



OASIS Work in Progress

How can the worlds of church and work be connected? What are we learning about mission to the workplace? Can church be formed at work? George Lings heard of an oasis planted in a demanding workplace and went to investigate...

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ChurchArmy

Encounters on the Edge

A Series of Quarterly Investigations from **The Sheffield Centre**

No.24



OASIS

Work in Progress



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Encounters on the Edge

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Work in Progress

This *Encounters on the Edge* booklet looks at church at work. By that we do not mean an examination of whether church is working; this issue specifically explores church and workplace and whether there can be church *in* the workplace.

A bank of memories

My own journey about church and workplace began in 1967 when I started out as an 18-year-old clerk in the Bank of England. Being a Christian at work was difficult. The secular and swinging sixties made faith rather a joke. What place did faith have at work? What did efficiency in the task, balancing figures and office protocols have to do with religious ideals, ideas and personal convictions? To sustain my own faith, I was recommended to go to Tuesday lunchtimes at St Helen's Bishopsgate. Men in suits filled the pews, the redoubtable Dick Lucas preached the Gospel from the Epistles and people chatted afterwards over sandwiches. I saw that I was not alone in this bewildering, bedazzling, self-sufficient world of work and understood the mission was to bring other individuals to hear this message too. But thinking of my new friends at work, it was implausible that they could cross such a gap to faith in one leap. In addition, by some chance, I came upon the Bank of England Christian Union. This pleasant group met for prayer and Bible study, in an obscure smaller room on one of the lesser floors, high above Threadneedle St. Among 9,000 employees, our numbers and our venue rivalled the catacombs for secrecy and inaccessibility. We were more like a refuge than a revolution. I recognised a chasm between the world of work inhabited by my new colleagues and the world of faith from which I came; **they were indeed worlds apart.**

If faith was difficult, **church at work was unthinkable and unnecessary.** Church in 1967 was,



by unquestionable assumption, that which occurred in a sacred building, an event run by authorised, dressed-up, male professionals, to which grateful recipients could come. Anything else, like a CU, was not a church; very definitely it was only a gathering of Christians for mutual encouragement and to stir some evangelistic witness to others in the workplace. The CU might be a staging post towards commitment, but that would then mean “going to church”.

Over the next three years I survived. There was the odd conversation about Christianity, where my youthful enthusiasm and modern secular bewilderment barely met. I, in turn, was converted to the material values of salaries, pin-striped suits, cars and girlfriends, all of which I could just afford. The staff at the bank's head office computer centre didn't live in my world. What did they live for and how could I connect? I am not sure I ever found out. I recall, as yesterday, their British working culture of mild complaint about everything. Here were people telling me that their jobs were boring, life at home wasn't great either and I knew commuting in between was no great thrill. Perhaps the clearest witness came when I left. Vagaries of bank protocols meant I had to hand in my notice before I was certain of a place at theological college. My office knew I chose to resign from economic certainty in favour of possible vocational hope. There was faith and madness mixed for all to see. Some pitied me and others expressed admiration.

A Change in Attitude?

Over the next 20 years, the connections made were still tentative; church and work being truly connected was still a mirage.

A brief visit

The churches I served in did not engage much with the workplace. In the mid 1970s in my first curacy, St Peter's Harold Wood, there was a higher proportion of men than normal in church. Sharing faith was a significant strand of that church's DNA. Yet most men worked miles away, across a range from industry to London finance. In those days, there were fewer working women and many of those had more local jobs. Perhaps the closest encounter with work was the day spent at Harry's business in Brentwood. He had come to faith in Christ, and as the firm's MD, wanted

his people to meet the leaders of his church. As we were taken round, I felt a little like the poor man's Prince Charles, asking people on the shop floor or in the office, "What do you do?" and "What are the pressures of your work life?" I noted, even then, that mostly **we met openly expressed surprise and pleasure that the church bothered to come** and was expressing an interest in their world. However, as the church programme was full and there were open parish-based contacts, the network world of workplace was not in my sights.

A promising group

I next lived in Reigate. This prosperous self-contained Surrey town of professional people is not quite "gin and jag", more "vermouth and volvo". By the mid 1980s, Reigate St Mary, as part of the provision made by a large church, had grown a group for those in business. I forget the frequency of meeting and guess it was no more than monthly, but it tried to handle issues with which men, and by then women too, struggled. Business ethics, leadership issues, faith in the workplace, developing others, living with time pressures all came up. After my time it evolved further in offering care to those made redundant. This was no small matter as there were stories, in this competitive society, of those who had been sacked still catching the train to London and pretending nothing had happened, so strong was the stigma of unemployment. Yet the take-up for the group as compared to the number of working people was tiny.

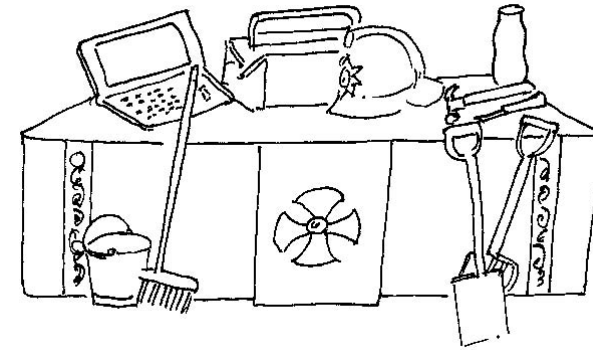
High St but not workplace

Being vicar serving in St George Deal from 1985-97, church and the workplace meant developing the civic church identity of this prime High St location, not so much growing links with the tighter world of work.

St George Deal certainly entered the life of the town through the tragedies that engulfed us all: involvement with those suffering in the 1980s miners' strike, the 1987 sinking of the ferry *Herald of Free Enterprise* and the fatal 1989 bombing of the Deal marines' barracks. All of this we saw as extension of parish-minded ministry, but which spread untidily across a small town. Workplace as a distinctive ministry was not a focus, and mission was mainly in the mindset of "come to us". **Any tradition that highly values being with God and others in worship, and teaches that value,**

easily conceives of mission as inviting others to join in with what we like. It is very natural, but it is an increasingly implausible strategy in post-Christendom Britain.

I do recall one memorable moment where work and church connected. As we approached one Harvest Festival we decided to turn it into Work Sunday. Even in East Kent with its farms, fishing and mines, few people were still in primary industry. Most worked in trade, service industry or science as Pfizer were the largest local employers. We asked the entire congregation to bring some icon of their work: a diary, an artefact, a product, a uniform or piece of clothing. In response to teaching that work is a gift and ministry from God, all were invited to put this symbol on the communion table. For some, the separation from, and sheer surrender of, that icon was sacrificial and moving. The procession was long and the resultant offering was more diverse than we imagined.



Prayer for some work

Public prayer of these churches I was involved with **usually only touched the world of certain jobs: classically, teachers and the caring professions**, with seasonal mention of farmers in autumn and the military in time of conflict. The Queen and Government were well covered, but with such frequency one wondered why it didn't seem to make much difference. The architect, solicitor, accountant and stockbroker, as well as the industrialist, builder, scientist or environmentalist, were left out. Little mention was made of those in retail and trade, except on the Sunday of a civic service when the dustmen and police copped a prayer too. Who prayed for those on the shop floor, or Far East sweatshop, or the journalist, advertiser and filmmaker? I recall giving or hearing very few sermons on work topics, beyond the occasional call for honesty, integrity and witness. I suppose most of us as clergy didn't actually know in depth what the issues were, much less ways through the ethical and practical dilemmas surrounding them. **Work being widely honoured within church was a mirage.**

What has happened to work?

Yet in the same time period, distance travelled to work has lengthened, legislation has grown in complexity and hours worked have increased. Targets have become fiercer, regulations more complex, litigation much more likely in a world of rights not duties, computers and the internet have created serious information overload, email peddles the illusions of rapid response and that those cc'd into correspondence even want to read it, while the mobile phone has created the culture of deferring decision making – I can always call you back and continue to chat on what we might do. Downsizing over efficiency has led to fewer people being asked to do more, to less spare capacity in the system to respond to the unexpected, and competition

internationally leaves all vulnerable to becoming unsustainable.

Stress in the workplace may be higher than we have ever known.

At the same time we are ambivalent about community, longing for it but increasingly unwilling to commit to it. Society is fragmenting, neighbours are becoming strangers and the lack of social capital is a live issue.

Managers are now taught that the world is not ordered and predictable. My thanks to Jim McNeish, Management Consultant with *Cantle*, for his list of what secular managers are taught to expect and live with in a world way beyond rules and procedures which feels more like anarchy: chaos, unpredictability, paradox, multiple agendas, complex communication, constant disruption, allowing emergence, unanswerable questions and new learning. For most, this is stressful.

We need to work on our mission

I give this sketch because I suspect my experience may be typical. The worlds of work and of church have intersected a little, in a selective way, but not nearly as deeply as may be necessary. This applies at many levels.



Christians have been insufficiently encouraged to see their work as ministry in its own right and as part of their mission. Also because we have been “come-shaped” in mission, we have been unable usually to connect with the networks that the world of work consists of. Often urban people sharing the workplace live many miles from one another’s domestic address. A previous world in which most people lived and worked within one small town is past.

Mission-shaped Church (MSC) makes clear on pages 36-41 that there are different “tribes” in the UK cross-cultural mission field we face today and they need different approaches. This graph, borrowed by MSC, shows the proportion of the population who have any kind of church experience is diminishing as Sunday school rolls continue to fall. So those who can be invited to return to hear the story they once knew amount to a shrinking pond. **The invite “come back to church” is bait that less and less fish will want to bite.**

Percentage of child population in Sunday School UK, 1900-2000



An Oasis - Not Just a Mirage?



With these limitations and questions, I had been looking for examples of how church and work could be connected. A year ago, in the run-up to Christmas, I travelled to Edinburgh to meet a group of people in a work called OASIS, who I heard had gone further down this road.

The first event I observed was the Community Carol Service at St Cuthbert’s Church. Known as “the kirk below the castle”, claiming links back to Cuthbert, Abbot of Melrose before becoming

indissolubly linked with Lindisfarne as its Bishop, it is rich in history. Undoubtedly, a St Cuthbert's building has been on the site since 1127. After many literal and fiery ups and downs, (including a minister for 40 years rejoicing in the name of McVicar!), the present building dates from 1894. For any uninformed English readers who imagine the interior to be plain and dour, it is actually strikingly impressive in Italian Renaissance style, in an open, almost square building. In the sanctuary, the massive marble communion table, alabaster frieze of the last supper and highly unusual font called Mother and Child were all items of national controversy in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, but are now much cherished. The building is colourful and classic.

St Cuthbert's makes a stately and natural setting for a carol service in the twilight of Christendom. It oozes respectability, safeness and decorum. The link with the local business community, through OASIS, is over a decade long and this was their event. **The carol service may represent the last major liturgical link into surrounding culture.** It drew a good 200, whereas Easter gets only 30. The length of sell by date of this animal may surprise us, for adults of all ages were there, some coming for the first time. The carols were traditional, but ably led by a scratch choir from the business community. While narrative carols interleaved with unintroduced readings may tend to lack thematic shape, flow and bite, is there any freedom, or any gain, to do more in such a climate? The prayers disappointed; while good at rejoicing that Christ shared everyday life with us, they went on to foster guilt over our participation in consumerist, trivialised, comfy Christmas. How much better it would be, I thought, to build on its wonder, its mystery and that people still come. **How do we sow yearning for more depth, rather than condemn its absence?** Further prayers focused on peace and the poor but incredibly omitted to mention business people. The address, on the Magi as spiritual searchers, was snappy, short and entertaining, not least for a Christmas pun on *Prêt a Manger* – “ready for the manger”? Towards the close, the service changed up a gear with the presentation of the OASIS Fun Run trophy - an annual charity run to which many firms contribute a team. Suddenly the business community were taking part, enjoying part of their own life entering the proceedings. Perhaps the carol service structure was the rump of the old ways, and shoots of the new could just be seen?

The history of this OASIS

Revd Tom Cuthell was appointed Minister in 1976. During the 1960s, buildings in the parish, which surrounded the railway yards of the now defunct Caledonian station, were demolished. Massive depopulation occurred as the workers were moved out. Without a residential population, what should the vision be now? New commercial buildings began to replace the empty spaces, as the financial and legal centre relocated from Charlotte Square and the New Town to this brand new Exchange area, up Lothian Road from St Cuthbert's. Connecting with its workers was one obvious direction to follow. But how could that be? St Cuthbert's building does not lie on a pavement but is considerably hidden from Lothian Road, and the more famous Princes Street, by the trees that beautify its graveyard.



Chapter one - getting started

In 1991, Ian Percy, a senior person in the financial world (even gaining the ear of No. 11 Downing St) had moved back to Edinburgh from London. He saw that the financial services sector people were not money poor but that its people were community and time poor. He began to articulate a vision of Christian life in the midst of this new daytime community and people being brought into it by other colleagues practising a subliminal Christianity. This led to an article in *Life and Work*, the national journal of the Church of Scotland. A certain Donald Fortune (a wonderful name for a senior Investment Fund Manager) was nearing retirement and contacted him. In time, Donald became the first OASIS part-time appointee as an “executive assistant” to the Minister.

The wisdom inherent in that development is that **choosing a business person to reach business people is crucial.** If you cannot get entry to the social grouping you will struggle. If you cannot speak the language, communication will be difficult. Donald visited senior personnel, twice a

year, in all firms where he had personal links and on the strength of this, located a contact person in each of 80 offices. OASIS began to run a series of fortnightly lunchtime talks or interviews with famous personalities, none of whom were clergy, though Revd Tom Cuthell gained a reputation of being a Jeremy Paxman. In this period, the annual carol and Easter services began, as did the annual charity fun run. A sense of partnership between business and church grew, with some firms making annual contributions to the part-time salary. In historical perspective, it was another example of the existing paradigm, but highly intentional and personally focused: get into the business community in order to get them into St Cuthbert's.

Chapter two - exodus from church captivity

Revd Peter Neilson came to St Cuthbert's in 1997, as Associate Minister, to develop its city ministry. Other staff would continue to serve St Cuthbert's genteel older Sunday congregation, practically none of whom live in the parish, for they commute in for the distinctive brand of high church Presbyterian worship that has become St Cuthbert's hallmark. Peter facilitated ongoing creative experimentation with church among the nightclub/clubbing scene, attempting to engage with some of the young people who can be found among the up to 20,000 people per week entering this part of the city for weekend entertainment. That is another story. Peter spearheaded the drive forward to the next stage of ministry to the business community. Like all good missionaries **he began by listening and watching.**

In listening to Donald's contacts, Peter heard a double message: *"Glad to see you. Sorry I've not managed the lunchtime events."* Peter concluded, *"Clearly the effort was valued, and especially the visits, but here was the church doing again what the church does best – making people feel guilty"*

Listening and watching told him that the St Cuthbert's venue was a deterrent. Visually hidden amid graveyard trees, symbolically it meant walking a passage between rows of prominent tombs of the long dead to find uncertain life, and even then the doors of fortress St

¹ Peter Neilson private paper
 Ministry in the Business Community p.2



Cuthbert's were often shut. Even a recent, first-time, open-air advent service in nearby Festival Square drew more people than found their way to the original lunchtimes in the church building. Those who did come to church-based events were from the other city churches. The spiritual and cultural gap between the church and many younger Scots was too wide. "Christendom come" needed to become "missionary go". **The product needed an export mentality and customer sensitivity.** A new paradigm was needed to shift the work out of its church location into the business environment. The team began to visit key people at work and to ask them the following three questions.

- What is your business?
- What are the people issues here?
- If you were doing my job how would you do it?

The questions were key. They embodied a spirit of genuine enquiry, implied a desire to offer something of added value to others and also sought their wisdom, rather than assuming the Christians knew all the answers and had only started the conversation in order to give them.



From the responses, it became clear what the business community wanted to talk about: stress, coping with change, the moral maze in a legal jungle, the Russian economic collapse and the introduction of E-commerce. OASIS offered one of the first seminars in Edinburgh on the last two

topics. How good that the church should be at the front of the queue for a change. Venues were found in firms' offices and a light lunch was kindly provided by the hosts. OASIS found qualified speakers, some Christian, some not, some explicit about faith and some not. *"Always we would introduce ourselves as being from OASIS – offering a supportive Christian presence in the business community"*²

² Peter Neilson private paper
 Ministry in the Business Community p.3



Occasionally in between times and always clearly advertised, a respected person would be interviewed about their faith. Pastoral work with individuals was done over lunches as individuals requested time. Gradually people grew to trust OASIS and its credibility increased. **Its events and people were becoming a place to go when work felt like a desert.**

Chapter three - going deeper and wider

In August 2000, OASIS changed once more as Donald Fortune, having done the founding work, retired. St Cuthbert's appointed another Scot in the business world, Iain Archibald, a younger man in his early fifties who even now still works a day a week as a consultant with the likes of Microsoft, specialising in corporate social responsibility. In his Microsoft work, Iain has assisted public sector bodies and charitable trusts to alleviate social exclusion, this notably by helping unemployed people enter the job market through becoming computer literate. Iain was keen to tell me that Microsoft give 9% of their profits to this sort of corporate community investment, a far higher figure than many other companies. He calls it "enlightened self-interest" on the part of Microsoft, for thereby they earn much goodwill throughout society and indeed new customers in the long term.

God doesn't waste our past

In keeping with his other role, Iain's title was "Consultant to OASIS" and he co-led the project with Peter Neilson for three years, until Peter moved on to look after the Church of Scotland's church plants – called New Charge Development. Iain brings a graduate modern languages background, followed by a London-based career in textiles, exporting and IT. Importantly, in my view, he also brings long experience of community; he and his wife were members of the inter-denominational Antioch community in West London from 1979-98, acting as its full-time lay co-ordinator from 1986-1998. This community of about 200 men, women and children is both dispersed and intentional and has an enviable track record of marriages that stay together and children who get through the hoops of second-hand faith to find their own. Thus, there are **deep instincts for the primacy and quality of relationships**, but held within the values of a purposeful and faith-building group. He celebrates an ecumenical marriage with Theresa, a

British-born, Polish catholic, and this too has brought instincts that naturally work across differences (though Edinburgh is less polarised in its Protestant Catholic divide than Glasgow). Iain and Theresa, as it so happens, are not members of St Cuthbert's; they are involved with *Community Church Edinburgh* which has links with C Net and their local catholic church, St Mark's, Oxfangs. While down south, Iain also studied at Spurgeon's College in South London.

Connect

In the last three years, the work has diversified and a clearer strategy been developed. Partnerships with other city centre churches have grown. Though St Cuthbert's is clearly the lead church behind OASIS, it is now being promoted also by St John's and St George's West. This has sent a signal to the business community that OASIS work is not narrowly denominational, which neatly fits Iain's track record. His IT and sales background have also changed the preferred method of communication and the image of OASIS.

The brochure they produce is simple and elegant, **quality without ostentation**. The front cover has one offset circle nestling among squares – the rounded life amid sharp edges, endless routines or tough places? To me, this communicates a subliminal message of oasis found in a merciless environment. The first page reads, "*The corporate environment is unforgiving in its demands. For a responsible person, working well and ensuring a healthy lifestyle is enormously challenging.*" It then lists the issues office people can face, ranging from the creative, the reactive and the strategic, many of which are expressed in people-centred ways. There are choice phrases, "OASIS

seeks to equip and support you, creating replenishing spaces" and then offers support, advice, referrals, seminars on business/personal issues and work/home balance, community events, church events on special company occasions, and exploration of spiritual development. The document is also rich in restful, white space – a visual oasis indeed.



Iain set up the website and created an effective email-based network. Now, as well as sending out the traditional posters, **he keeps in regular touch with his growing constituency, encouraging participation in OASIS events.** He or his voluntary administrative assistant email the OASIS contacts prior to events, inviting people to book up for them by email – not least so as to know the numbers for the light lunch that is often provided. On September 11th 2001, the business community had its own shockwave, and many knew someone, or of someone, who died. When Peter Neilson suggested on the 12th it would be good to email some of their contacts with American connections, Iain was able to say that a message of condolence, support and prayer had already gone out the night before. Later that week, Peter said *“the chief executive of a global bank spoke of how much it meant to find that message as his first email on the morning of the 12th”*³

Iain also has a wide and generous streak of pastoral evangelism and that has made the work more focused. He has helped those struggling with their existing faith, those who thought they had lost it and also those interested in finding one. These quality contacts have thrown up a whole further set of questions that people want to put. **How good to see a work that spends its time answering the questions people are asking, rather than persuading them to ask ones they never dreamt of.** It launched lunchtimes on a fascinating set of topics, held in banks and offices. The first series drew 150 people and they have been repeated. These are some topics from the following selection:

- Getting to the heart of success
- Coaching leaders - how do you get alongside and really help?
- How we work with chaos rather than attempting to plan it away?



³ Peter Neilson private paper Ministry in the Business Community p.4

- Blame culture/praise culture - the importance of praise at work
- How do I help a colleague, client, friend or relative who is suffering from depression?
- How do I help a colleague, client, friend or relative who has an alcohol problem?

I was struck by the obvious quality of the few speakers I happened to meet and they are warmly commended for their generosity of spirit in giving time and skills on this range of issues. The numbers and attentiveness tell their own story.

OASIS are also **sensitive to events** and put on a best-attended post-Enron interview with the Chair of Scottish Widows.⁴



I can imagine that this variety attracts people needing an oasis amid the heat of work life. Moving the venues around also takes people into others' offices which helps build a sense of community across firms. This is furthered by the February inter-office quiz night (with a serious meal out as the prize for the team of four) and the June fun run. Go to the website and check out the analysis of, and reactions to, the 2002 speakers, to get a value of some of the dynamism involved.

The department store image

How do all these events link together and where may it lead? Iain likens the whole process to running a department store. It is marketed through the contacts started by Donald Fortune. Posters of all events are sent to key contacts for office display and emails sent to individuals as reminders, as already explained. OASIS workers continue to visit, asking the three key questions and working to support the HR departments. With any new company setting up they will seek out the head of HR and offer their

⁴ June Hughman private paper Explorations of Workplace Church p.25

services, as the lunchtimes genuinely represent an offering of continuous professional development. Christmas 2003 saw these links strengthened by the appointment of Revd Fiona Hutchinson as the new Associate Minister of St Cuthbert's to work 60% of her four day week job, with the business community. The church clearly intends to continue to invest in this ministry. She comes from a career in the Bank of Scotland, is mother of two children and married to the communications director of a global controls company. Consequently, she knows life with diverging pressures. For her work, OASIS has responded to requests for chaplaincy and she finds her time is being asked for by some financial institutions, after contact with the HR department, who want an outside face or voice to tackle some issues.

On the **Ground Floor** are the most obviously social gatherings: the quiz night that brings 100 supporters of the various teams and the fun run for 80 with 120 supporters and stewards.⁵

The annual carol service probably belongs on this floor too, explaining why it pushes boundaries so little. Iain tirelessly networks and helps build a sense of community between those who come. **Only if people enjoy these low-threat events and those they meet through them, will they take the escalator up one level.**

The **First Floor** contains the lunchtime talks which have a subliminal relationship to the Christian faith. Contact with those on this floor takes discernment to assess who may have a further spiritual interest. **OASIS now faces the issue of the possible death of the lunch hour**, as it is replaced by the sandwich at the desk, or the working lunch. In some companies, there is the problem of "presenteeism" meaning having to be seen to be always there, and the fearfulness associated with having to put in very long hours, behind which lurks the stick of the presence of the blame culture and the attitude, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen". Their experience is that the Mutuals⁶ are the better employers in that they foster a deliberate culture of care and ask that a lunch hour be taken.

On the **Second Floor** are opportunities for spiritual exploration. The Lent Course is labelled as such and runs for five weeks in St Cuthbert's which

⁵ June Hughman private paper Explorations of Workplace Church p.25

⁶ This term is shorthand for financial institutions that exist for the mutual benefit of all their members, and do not have shareholders, like Nationwide or the Co-op.

probably only picks up the church and de-churching. A larger feature is Business Alpha Edinburgh (BAE). **Quite deliberately, it is run not at the church** but at the familiar, more neutral and relaxed, Roxburghe Hotel in nearby Charlotte Square. The progression up the floors of the metaphorical store is typical of intentional principled process evangelism.⁷

The lessons of BAE

Always contextualise. Learning from Roger Simpson's lunchtime *Alpha* for the business community in Vancouver, OASIS took the idea further. The presenters are business people, briefed to use their work experience and imagery in speaking, encouraged to speak without notes and "to be articulate without being imposing, leaving people open at the end, rather than backed into a corner."⁸ Some find it hard to put down churchy habits of a lifetime.

OASIS is a trusted umbrella. For example, Iain found he secured appointments in firms within 48 hours of starting his new job. The OASIS brand name was good. **Ten years builds a track record and fruit only grows slowly.** Without this, further programmes don't start. Furthermore, OASIS, as an independent charitable trust, is financially supported by business, not just the church. It also has a steering group containing three people active in the business community and this helps ensure it remains fresh and connected.



Time is the great pressure so time-keeping is crucial. Lunch is 12.45pm, welcome at 1pm and after the 15 minute talk, groups discuss for half an

⁷ Still the most accessible read on these dynamics is *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping* by Laurence Singlehurst

⁸ June Hughman private paper Explorations of Workplace Church p.26



hour. The end is guaranteed for 1.50pm. People's time is respected. **They build trust by never exceeding the advertised end** and give people freedom to leave whenever they need. An article in *The Scotsman* quipped that the tight lunch hour means you can “*paint your nails, do some quick shopping or drop into a Mosque for a prayer.*”

Build relationships. Here this has particular contours. For some, the BAE taster lunch is the one-shot chance to establish contact, as people may come somewhat cold, only having seen a poster or national advertisement hoarding. So the table hosts are carefully-trained business people who know how to welcome people and allow them at their tables to express opinions, questions and doubt. By the end of the course, a table group may often continue with a pattern of a monthly lunch. **It is also quite usual that people return to repeat the course,** as they may well



have missed sessions through work, or that they only “get it” a further time round.

Adapt the shape. BAE have created a new week 3, on the Holy Spirit, and moved the rest of that teaching to the very end of the course, in that relationships take time to form and because, moreover, the guests need quite a few weeks to see why it may be a good idea to go away for a whole Saturday or Sunday. Iain and Michael ensure the Away Day, as it is called, offers quality hospitality; they use a sister hotel of the Roxburghe outside the city, the Houstoun House Hotel. They compress into one day what needs to be said and space to experience it. The hotel gives them a remarkably generous rate. The whole party - and it feels like a party - ends the day with an excellent dinner in their own private dining room, and partners are warmly welcome at this to gain an idea of what their loved ones have come into.

Allow seasons. After two years of running courses, OASIS sensed they needed fresh links with further people before offering another BAE. The work also needs a large enough team of 30 to host, prepare food and speak. These workers need breaks too so they have taken now to running the course once a year, in the autumn.

Alpha Graduate and then . . . ?

As a number of churches are finding, Christ, the seeker par excellence, has always taken initiatives to find people. Encounters with Christ and the Spirit often flow easily from an *Alpha* process. What is harder is the jump from there to church, expressed as attendance at a public place of worship. OASIS offer the *Life Worth Living* course, but in some ways it only accentuates the difficulty. The better the BAE relationships become, the greater the loss to forsake them, in order to try starting to belong elsewhere. OASIS coaxes the graduates, if one may call them that, to explore the church possibilities in the city. So, knowing different choices may help, OASIS offer a brochure containing a frank description of the styles of worship in Edinburgh. The OASIS team see a variety of patterns among the people that they come across and consider **it may take them two years to find a church home that works for them personally.** That leaves quite a long gap after the end of an *Alpha* course. Some settle in the local church that their table host attends. Some use the leaflet provided to go on a church crawl. But some never find something and look to OASIS. As one female lawyer,

still on her way to belief, blurted out, “I suppose OASIS has become my Christian community”.

This is not an issue that is specific to Alpha; **it arises for all missions that go out beyond existing church.** It is shared by youth workers, people gathering in cafés, those drawn through community development and cell or cluster-based initiatives. Theologically, the task of mission will involve growing church. Relationally, those who find Christ together want to stay together until moved on to multiply their discovery elsewhere. **I wonder if we need to stop being surprised that adventurous mission tends to create fresh churches rather than be a recruiter for old ones.** This pattern will be even more likely in a network-based society and in one which is diverse.



What is said at OASIS is worth listening to.

Is OASIS Church?

When I put the open question to Iain, his first response was to see OASIS as “an outreach to serve local office people, spread Christian values, form Christian community, and explain to people they can have a spiritual dimension.” It is true that it plays a number of roles. **Partly, it is a prayer network** for Christians at work. They have some kind of dual citizenship, belonging in both their neighbourhood local church and the network group of OASIS. **Partly it is a mission initiative;** in Iain’s words, it is “a loose community of people in the working population aspiring to discover the spiritual side of their life”. **But partly it is church for outsiders,** as the 36-year-old lawyer, still exploring belief, concluded. Who is to say she is wrong? My view would be that OASIS is becoming an expression of church for people in the business

community. For some it is the only expression of church that they know. On further questioning, Iain felt able to speak of it as “an expression of church”. Pressing questions will arise when a non-churched convert asks for baptism; which community will they be asked to join? On the mission field, **baptism is the more diagnostic sacrament than communion, to mark out where church is forming.** Just as with *Encounters on the Edge* No. 21, the story of youth church in Reading, the last piece of the jigsaw to come into place may be worship that engages with this culture. Forming community and doing mission come earlier.

It would not surprise me if that evolving worship here was found to be characterised by stillness, contemplation, labyrinths and peace. **Call it OASIS and you may have chosen your charism at the start.** Then it



is wise to nourish it and to send a counter-cultural signal to the watching world, who might not need much persuading that an oasis is a very obvious refreshment or replenishing place. Already within OASIS thinking are some key words. “Sanctuary” carries notes of safety, holiness and haven. “Simplicity” speaks for itself and connects to honouring the time issues.

“Integrity” is about connecting faith and life. “Effective” connotes the value-added dimension of the lunchtime agendas and the transformation that encounter with Christ brings.

Is this transferable?

Edinburgh is the fifth biggest financial centre in Europe. So I had some hesitations about how transferable the model or lessons might be. The concentration of 15,000 working people is unusual. The seniority, clout and quality of the people working in this field are exceptional. Direct application might only occur for other capitals like London, or for other regional finance centres like Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow, Bristol and Birmingham. **One test of a good model is whether it reproduces.** That process has begun. A Glasgow woman in business saw OASIS in operation and put it to the central churches that they could start something similar. Based at Renfield St Stephen, they couldn’t use the brand name as the lead church already had a restaurant called *Oasis*. So *Business in Glasgow* it became, leading to the acronym for the lunchtime: *The BiG Talk*.

Of more interest to readers in smaller centres will be a development in Uxbridge. Revd June Hughman, through *The Sheffield Centre*, undertook a 2003 sabbatical project to examine fresh expressions of church, in particular in the workplace. She visited 11 projects, mainly in London and Edinburgh, and the report makes fascinating reading. She compares different instincts for different priorities about creating community and the place of the spoken word, for positive inclusion of women, as well different assumptions about the value of engaging with post-modern culture. While all the cases helped her reflect, clearly the highlight was the visit to Edinburgh.

“The more I heard about OASIS, the more excited I became. It really seemed to me that OASIS was about Christians seeking to relate creatively and relevantly to



the business community where they are. Indeed OASIS already shows many marks of being church, an expression of the body of Christ, in that community.”

The Uxbridge case opens transferability to a wider group. St Margaret’s in the Uxbridge Team Ministry serves 12-14,000 in the local community. They think at least that number travel in daily, from a wide radius, in order to



work, shop and for a whole variety of other reasons. **I guess another hundred town-centre churches could have this kind of influence.** By their previous reputation in the town, they may have already laid foundations towards a trustworthy work-centred ministry.

Their vision is to “see lives in Uxbridge town centre transformed through knowing God’s love and living Christ’s way”¹⁰

⁹ June Hughman private paper *Explorations of Workplace Church* p. 27
¹⁰ See - www.oasisuxbridge.org/NewDocs/StM.asp

This works out through two streams - one serving the wider community and one more focused on work. The strategy has four stages.

- 1 Developing relationships.** This is offered via their coffee bar work, confidential listening service and chaplaincy.
- 2 Meeting needs and sowing seeds.** Core to this are regular business events (breakfasts, lunches and seminars) of a similar character to Edinburgh OASIS. Because the presenters are Christians in business, the seed is sown that there may be more to life.
- 3 Opportunities for spiritual exploration.** Central to this is provision of business *Alpha*.
- 4 Discipling.** This includes both support for existing Christians in their place of work and also conscious provision for post-*Alpha* people. The hope is to begin a café church.



What is held in common?

The similarities include **the name**. Imitation is sincere praise. *Oasis* is iconic. The image conveys peace when surrounded by pressure, rest after working hard and a chance to refill when running on empty. The Edinburgh leaflet and the Uxbridge website unashamedly offer these values as, in both places, those in the workplace face similar issues. The *Oasis Uxbridge* strap line reads “live well, work well”. The colours communicate chill out beside “green” spaces, reflecting their desire to offer **rest, refreshment and renewal**.

Both operate using **intentional and open progression** of relational contact. It reflects directly in the order of the list of the Uxbridge website menu bar. It starts with the work world, offering resources and support, in the

conscious language of serving. Only if there is **value added** will many move on further. These are the seeds that will grow into something more. The site then moves through fostering community and offering **spiritual exploration**. Only then does **Alpha** feature and both groups share instincts for minimalism in how it is used and use appropriate presenters. Last of all does the site mention church. **Oasis knows this cascade expresses two symbiotic aspects of hospitality: genuine relationships and good food**. These are vital and their absence, or lack of authenticity, turns any oasis to mirage; such attractive illusions promise from afar but always disappoint on inspection.

They are alike in **building slowly**. The Scottish *OASIS* is a 12-year-old, growing from a longer St Cuthbert’s parentage. St Margaret’s began contact with people coming to town, about 25 years ago, with a kettle and a few willing volunteers. Now both have **dedicated paid staff**, to be key contacts, develop the connections and front the events.

Uxbridge differences

Context shapes so much. This is a thriving town, not a capital city or major



finance centre. Not only that, but St Margaret's is prominent in the townscape unlike the hidden St Cuthbert's. There is all the difference in the world between a church that is open unless closed and one which is closed unless open. St Margaret's has 1,000-1,500 visitors weekly and runs a coffee bar within the building envelope, in which only glass marks the border to the nave.

For all these reasons, the range served by *Oasis Uxbridge* is wider. It includes those in retail and education. Beyond them are town-centre staff, police, the RAF and shoppers. Other concerns are the elderly, disabled and homeless. **Such diversity brings plenty of opportunity, but could carry the dangers of blurring focus** and only doing a little bit for everyone. This is resolved by seeing these as two arms reaching out – one to business and the other to wider community. The website is clear that workers are a prime focus and this is reflected in June Hughman's full-time post, in that they are a key component. She manages a team of paid staff (trained pastoral workers and a coffee bar manager) in addition to a whole network of volunteers. This is different from the pattern of Iain Archibald



and Fiona Hutchinson working in Edinburgh. It could read as though the Uxbridge story has reverted to “come” mission, because of the history and geography. It must be added that chaplaincy roles with the Police and with Debenhams, participation with other organisations in the development of Uxbridge's town centre and active involvement in town centre events e.g. days for disabled shoppers all show the focus is more outward.

Another indicator of a “go” mentality is that *Oasis Uxbridge* are more convinced that *Alpha* will lead naturally to fresh expressions of church. Those who commute to Uxbridge may travel in from a 50 mile circumference. Close work colleagues won't have homes in the same town. If a work friend's interest is awakened they can't come with you to your local church. What sense then does it make when non-churched people gain a shared experience of Jesus Christ and His church, through *Oasis* and *Alpha*, to offer them the end to what they have discovered and closure of corporate spiritual experience? This is a sharper question when the **alternative is an unsafe bridge into culturally alien church, to an unknown group, practising expressions of church with an uncertain future.** June's sabbatical pondered:

“...participants have already, in a sense, got used to doing church at lunchtime during their week by coming to Alpha, so why not continue to experiment with forms of church at lunchtime rather than expecting them to fit in to more traditional models of Sunday church.”¹¹

Oasis Uxbridge uses a deceptively simple round logo. The vertical strokes might be a person, or a tree, refreshed by the horizontal strokes of rippling water. As I ponder it, I begin to see the tree might just turn out to be a cross and streams of water might signify the Spirit. Quite deliberately, this is not “in your face” mission, but **hidden values that only yield to enquiry and discovery.**



¹¹ June Hughman private paper *Explorations of Workplace Church* p. 27

Where does this take us?

We do not live out Gospel and church in the mission context of Acts 2, when all the hearers were Jews or converts - there by choice, just missing the final link and already curious at what they saw and heard. **Our context more resembles Acts 17**. We too wander around the city, spotting clues in the culture with which we connect. Then we seek out the places where people gather, with whom we can discuss Jesus and the Resurrection, from the starting point their world gives. In this we trust in the missionary Holy Spirit who woos, convinces and then creates church. This looks to me like another case of the broad pattern, referred to in the last issue, which is worked out several times in Acts 16-18 (Philippi, Athens and Ephesus)¹². The shorthand expressing this instinct runs: **apostles seek agoras and grow ecclesias on them**.

Workplace is another “agora”. It is an “open market” in many senses of that phrase. It is where many spend their lives. **It should not remain a sideshow in mission but is a culture within which to grow church**. The language from *Mission-shaped Church* can help. “Fresh expressions of church” bids us remember that all expressions are provisional and partial. No one expression can fully express the totality of church, much less Christ.¹³



“Oops, I seem to have started a Church”

By this term, we have gained the flexibility of thought to welcome church for work, believing it can be legitimate and real, though like all other expressions it needs the others, because they belong together, in the one Body of Christ. In the complex reality of network society, **it is increasingly likely that people will have a number of expressions of church to which they belong**.

Why not include workplace church?

I shall watch these Oases to see which become more than temporary watering places on a supposed journey to the “promised land of proper church”. I think it is legitimate that some become permanent camps. I suspect they are becoming church for some working people. These Oases will be the place where persons encounter Jesus, which transforms them and their relationships with each other. From this replenishing place they will journey out to work, serve and witness, for in all expressions of church, **having a sense of belonging should not stop an apostolic identity**. In these Oases stories, the two-way chasm stretching between church and workplace is beginning to close.

Thanks to Peter Neilson for his 2003 written version of the OASIS story and June Hughman for her 2003 sabbatical report on various church and work projects. Without their observations from within and outside, the story would be less nuanced and less developed. Both authors have taken a longer text to explore wider connections and are worth examining for further reading. Both can be obtained through *The Sheffield Centre*. Thanks also to Iain Archibald and June Hughman for commissioning and sending many further pictures.

George Lings
December 2004

¹² See *Encounters on the Edge* No. 23 *New Housing, New Partnerships* p.17

¹³ I know that Ignatius put a different case that flows from Christ to the Church Catholic.

Websites worth consulting

- www.oasisedinburgh.com
- www.businessalphaedinburgh.com
- www.businessinglasgow.net
- www.oasisuxbridge.org
- www.worktalk.org.uk
- www.acalltobusiness.co.uk

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Left to right: Steve Hollinghurst, Claire Dalpra, Michael Collyer, George Lings, Peter Hallsworth, Ruth Walker, Andrew Wooding



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