Even city officials said we would never have a wedding chapel at the gate of Vancouver.

We have made some mistakes, but what are most encouraging and rewarding are the victories. We have been able to push through and succeed when we really did not have a whole lot of money at the start. We now have a second location—“The Chapel at Minoru Park” in Richmond—and we are looking at two other possible locations.

23. With respect to starting and running a business, what are the three most important lessons you’ve learned and hope to ‘pass on’?

First, you have to have incredible perseverance and stamina. Secondly, really do your homework. Know the industry, know the market, and know the trends. For example, I studied trends going back decades on the number of marriages in Vancouver.

Third, have that pioneering spirit to not only be willing to do things that nobody else is doing, but to see things that nobody else sees, and capture them. I heard a story about how Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, analyzed his competitors to determine what they were doing right—in other words, what they were doing that he was not—to use their wisdom in his own business.

24. What does the word “calling” mean to you?

I believe God has called people into business, as much as a pastor is called to the ministry. I have done both; I have been in both places. I thank God for my background as a pastor, but I have no desire to go back to that. Really, I am a businessman: that is my passion.

25. Do you feel “called” to entrepreneurship? If so, what does that mean to you?

I really believe God has called Betty Ann and me to do what we are doing. When we go through the tough times, and when we feel like we are standing alone, we cannot forget our sense of calling. We must say to ourselves, “We are in this business because we believe it is what God has called us to do. We are going to hang on, because we know this is where we are supposed to be.” We could not have gotten this far without His guidance and provision.

When everyone is telling me to throw in the towel, saying, “You’ve gone down for the last time; stay on the mat,” I want to be like Rocky in the 15th round of the fight. He looks like his face has been put through the meat grinder, yet he gets up and wins. Without that sense of calling, I would not be able to get up off the mat.

26. Who, if anyone, affirmed that calling?

Our local church has been incredibly supportive and bold. The whole congregation really has been phenomenal.

27. What do you believe your gifts are as an entrepreneur?

(No answer.)

28. How do you integrate your business expertise with your Christian faith, and how are they complementary?

(No answer.)

29. How have you been involved in your local church?

I am a part-time staff member, primarily because I head up the Alpha ministry at our church. Betty Ann and I are quite passionate about leading Alpha.

I have also led a home group for many years, and I’ve been involved with our church’s praise and worship team since we first starting attending there.

30. Have you been involved with your church denomination?

N/A (Non-denominational)

31. Have you been involved in para-church organizations?

No, I really haven’t been.

32. How have you integrated Biblical principles into your business practices, thus acting differently than a non-Christian would?

Prayer definitely plays a role in our business. Rarely does a day go by in which we do not pray as a team of staff. When we have functions, we absolutely pray before them.

People expect different behavior from us than they would from the average hotel in Vancouver, because they know I am a minister. They seem to sense that this is a Christian place. I do not know what it is—the way we act, or what—but people notice our faith. I have seen it on a number of occasions. People are not surprised when they find out that I am a minister, or that Betty Ann and I run a Christian business.

33. What lessons would you ‘pass on’ to Christians pursuing entrepreneurship?

God does not want us to park—ever. Whether we are working at a church or in business, He wants us to continually lift up the eyes of our faith and say,

"Where is a field we have not harvested?" or, "What can we do to take our business to the next level?"

I do not want to ever get complacent where I am. It's easy to think Betty Ann and I are secure because we can pay the bills, but that is not what life is all about. I believe we have an obligation as Christian people to make as much money as we can and give away as much money as we can.

34. How could your local church congregation support you as an entrepreneur?

Our church has done an incredible job: I think our church could write a textbook on how to encourage Christians in business.

Every church should encourage Christian businesspeople, inspire Christian businesspeople to go into the marketplace and conquer new fields, and recognize that Christian businesspeople are ministers in the marketplace—that is a way to support them.

35. What have been the biggest challenges for you as a Christian in business?

My biggest challenge personally was when we were in financial arrears and still owed money to several people. My thought was, 'I do not want my situation or behavior to bring reproach to the Lord.' Betty Ann and I had to make sure communication lines were always open with those who had loaned money to us, especially when we were going through tough times financially.

36. Who has been most helpful (and why or how) in addressing these challenges?

I am very involved at my church, Coastal Church. Pastor Dave Koop is a strong mentor in the area of accountability, because he is a man of very high integrity—you can take his word to the bank.

The church council I am on also keeps me accountable in the midst of life's challenges. We ask each other difficult personal questions when we are together, and we are quite transparent in our answers.

I think an accountability team, where people will ask you the tough questions, is a very good thing for any Christian businessperson to be part of.

37. Have you hired people from your church? If so, has that been a positive or negative experience?

Pretty much all of our staff are from Coastal Church. Our experience has largely been positive. Sometimes working with people from church is tough, because we have to be relational; Betty Ann and I are so involved with these people at church, and then again at work.

Working together is like a marriage. You get to see each other's weaknesses and hang-ups, so you really have to grow beyond that—which, to me, is not a negative at all.

I am not saying that every Christian entrepreneur should hire Christians, but because of the nature of our business, I cannot ever see us hiring non-Christian staff. The heart of what we do is ministry. Our staff members do not have to be part of our church, by any means, but they have to be going the same direction we are.

Overall, hiring people from church has been a very positive experience.

38. Have you done business with other people in your church? Please explain.

Yes. I find it frustrating when people from our church come to us and ask for cheaper rates, because we are very clear that there is a stated fee structure for what they want us to do. Sometimes they don't understand that you are blessed when you bless others.

39. Have your relationships with those people been positively or negatively affected—from a business and spiritual standpoint—by doing business together? How?

When couples from our church get married at our chapel, work reaches a different level. I'm very passionate about working with couples, but it is special when the couple is from our church.

40. Are any passages of scripture particularly meaningful or inspirational to you?

One passage that was an inspiration to me in the early days, and still continues to be, is Ezekiel 47. The angel says to Ezekiel, "Come around to the east side of the building, where there is a little trickle of water flowing from under the building." The further that water flowed out, the more it affected people—and the reason that story has stretched and encouraged me is because I pray that what we do at The Chapel at Stanley Park flows out and impacts people, whether we hear about it or not. At the end of the day, I hope we have made a positive impact on people's lives, and maybe that impact will affect their children and their children's children.