

Practical Approaches to Workplace Ministry with Robin Scurlock

This is the summary of a talk given to Reading@Work by Robin Scurlock in June 2003 on the theme of Practical Approaches to Workplace Ministry.

Introduction & Biography

Robin Scurlock is Head of Industry Market Development at Equant, a France Telecom subsidiary, where he has worked for the last 8 years. His career to date in the IT and telecommunications industry has been in a variety of sales, marketing and business development roles.

Robin came to faith 17 years ago while working in central London. He soon discovered the newly established London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC), at the nearby St Peter's church in Vere Street, part of the ministry of All Soul's Church, Langham Place. It was here that he first began to learn how to reconcile his working life with his new faith.

The normal work pattern in the IT/telecoms sector is very varied. It typically combines international travel with home working as well as office-based meetings. Often there are many project-based conference calls. These meetings are with people in different parts of the world who have never or rarely met face-to-face. Most of the work is sales-driven, and therefore creative and account based.

Early in his faith, Robin struggled to integrate his Christian faith with his work. There was very little to study on the subject other than that generated by the LICC, and virtually no teaching materials for his local church community. This was the inspiration behind publishing the book 'I Love My Work' in 2002.

'I Love My Work' is a set of bible studies looking at different aspects of working life. They are designed for individuals, for workplace prayer groups and for churches to use. The book is co-written with Steve Goss who heads up Freedom in Christ ministries in the UK.

Purpose of the Talk

The purpose of this talk is to describe an example of setting up a prayer group in a busy multinational company environment. The hope is that this will encourage others as they seek to honour God in their work, and to learn from this experience for their own workplaces.

Colossians 3:23-24 tells us:

'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'

With up to 10 hours or more per day spent in the workplace, we need to expect to see God working through us in this area of our lives. Wherever you are working, you are significant to God 24 hours each day, every day.

'I Love my Work' – Some Starting Assumptions

The assumptions behind the book 'I Love my Work' are foundational to looking at the practice of workplace ministry:

- God is sovereign over all.
- God is interested in the workplace – my workplace.
 - There is not sacred – secular divide.
 - Prayer 'works' anywhere.
- Christians can and do have a positive influence in the workplace.

Richard Eyre, then CEO of ITV, spoke at the Spring Harvest 'At Work Together' conference in September 1998. He made the following key statement:

'If God's principles are true, then they don't just work in church'

Assuming this to be true, the challenge is how to organise a workplace prayer group that is relevant and credible for your organisation.

There are three areas to consider:

- God is already 'at work' at work – before Christians working together meet to pray, God will be active in the background. Nothing is off-limits for God.
- Prayer has no boundaries – people who want to pray together, and are committed to this goal, will find each other. God enables this to happen.
- Publicity – publicity is clearly necessary to let people know who you are and what you are doing. But this needs sensitivity and approval in a workplace setting.

Workplace Ministry – A Practical Approach

It is important to spend time praying through the different purposes of a workplace ministry group. These may include:

- To recognise a spiritual dynamic in the company's life and decisions.
- To encourage Christians to pray in the workplace for their concerns, both at work and elsewhere.
 - To encourage personal accountability for actions at work.
 - To see people come to know and grow in Christ.

In addition to a weekly workplace group meeting, there may also be opportunities for prayer doubles or triplets to provide additional direct accountability and support.

Local church support is key to a successful workplace group. Staff in any workplace will be drawn from a wide geographical radius, and need to relate their experience at work with teaching in their local church.

As it develops, a group can support people who are seeking to come to faith.

Alpha, for example, can be seen as a powerful brand to catalyse interest in a prayer group as well as steer seekers towards a local church community in their area. An alternative may be to run a workplace Alpha group in the workplace. But there may be cases where the corporate culture does not make this feasible.

Example

James became curious about praying in the workplace after observing some of his colleagues who met on a weekly basis. A non-Christian, he eventually joined an Alpha course after being encouraged to attend by his Christian co-workers. He subsequently made his own decision for Christ. A key factor was the regular contact with Christians at work who steered him towards good local church.

Ground Rules

As with any activity, it is important to start with objectives. Given the extracurricular nature of a workplace prayer group, it is advisable to set out some ground rules which can be publicly scrutinised if necessary by anyone in the company – a kind of charter. This may fall into the following five areas:

1. Excellence in and Commitment to Job

A commitment to doing an excellent job of work, wherever we are called, must be our first priority so that we can honour God through our energy, application, creativity and relationship development. We should not ‘steal’ time from our employer.

- Being ‘salt and light’ means doing the job to the best of our ability – reflecting God’s calling.
 - Positive attitudes and actions speak louder than words.
 - We can embrace change and uncertainty without fear
 - We must value personal relationships

As Christians, we need to remember that, whatever happens to our careers, our ultimate security is in Christ.

Through our work, and following the principle laid out by Francis of Assisi, what we do and the way we do it is as important as what we say:

‘Preach the gospel to all the world – and if you have to, use words.’

The workplace should be seen as part of ‘God’s Training Ground’ where character development takes place (see ‘Purpose Driven Life’ by Rick Warren). God waits for us to act first and not the other way around. We need to do the right thing in spite of our fears and feelings.

2. Openness and Transparency

Some of the key areas which are foundational for a successful workplace group, and on which initial agreement between members may be necessary are:

- Acknowledging God’s sovereignty in the workplace
- Accepting the relevance of biblical teaching and its applicability
 - Practising and applying our faith and gifts
- Recognising and being sensitive to a diversity of opinions
- Not being a closed ‘holy’ club perceived as ‘predatory.’

Practising gifts, such as prophecy, may seem strange in a workplace - this is not a commonly accepted gift in some churches, let alone at work and should be experimented with carefully.

Example

On one occasion, a picture of a spiritual battle was given in prayer where there were problems over a specific individual in a position of authority. Being guided to stay apart from this situation was God's advice - in fact after six weeks the 'problem maker' had independently been asked to leave the company.

**A fixed place to meet booked for the same time each week can be helpful for developing a habit of attendance. Ideally the meeting room should be in a location where prayer can be undisturbed (a goldfish bowl in an open plan office is not ideal !)
Between 8 & 10 people is enough to generate a group size of sufficient critical mass to be self-sustaining, though in some industries, regular travel can limit the number of regular attendees.**

A prayer gathering should not create the perception of a private holy club, operating by stealth, that is a sub-culture of the organisation. But it can be difficult to achieve the right balance between openness and privacy. The availability of a well-thought 'charter' or ground rules document helps to answer any questions asked about the purpose and motive for meeting.

The Universal Truth from Psalm 37: 3-4

'Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.'

3. Confidentiality of Discussions

It is important in a corporate environment that a religious meeting is not seen as a source of information leakage, betrayal of confidences and gossip. It is particularly important to observe confidentiality of information when people from different levels in a company are meeting together in such a gathering. This therefore avoids the dangers of motives being mis-interpreted, and depends very much on the level of mutual trust achieved between those attending.

Where more than one company prayer group meets together, additional care needs to be taken with the content. Encouragement in general issues of personal faith and discipleship, supported by Bible study, may be more appropriate.

Example

A local group has started to meet with members of other prayer groups running in adjacent local companies. Together, they have had to think through what can and cannot be discussed and prayed about – company specific issues are avoided.

4. Areas of Support to complement to the Local Church

A workplace prayer group should not be a substitute for local church involvement. In fact both should ideally be linked to provide a consistent support framework 'home'

and 'away' at either end of the daily commute. Some appropriate themes for prayer can be:

- Day to day concerns that impact work life
 - Current projects / people / relationships
 - Work, home, family – achieving balance
- The 'success' of the business or organisation
 - Key upcoming decisions / decision-makers
 - Good decision-making
- Planning of outreach support – eg. Alpha posters.

Every Christian in a workplace group should be encouraged to invite their local church minister to visit their office, factory, school, hospital, surgery ... whatever is appropriate.

Example

A visit by a minister to one lunchtime prayer meeting stimulated a very helpful exchange of ideas, which led to a programme of studies being integrated into the church's teaching programme – on the subject of work.

The media have also developed a growing fascination with things spiritual in the workplace as people struggle for meaning in their day to day activities.

The Financial Times, for example, on 7 January 2003 referenced the way in which companies old and new are making links to church and para-church organisations to help support their personnel with pastoral HR issues.

Example

For companies in the IT services industry, the 1960s & 70s model of the shop floor industrial missionary is changing to accommodate different working practices. The pressures of globalisation, travel, flexible working patterns and rapid organisational change are just some of the differences in 'knowledge' industries. In some cities, Church Ministers for 'Work and Economic Life' are being appointed to reflect this broader need to connect communities with their major employers.

5. Good Practices and Processes

Developing best practice for workplace meetings is another area of importance, linked to openness and transparency. Some specific themes are:

- Respect for company premises, facilities (email) and time
 - Face to face contacts are often preferable to email for communicating information to a group. Copied e-mail has both advantages (publicity/distribution) but also disadvantages (can foster exclusivity – who is in, who is out).
- A workplace group should not be a substitute for professional counselling (for the reasons above). Know when to refer on cases, as appropriate.
- Male/female group issues. Be aware of lone male / lone female meeting dangers. This can lead to unhelpful company gossip.

Example

A broadcast email was sent to all desktops in support of the 'Stop the Afghanistan War' campaign. The strength of reaction to this unsolicited blanket invitation to a march in London led to a new internal corporate e-mail policy being developed concerning abuse of IT systems for personal use. This cited religious solicitation as being one of the specified banned areas.

The credibility of a prayer group can be damaged if blanket invitations to Christian activities receive the same adverse response. Care and wisdom is needed. We need to be aware of the company policies for email and intranet sites.

Seeking approval for activities is one way to tackle this – from the company, the HR department, the IT systems administrator, the facilities management organisation – perhaps all of them depending on what is relevant to your organisation.

Learning Points

The following points summarise some of the learning from this workplace prayer group experience:

- Pray through the ministry launch.
- Decide whether the group should meet formally or informally. Should there be a general invitation to all employees ? or choose just to pray through one issue at a time together over coffee or lunch?
- Seek God's agenda for your organisation. Remember He is already at work.
- Not all organisations are the same. Different corporate cultures and working patterns may make certain types of activity more appropriate or not – the workplace Christian group has to be sensitive to these
 - Respect the company, and expect God to move.
 - Set realistic objectives for the group.
 - People welcome offers of prayer.
 - Persevere ... many opportunities will come.

In summary, Christians need to be confident in who they are in their everyday work, trusting in God to go before them in all things. It may be important to pray for Christians to be raised up and placed by God in strategic positions within an organisation.

In fact God wants us to plan with him in this way for the organisations to which we find ourselves called, as in Proverbs 16:1, 3 & 9

'To man belong the plans of the heart ... but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue.'

'Commit to the Lord whatever you do ... and your plans will succeed.'

'In his heart a man plans his course ... but the Lord determines his steps.'

Perseverance will always be necessary, as Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5: 16 -

'Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.'

Break-Out Sessions and Feedback – Your experience

Following the talk, those present were split into groups to comment on and discuss the following three questions. The responses are collated below after each question:

What examples of workplace ministry would you recommend to someone else based on your own experience?

- Avoid assuming colleagues are not interested in joining / knowing about what you are doing
- Avoid assuming that a fish on a car means someone is likely to be responsive to an invitation – it may be a second hand car !
- Avoid using inappropriate ways of getting information about ‘undeclared’ Christians – eg. asking for names of people from security. This may result in a loss of credibility for the rest of the group.
 - Be aware that your primary role is to do your work well. Therefore be conscious of time taken on extra non-work activities, such as setting up & running a prayer group. Good witness through work is important.
- Existence and recognition of Christian group with regular meetings acts as a focus and support function for existing and new Christian staff – a networking resource.
- Groups build support for openness to talk about your Christian beliefs and activities in the course of everyday conversation.
- Running a series of public talks on subjects likely to attract non-Christians, such as ethics and the relevance of Christ/God.
- It is helpful to know of existing workplace ministry already in place – which ties to the need for suitable/appropriate advertising.
 - The requirement for critical mass (eg. 6) in the group to be able to support itself and carry on ministering to itself and the wider workplace.
 - Be aware and sensitive to the fact that some Christians will not wish to join workplace groups.
- Use Easter and Christmas as entry points to open talks and seek to engage the organisation in publicising the events – eg. blanket email, Intranet and posters.
- Successful use of prayer triplets and off-site prayer sessions – the latter to develop the group dynamics and personal relationships.
- Every day have members of the workplace group praying for the organisation.
- Use gospel presentations and publicise Alpha to witness to the organisation.
 - To simply pray together – not just programmes or events.
 - Not being afraid to start (or continue) to be small.
 - Organise a few social events as a group to develop relationships

How do you want to develop your organisation's current activities?

- Involvement in the senior levels of the organisation and in influencing the ethics, governance and ‘corporate DNA’
- Pray for the business and its commercial success: ask management what to pray for and keep a diary of answers
- Utilise further opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas from Christian organisations (such as the Boiler Room and Yeldall Manor) to offer a discovery experience for managers.
- Management of redundancies and performance measurement to a Christian framework.
 - Encourage commitment and continuity for the group.

- At a starting point – no group currently exists.

What could you dare to be praying for?

- To link up with other companies' Christian groups to encourage and build one another up.
 - Direct opportunities to share our faith.
- Vision to see God's agenda and purposes and not ours – and have the courage to follow God's agenda and plans.
- To stop explaining our actions and beliefs and start proclaiming the Gospel.
 - The new Area Director to be a Christian.
- Recognition that God's agenda for the workplace is much bigger than we can imagine ourselves.
 - A change of heart so that we don't feel we should be apologising for Christianity and the Christian message!
 - Confession of both personal and corporate shortcomings to God.
 - Pray for local and national company policies

Edited by Robin Scurlock, source notes by Magnus Smyly, 14 June 2003