

## **Diversity – An Opportunity for God’s Kingdom in the Workplace**

### **The Great Commission**

Do you remember the Great Commission of Jesus? Jesus’ last words in Matthew (Matt 28:18-20) were, ‘Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples’. That’s pretty clear isn’t it? That must mean Christians making themselves known in every facet of their lives. Jesus did not say ‘Make some people my disciples’. He said that everyone was to become his disciple. This ‘Great Commission’ must move all Christians to thinking beyond the narrow concept that Christianity is confined to personal lives and church worship, towards a 24/7 model of Christian witness. For those who spend most of their day in the workplace it must mean that the workplace provides an opportunity to live out the values of Christianity.

### **The Growth of Christian Workplace Groups**

There is a growing realisation amongst working Christians, we believe prompted by the Holy Spirit, that the workplace is part of God’s Kingdom, a place where the artificial barriers between the sacred and secular should be broken down. Many Christians in the workplace are now wrestling with how to fulfil this commission in the form of Christian workplace groups, which are springing up at an increasing rate in a varied range of workplaces.

We have seen the growth of some large Christian workplace groups in a number of national organisations. We can also see the tremendous progress in some local authorities where these groups are having a real impact and making a positive contribution to the organisations.

Christian workplace groups exist in some places where there is an active acceptance by the organisation that such groups in the workplace are positive. In other organisations there are smaller groups which are feeling their way tentatively to establish their place and role in the organisation, with some facing opposition from within the organisation. Nevertheless, the number of Christian workplace groups is growing, with each coming to terms with the potential opportunities and challenges that recognition by the organisation brings.

### **Organisational Diversity Frameworks**

One of the issues, which Christian workplace groups have to address, particularly in the public sector, is how they fit into organisational diversity frameworks. In some cases the

relationship between Christian groups and diversity frameworks has been a positive experience for all concerned, in others less so. Whatever experiences might be, we need to recognise that most of the current working environments in which we find ourselves have equality and diversity policies in place. The presence of diversity frameworks can be seen, either as a challenge to face or an opportunity for all of us to enthusiastically address. I would like to suggest that Christians should see these frameworks as positive and presenting exciting possibilities for Christians in the workplace.

There are a number of key issues for Christians in the workplace to consider.

### **Diversity at the heart of the Good News**

Many non-believers consider that the Christian faith is directly opposed to diversity principles. Nothing could be further from the truth. The starting point for all Christian workplace groups is that we can tell people that the roots of diversity can be found at the very heart of the gospel message and in particular the actions of Jesus.

In a patriarchal society, Jesus treated women with respect, He mixed with the poor, the marginalised, the outcasts, people with disabilities, people with dreaded skin diseases, people with mental health problems, people possessed by evil, people of different nationalities and from different traditions; people living by a different moral code. (See Appendix 1) Did Jesus reject any of them? No - Jesus met all who came to him with love and respect no matter what they had done. He might not always have approved of their behaviour of some or their lifestyles, but his starting point was love. I don't think you can have a more diverse approach than that or a better starting point – love and friendship for one another and for our work colleagues. That's a positive story to tell our work colleagues and senior managers as we try to mirror the approach of Jesus in our respective workplaces.

If you take a look at John 4: 1-42, you can read that lovely encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This sums up how Jesus sensitively crosses a whole range of barriers in treating the woman with sensitivity and respect. Diversity in action!

In Paul's letters we read how we all have different gifts and how they are all part of God's plan to bring all peoples together as one body. So we have the concept of diversity which as Christians we know can be unified as one in Christ. Paul would almost certainly have approved of those organisations that set up diversity frameworks which aim to get the most out of all the gifts that employees bring to their workplace.

When we talk about diversity in the workplace with colleagues and our Human Resource (HR) departments we can begin our discussions from a position of strength, confident that diversity is firmly rooted in the teachings of Jesus. This positive approach from Jesus towards difference in people and the various gifts that each individual potentially brings to a range of life situations, is an example to which we as Christians may aspire to in our everyday lives.

### **Rationale of Christian Workplace Groups within Diversity Frameworks**

When seeking recognition within the workplace and in particular to become part of the organisational diversity framework, it is important to understand the rationale of what you are asking for. You need to be prepared to face potentially challenging questions from senior managers within the organisation.

One of the reasons frequently put forward by those who are unsure or opposed to Christian groups being part of organisational diversity frameworks, is that: 'Diversity networks are for those groups which are discriminated against. Christians aren't discriminated against are they?' Well there are indeed workplace locations where Christians have had personal experiences of discrimination. This is however, probably not the right path to pursue. This view that diversity networks are solely linked into issues of discrimination is perhaps confusing the concepts of 'equality and diversity'.

Equality is indeed concerned with ensuring that no-one should experience discrimination or disadvantage, in this specific context, within the workplace. Equality is essentially concerned with fair treatment of all employees. Whilst we do not think that diversity can exist without equality, they should not be mistaken as one and the same thing. Equality and diversity are different concepts.

Workplace diversity is concerned with difference and a recognition that the workplace can be enriched by the different skills; qualities; personal attributes and beliefs that employees bring into the workplace. Diversity then is a celebratory expression, which good employers will see as one means of getting the best out of the workforce in terms of both performance and good employee relations. If we take diversity to mean this, then we begin to see why Christian workplace groups, along with others, should have a place within organisational diversity frameworks.

Those organisations that recognise the full breadth of staff network groups, including Christians, realise the business sense that this makes. People who come to work feeling able to openly be who they are and valued by the organisation, are likely to make better employees. This includes Christians! Supporting staff groups, and in our case, Christian

groups is not simply about legislation, it is about releasing potential in the workplace. Not only will this approach be helpful for the internal productivity of an organisation, but will also enhance its external reputation as an organisation that believes in maximising the potential of employees. This in turn is likely to have a positive effect on recruitment.

### **Ensuring clarity as a Christian Workplace Group**

When engaging in discussions with managers make sure that you are clear on what the aims of your group are. These must inevitably be determined by each individual group, but a common starting point might be to affirm the group's commitment to the organisation. For example the first aim of Christians in the Audit Commission is concerned with serving their employers faithfully. What better employees can an organisation have than workers who commit to being the very best employees that they can be? That's what God wants from us, to give our very best at work and it's important to get that message across to managers and indeed all our colleagues.

At a minimal level Christian workplace groups will probably want to achieve organisational recognition, ensuring that they have approval to meet on work premises. You may wish to get agreement on how you communicate with others within the organisation, Christians and non-Christians. This could entail establishing protocols for the use of an organisational intranet, or on a simpler level, use of the notice boards. Almost certainly you will need to seek agreement to have a place to pray. These are basic requirements for a Christian workplace group and can be regarded as the 'Organisational Recognition' stage. The stages which Christian workplace groups may progress through are set out in Appendix 2.

If however, you want your group to be integrated into the organisation so that you can influence policies and decision-making, you will need to seek to establish the group as part of the organisation's diversity framework. This means aspiring to be an active participant in formal diversity meetings which may enable your group to participate in consideration and development of both good organisational practice and policy.

### **Developing positive relationships within the Organisation**

Christian groups will inevitably be scrutinised by both colleagues and managers and so they should be. If we aspire to bring Christian values into the workplace, then these should be transparent and visible in the way we conduct ourselves at work.

One means of bringing a positive influence into the workplace is through prayer. Being available to pray for others and the organisation helps change views. You might like to

consider setting up a confidential prayer network for those who would like to avail themselves of this? We should not under-estimate the value or the power of prayer.

Find ways to talk to senior managers and HR team on a regular basis and emphasise the benefits that your group can bring to the organisation. Identify managerial champions who will support you at key strategic meetings. Don't be afraid to ask managers how you can make an effective contribution to the organisation. This might mean praying for particular issues or more specifically assisting in practical ways such as offering pastoral support. Again this makes good business sense for the organisation.

### **Working with other Diversity Networks**

It is most important that Christian workplace groups see themselves as part of the overall diversity framework and act in a corporate way. There is real strength to working in partnership. Talk to other diversity groups and whenever possible work together. This strengthens diversity groups as a whole and supports having a joint positive influence in the workplace. Identify both common ground and areas of potential differences with other networks and where there are differences seek to find a resolution. Where common ground cannot be found accept that there are differences.

Diversity is about difference and not squeezing everybody into a common straightjacket approach. For example some organisations seek to pursue the establishment of multi-faith groups for fear of offending any particular interest. Yet in most cases this is not an issue for those of differing faiths, who more often than not are tolerant and respect other beliefs. If diversity is about difference, why seek to blur those differences?

There are indeed some difficult issues to grapple with in working with other networks, in particular issues around potential conflicts with individual beliefs. However one particular Christian fellowship tackled this by stating that they unconditionally supported all workplace colleagues in their right to representation in the workplace; that they supported their right to be treated with an absence from prejudice; that they wished to love and befriend all their colleagues, whilst maintaining their own specific beliefs. This provided the basis for an excellent working relationship with other diversity groups and would seem to be a good starting point for all Christian workplace groups in establishing good working relationships with all work colleagues.

### **Pace of Change**

One of the challenges that diversity frameworks bring to Christian workplace groups is one of pace. How quickly do you move? For example: When should you ask for prayer

facilities? When can you perhaps hold Alpha in the workplace sessions? Can you hold a conference for Christian colleagues? Can you have an intranet site? What can you put on it? These are examples of some of the challenges which arise in determining how Christian workplace groups should develop. The answers to these are very much based on where your network is at any given time. There is no stock solution to this. You need to proceed at the pace which God wants for you. As in all things that varies between situation to situation.

### **Getting out of the Boat**

When Jesus came walking on the water to the disciples in the boat (Matthew 14: 22-32), some were cowering in the bottom of the boat whilst Peter enthusiastically leapt out. As Peter moved towards Jesus he began to sink as his faith wavered, but of course Jesus put out his hand and rescued him and held him above the waves.

I think that is a fundamental challenge to all Christian workplace groups. At some point we have to get out of the boat and work out where we go in the diversity frameworks of our organisations. God will show us when and how. We all need to move at the pace that God has determined for us but we can be sure that whatever we do, Jesus will be there holding our hand as we move forward. So in every workplace one thing is sure that we need to hold our individual situations in prayer before God and listen actively and attentively for his guidance so that his kingdom may come into every workplace in the land.

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