

Oxford Street Oasis Gerald Beauchamp



"If I come here I don't just want to be 'the help'. I'd like a focus to my ministry. What about the chaplaincy to the stores?" I was sitting in the study of Fr Alan Moses, the Vicar of All Saints, Margaret Street. I had recently returned from America and was looking for a new direction in ministry. There was the possibility of my joining the staff of this Central London church. I had known someone who carried out this role years ago. "Funny you should mention that," said Alan, "I've been talking to the Archdeacon about finding someone to do that." So, it was a done deal. I joined the parish on Advent Sunday 2007 and since then I have been devoting some of my time to retail chaplaincy.

I started with some research. There are now a number of town centre chaplaincies and the two that are nearest to me are in Uxbridge and Watford. I visited both of these and was impressed by the work. Watford has a highly professional team of lay volunteers resourced by a core staff. The Revd Richard Chewter is a trail-blazer. Having networked he has set up particular projects such as a presence in a



certain store and then trained lay chaplains drawn from town centre churches to develop the work. This has enabled him to move beyond the world of 9 - 5. In consultation with the local police a Street Angels scheme was set up whereby volunteers spend time late at night at weekends helping young revellers. This has had a marked impact on crime and antisocial behaviour. When I met him his latest wheeze was to become chaplain of a lap dancing club. He was leading an Alpha Course with some of the dancers and security personnel after the club closed around 3.00 am.

Armed with wisdom from Watford I ventured into Oxford Street. I talked to local stores and traders' associations, to neighbouring churches and other chaplains. I consulted Churches Together in Westminster. The West End is thick with places of worship. If you walk down Oxford Street from Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch you pass fifteen places of worship. Only one of these is on Oxford Street itself - the Salvation Army opposite BHS - but all of the others are just a block or two away. The French Protestant Church and St Patrick's (both in Soho Square) are only a stone's throw from Tottenham Court Road tube station. All Souls, Langham Place is clearly visible if you look north up Regent Street from Oxford Circus. Some churches already

support work-based ministry. John Lewis has a Methodist minister based at the West London Mission in Hinde Street who visits the store fortnightly. Many Christians meet for worship at lunchtime be that a weekday mass or newer expressions such as Worship@ LiteLunch which is on the prophetic end of the charismatic spectrum.

The word that kept cropping up again and again in my research was 'oasis'. Many of the existing retail chaplaincies have this in their title and Westminster Council designates places of worship as 'oases of calm'. Shopping in the West End is not simply about purchasing essentials but is an 'experience'. Those who shop here are likely to be doing it as a recreation. There are visitors and tourists who are combining shopping with seeing friends and/or doing something cultural. So the emphasis in the West End is about 'adding value'. Here the churches have a role. By being open through the day they are buildings which are not only interesting in their own right (many of them are listed grade 1) but they are also places where people can find peace and quiet and sometimes information or assistance as well, not to mention liturgy and study.



I have launched a website (www.oxfordstreetoasis.com). This online presence is designed to enable people who work in or visit the West End to find their way to the churches and see what might be on offer when they get there. So far, it's attracting plenty of hits although it's too soon to say whether it is having a measurable impact on the footfall through church doors. Ideas for the future include having a presence at the car free day on the first Saturday of December, one of the major shopping days in the year. The New West End Co organizes this event at which all the traffic is taken out of Oxford Street, Regent Street and Bond Street. There's plenty of street entertainment and it's a perfect platform for a Christian presence.

That's the vision and the beginning of work so what of the problems? I highlight two.

The first is that unlike places such as Watford there is little by way of ecumenical conversation in the West End. Big shows with eclectic congregations and rarefied traditions don't see talking to their neighbours as a priority. Ideally, I would like to develop a chaplaincy that both incorporates existing work and creates new initiatives.

The second is questioning the notion of chaplaincy itself in this context. It may be the wrong model for our times. If the word 'chaplain' conjures up the spectre of a priest moving from bed to bed in a hospital how far can this be a meaningful description of someone relating pastorally to hundreds of thousands of people working 24/7 in sometimes secure environments over a large area? Unlike Watford I doubt that even if the ecumenical partners were more engaged they would be able to supply people for a chaplaincy team because congregations are eclectic. Shrines generate and are functions of non-geographical communities so there is a disconnect between the congregation and the locality. As there is little or no ownership or interaction between people and place I can understand why some churches are only concerned for their own members and regard what surrounds them as wastelands ripe for mission.

I'm grateful to be in a place where I can ask hard questions and I am supported in doing so. In the present economic downturn many people who work in or come to the West End are also asking tough questions. If I and others can model how this can be done then we would have contributed to realizing the kingdom. *f*

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