

Workplace church

<https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/examples/workplace>

Examples



Riverforce is a fresh expression in the Merseyside Police Force. It started with a lay person, Peter Owens, who wanted to be more missional in the workplace.

Supported by his local church and diocese, he began meeting with three other colleagues who no longer went to church. Their meetings focused on:

- presence, in which God's presence was recognised through worship;
- pressures, in which members shared and prayed through concerns, whether domestic or work-related;
- purpose, during which they reflected on their roles as Christians in the force, both individually and collectively.

Other groups formed, meeting at lunchtime or after work. They have linked up to become a missional network that has been effective in connecting swiftly with large numbers of people who have dropped out of church.

Riverforce is structured round several cell groups, and gathers together about 80 people for worship in the central refectory area of the police headquarters. The network has a three-pronged focus:

- supporting Christians in the workplace;
- reconnecting people who have left church;
- engaging with people who have hardly ever been to church through a mixture of pastoral welfare programmes and seeker events.

The Liverpool Diocese intends to repeat this approach in other workplaces. In the John Lewis department store, for instance, where there is a lay chaplain, it may look to start a single cell. As leadership resources and connections grow, it would seek to develop more cells across the city centre, putting in all the building blocks necessary to be authentic church.

It envisages that for some people, the network will be their spiritual home, others will cross the bridge into local churches, while others will have a foot in both. Workplace church would support local church, and vice versa.

The longer term vision is to multiply cells in the workplace, using the heart of Liverpool as a springboard for an ever growing network including both major and smaller-scale employers, and to join these cells up into a wider network capable of working and witnessing together.

In time, it is envisaged that this approach will be repeated in other towns across the diocese and in cities round the UK.

- Story: Riverforce
- How might a call to fresh expressions come: Riverforce

What is workplace church?

It is neither chaplaincy nor Christian Union. Though industrial and other workplace chaplains have always seen themselves as very much part of church, they have tended not to see their role as forming worshipping communities at work.

Many Christians meet with others in their place of work for prayer and Bible study (sometimes calling themselves Christian Unions), but these groups have rarely seen themselves as church; church proper happens at weekends.

Workplace church, as we use the term here, is fresh expressions of church in the workplace (see What is a fresh expression of church?). Groups of churchgoers or lapsed churchgoers meet with the explicit intention of growing in the four dimensions of church (see Are fresh expressions proper church?):

- IN in deepening fellowship ('One').
- UP towards God as together they open themselves to the Holy Spirit ('Holy').
- OF as they see themselves as part of the whole body of Christ and seek to connect with it ('Catholic').
- OUT as they serve others in the workplace ('Apostolic').

In How do fresh expressions develop? we suggest that fresh expressions will often travel the following journey:



Small 'missional' groups of Christians can have an impact on the workplace as they find ways to love their colleagues and listen to them, as they draw them into small communities (cells), as they help them - if they want - to explore Jesus and as they encourage these cells of emerging Christians to be church.

Canon Phil Potter, who has been heavily involved in the development of Riverforce, points to a similar process when he encourages believers to: 'share your passion, share your life, share your faith, share their journey.'

Two Christians might share their passion for fairness in the workplace with two or three colleagues who don't attend church. As they meet together to explore practical things they can do, they start to share their lives.

In the context of this sharing, the two churchgoers might begin to share their faith and ask the others if they would like to explore prayer as a possible resource for promoting fairness. As their colleagues' interest grows, the original two would share their colleagues' journey into faith and into being church.

Possible ways of being church in the workplace



These are still in their infancy because of the strong tradition of attending church at weekends near your home. But more and more people are starting to ask: 'Why shouldn't church exist where people work?'

The sort of ideas that have been tried or come up in discussion include:

- a couple of Christians might start a spirituality-at-work group or a justice-at-work group, and encourage it to evolve into church;
- two Christians might offer to pray for colleagues in confidence, and then start a group for people who would like to explore prayer further. The group might use a book of Ignatian meditations, based on Scripture, and encourage church to grow from that;
- Christian doctors and health visitors in a locality might start a weekly after-hours prayer and support group - a possible first step to church;
- a city centre church might encourage some of its members not in small groups to start a cell to serve colleagues at work. The cell might organise seminars on themes like 'Using spiritual resources to overcome stress', 'Becoming a better leader' and 'Resolving conflict'. Groups to explore the Christian faith might arise out of these events. The hope might be that other church members would form similar cells. Might the church's home groups eventually morph into missional cells at work?
- Some town centre churches are developing an explicit ministry to the workplace. For example, St Margaret's in Uxbridge, West London, has a four-fold strategy: develop relationships through coffee bar work, a confidential listening service and chaplaincy; meet needs and sow seeds through regular business events that address work issues (breakfasts and lunches with a speaker and seminars); provide opportunities for spiritual exploration; discipling. See *Encounters on the Edge 24: OASIS - Work in Progress*, Church Army, 2004;
- Christians might use a workplace carol service to advertise monthly seeker events (perhaps in a pub after work) and follow it up with personal invitations;
- in a re-focusing of chaplaincy, chaplains might be appointed to form missional groups in the workplace as one of their responsibilities;
- ministers in secular employment might be encouraged and equipped to initiate missional groups, too.

A rationale for workplace church

This might have three starting points.

The first is the need to organise to advance the kingdom of God

Many Christians have seen themselves as 'salt' and 'light' in the workplace. But a grain of salt on its own is much less tasty than lots of grains together, while several lights can shine more brightly than one.

The 'principalities and powers' (Ephesians 6.12) are highly organised in today's world. Arguably they are concentrated in the workplace - in the multinationals, the advertising industry, government departments, and so on. These are where power in modern society largely rests.

It is very hard for individuals to challenge these 'powers' acting on their own. Just as trade unions needed to organise in the nineteenth century to combat injustice in the workplace, so Christians need to organise today to advance God's kingdom at work. Church is the presence of organised Christians.

The second is the central role of community in mission

Sometimes the mission of God (the 'missio dei') has been understood in individualistic terms. The Father sends the Son who (perhaps with the Father) sends the Spirit. The accent is on the sending of individual persons.

But the Son and the Spirit never act on their own in mission. Jesus only did what the Father taught him (John 8.28). The Spirit makes known what the Son says (John 16.13-15).

They are so one with each other, in such close communion with one another, that they act in total collaboration. If one dares use such language, they are community in mission.

This characteristic of God is echoed in the mission task given to humanity in Genesis 1 and 2. The man was not to bring out the best in creation on his own; he was to do this with the woman. They were to form a tiny missional community that would eventually spread over the whole planet.

The emphasis is away from Christians embarking on mission as individuals. To be like God is to engage in mission as Christian communities - hence St Paul's stress on mission teams in his work, which applies the principle in Genesis 1 and 2 to a church planting context.

These mission communities are to have a oneness about them that mirrors the oneness of God. One way that community in mission can be lived out is through church at work.

Thirdly, nowhere does the Bible say you can belong to only one 'local' church

Our Christian identity is with the whole body of Christ. The individual churches we belong to are no more than 'local' expressions of this single body.

Joining more than one expression of Christ's body need not weaken - it may actually strengthen - our sense of belonging to the whole Christian family.



In the New Testament, churches tended to be centred on people's homes, coming together from across the town on special occasions. Homes were the context of work and to an extent leisure, as well as of family life. Household churches, therefore, were located in places of work, leisure and family life - all at the same time.

It was possible to maintain this unity in pre-industrial society through the village church. The church ministered to the village, which was a centre for work, leisure and the home. In today's world that unity has been fractured as the locations of work, leisure and home have pulled away from each other.

Workplace church (along with church in centres of leisure, as well as near home) has the potential to reintegrate work, leisure and home within the body of Christ.

Church takes root within each of these spheres of human existence as expressions of church emerge within them. Unity between these different expressions of church is maintained by creating links between them.

These links can be given concrete expression by means of collaboration between the various expressions of church. For some possibilities, you may want to read the Learning should be practical section of [Discipleship may involve rethinking worship, learning and spiritual practices.](#)

Things to bear in mind

Things to bear in mind when considering church in the workplace include:

The need to respect boundaries

Most employers will have clear rules about what you can and can't do during working hours and about how far individuals can promote their beliefs. The NHS, for example, has an explicit policy on 'proselytising' and the possibility that this could be construed as harassment (see [Religion or belief: a practical guide for the NHS](#)).

There are also professional boundaries governing the extent to which individuals can refer to their faith when dealing with patients or clients. Christians with power and influence need to be especially careful not to exploit their position in ways that undermine the freedom of the other person. Being sensitive to such boundaries is vital.

Joining a missional group means that your work colleagues are likely to put a Christian label on you, if they haven't already done so. In a few cases, might this put you at a disadvantage in your job?

In jobs with a counselling element, for example, might some people not reveal themselves so fully because they are worried about how you 'as a Christian' would respond? These possibilities need prayerful thought.

The workplace is increasingly fragmented

More and more people travel as part of their jobs and work at least some of the time from home. Often they belong to teams as much as to a department, and these teams may jump departmental boundaries and be short-lived. Weekend working and other developments mean that fewer people work a standard 9 to 5 day.

All this means that sustaining ongoing relationships with colleagues can be difficult, not to mention getting people together. So careful thought will be needed about the practicalities of workplace church:

- regular meetings in small cells of three or four people may be more practical than in larger groups. It's easier for a small group to find time when everyone can meet than a larger one;



- maintaining contact online, including a report of what happened when the group met, may be especially important when individuals can't get to a meeting. Strong online links can foster a sense of belonging;
- another possibility is suggested by Christians in the London office of a global consultancy: they committed themselves - if they were in the office - to being in a certain pub after work on the same weekday each month, so that those who were in London at the time could meet up.

There can be severe time constraints

Many employees are under such pressure to perform that the traditional lunch hour has been replaced by sandwiches at your desk and individuals are often forced to work late. 'Presenteeism' - being seen to work late even if there is nothing to do - can be rife in some offices. Other people have to rush off home because of family commitments.

This adds to the problem of getting people together - individuals may not be available. It also means that when they do meet time may be short. It will be especially important, therefore, to use the time well. Short but frequent get togethers - half an hour before work every Monday perhaps - may be more effective than an hour every fortnight. Keeping in touch electronically (including the exchange of online prayers possibly) can do much to strengthen relationships.

Beware of holy huddles

Some workplace prayer groups have got the reputation of being a little weird. Sometimes this is through misunderstanding, but it can also be due to the language and behaviour of the people involved.

Part of being church is to join in God's mission to the world - in this case, to the workplace. As cells of believers or new believers form, a key priority will be to pray about and plan ways of loving and serving others at work.

Like the Riverforce cell, might a group put its purpose (to serve the workplace) on the agenda each time it meets? Sacrificial service, done with love and sensitivity, will be the best way to protect a group's reputation.

Denominational loyalties may need to be addressed

Missional groups at work are likely to involve Christians from different denominational backgrounds. In today's more tolerant culture where denominational rivalries are less than in the past, this should not be a problem for the most part.

But one or two issues could emerge. How to celebrate communion may be one, especially if the group contains Christians for whom an authentic communion requires an ordained minister to preside and no such person is available. You may want to read [The UP dimension of church](#) for some possible ways forward.



Another question may be accountability. Does the group see itself as being accountable to the leaders of a specific denomination or is it a non-denominational group?

The question can be answered in various ways. If the workplace church is tied to a specific denomination, then a generosity of spirit to those from different backgrounds will be essential.

All involved may need a positive attitude towards exceptions - 'We wouldn't normally do it like this, but in the context here it makes sense.' A 'generous theology of exceptions' is discussed in [The UP dimension of church](#).

Staying connected is vital

It is a key element of being church and expresses the heart of our Christian identity. We are members of God's family. We are baptised not into a particular church but into the whole body of Christ.

Being connected may include developing networks of cells in the workplace, as in the Riverforce example. But it should also involve links with weekend church, including a relaxed attitude to those who make church near home their priority. The best links will come through people who belong both to a church at work and a church at home.

In time, as a workplace church matures, it may want to consider its links to other churches in the town or the locality. Might these be established through being part of a denomination? Might the church be represented in a group of local Christian leaders?

Joining up is vital, not only for theological reasons, but to form 'coalitions of the willing' who collaborate especially on discipleship. You may want to read [Discipleship requires the support of other Christians](#).

Resources

- **Encounters on the Edge 24: OASIS - Work in Progress**
George Lings, Church Army, 2004
- **Anointed for Business: How Christians Can Use Their Influence in the Marketplace to Change the World** Ed Silvano, Regal Books, 2007, 978-083074269-1
- **Church in the Workplace: How God's People Can Transform Society** Peter Wagner, Regal Books, 2007, 978-083073910-3