

Conference Report

The Benefits of Diversity

The Contribution of Christian Staff Support Groups in London Borough Councils

Tuesday 28th December 2008, 6.00pm to 8.00pm

The Jubilee Room
House of Commons
Westminster

Organised by
The London Councils Christian Network in partnership with Transform Work UK

Introduction

The London Councils Christian Network meeting titled 'The Benefits of Diversity' took place in the Jubilee Room at the House of Commons on Tuesday 28th October 2008. Fifty-two delegates interested or working in the area of diversity from across the London Borough Councils, and further afield, took part in an evening of lively talks and panel discussion.

This report highlights the need to understand one's workforce, recognising that workforce profiles are changing, as is the nature of minority groups, including an increasing recognition of faith groups; how employers make the most of the benefits available from employee groups, in particular Christian groups?

The meeting highlighted successful examples of 'staff recognition' for Christian workplace groups from the public and private sector and the validity, within an inclusive diversity agenda, of Christian staff groups. Diversity networks were exhorted as 'expert' groups that the organisation can call upon, and is one of the many business benefits, which diversity groups can bring to the organisation. This report will give insights and show the positive contribution that staff networks, in this case Christian networks, can bring to the organisation, work colleagues and the community.

The meeting aimed at providing a platform for politicians, diversity professionals, policy developers and leaders of council Christian groups to hear and discuss the benefits of staff support groups. It also gave the opportunity to learn about the work of the newly formed London Councils Christian Network and the potential impact this group can have if given the recognition and support needed by London Councils.

We are particularly grateful to our Chair, Jim Dobbin, Member of Parliament for Heywood & Middleton, who serves on a number of select committees including, Communities and Local Government Committee. We are also grateful to our four keynote speakers, diversity professionals who took part in the discussions and the leaders of the Christian staff support groups.

The meeting was jointly organised by the London Councils Christian Network and Transform Work UK. We would also like to thank the Events Team at the House of Commons as well as Christians in Parliament for their support in enabling this meeting to take place.

Ros Turner
Groups Support Manager
Transform Work UK
14th November 2008

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Principle Speakers

CAROLINE WATERS, Director, People & Policy, for BT Group,



Caroline's policy responsibilities include human resources process design and re-engineering for employment, strategic skills and equality and diversity.

Caroline has previously held roles as Director People Networks, Director of Employment Policy, HR Strategic Partner for the BT Group, HR Manager BT Europe and Director HR Programmes and HQ Services. Caroline regularly provides advice and guidance to government and industry and is a member of the employers for work-life balance advisory group, the Equal Opportunities Commission's investigation advisory boards into pregnancy discrimination and flexible and part-time working, the NCH Corporate HR Strategy Group, the Scope Diversity Works Board, the 4Children Advisory Board, the Dignity at Work Partnership steering group, the Ambition:IT steering group, Chair of the Lone Parents working group, the Carers UK ACE national employers' group, the Employers' Forum on Belief, the Employers for Fathers Forum and a Director of the Stichting Permits Board.

Caroline has also judged a number of prestigious diversity awards including the CRE Race in the Media Awards, Help the Aged's Living Legends Awards and Working Families Employer of the Year Awards.

JOHN CASEY, Chair, Christians in the Audit Commission



John has had a management career in both public and not for profit sectors. He currently works for the Audit Commission, an independent body responsible for ensuring good value and high quality in local public services. John is one of the founding members of Christians in the Audit Commission, a workplace network that is a recognised part of the Commission's diversity agenda. The aims of the network are to serve their employer faithfully while sharing their faith and providing opportunity for others to explore Christianity. John and his wife, Kate,

live in Yorkshire where they are also part of the leadership team of a growing church community.

ADRIAN MILES, Workplace Consultant, Transform Work UK



Dr. Adrian Miles has worked in Local Government as a senior manager for many years. More recently he was employed as a Lead Inspector in 2000 and then Head of Operations for the Audit Commission in the West Midlands region. He was also Chair of Christians in the Audit Commission. In 2007 Adrian retired from the Audit Commission to help kindle his passion for seeing Christians thrive in their places of work and is now a member of the Transform Work UK team. Adrian also has a Master of Science degree in Public Sector Management and in 1994 was awarded a PhD for his research into 'Managing Stress amongst Professional Carers'. Adrian has published a number of articles around his work and has conducted many stress/motivation workshops in the workplace.

LORIS RICHARDS, Coordinator, London Councils Christian Network



Originally employed in the world of banking, Loris felt the call from God to move into local government and is currently employed in the field of accounting. She is the leader of the Merton Staff Christian Fellowship and was unanimously elected last year to represent the London Councils' Christian Network. She has a busy schedule as a wife and mother, but finds time somehow to share the good news of Jesus Christ in local schools on weekdays as well as leading the LCCN Personal Development Workshop about 4 times a year, helping others to release their potential in God. Loris has travelled widely and recently adopted an orphanage in Jamaica! Her strong personal testimony is that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me".

Introduction by Mr Jim Dobbin MP

Dear ladies, gentlemen and friends, welcome to the House of Commons. I am Jim Dobbin, Member of Parliament for Heywood and Middleton, which is in the North West of England and is the largest constituency in Greater Manchester. You will probably recognise from my accent that I am from another land.

I understand that we have a mixture of Christians and non-Christians in the room this evening. I am a practising Christian myself; I am Catholic. I think it appropriate to begin with a short prayer in line with the issues we are going to be discussing this evening.

"Oh, God, Ruler of all, please direct all who represent and work in local government. Help and guide us today to make wise, righteous decisions that will promote peace and prosperity within our local authorities in accordance with your will and purposes. Amen."

Here in the House of Commons, I am also Chairman of the All-Party Pro-Life Group that has been extraordinarily busy this past two or three years. Right now, the bill is in the Lords and will be voted on tomorrow. However, this does not occupy all my time as I have constituencies to look after and many other interests.

I worked in the National Health Service for 34 years, was a member of local government for 16 years and a leader of my local authority (Rochdale) before coming to London. This means I have a background in local government as well as a politician. From this point of view it is both really interesting and extremely encouraging to see what you are attempting to do here in the London Borough Councils.

In the last eleven or twelve years that I have been here, these issues (Christian Workplace Groups) certainly have not been on the agenda in my local authority. It is encouraging to see that we are beginning to discuss them seriously. There is a tremendous amount of help and support that can be given to groups who wish to exercise the right of diversity of faith in the workplace and many benefits that can be accrued to those workplaces and to the individuals.

Here in the House of Commons there is a strong Christian ethos. All the political parties have their own Christian groups and you will know that before each session of parliament there are prayers both in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords. The Chaplain, who is Church of England, to the Speaker, who currently happens to be a Catholic, leads those prayers in the House of Commons.

There is also quite a large, and growing secular movement across the country. We sometimes see here in the House of Commons the effects of the pressure originating from some of those sources in some of the legislation that is introduced. There was a piece of legislation last year that might have been passed, namely to do with Faith Schools. The intention was to move an amendment on it, but the strength of feeling communicated itself to the Secretary of State, who withdrew it.

This illustrates the sort of influences that come to bear in this context, and I am quite sure there are other areas in government and in the public sector where you are able to communicate your views. It is about being together, working together and coordinating your strategy.

I understand there are some who do not profess Christianity here today because they have other roles in local government and local authorities. For that reason I am looking forward to the discussion tonight which I think will be lively and productive. The whole aim of this process is to move forward and on that I am sure we are all agreed.

Dr Adrian Miles, Workplace Consultant, Transform Work UK

Good evening everybody. It is a real privilege to be here this evening to speak to you. It is my intention to set the context for the evening and to provide an overview of some of the issues, which may be raised during the evening.

I now work for Transform Work UK. Our aims and objectives are to:

- Inspire Christians to transform the workplace and the nation.
- Work with Christian groups within a range of organisations and professional groups
- Assist in bringing benefits to the groups and organisations

We firmly believe that Christians have a place within the workplace and that through their influence they can transform the nation. I need to say immediately that I make no suggestion that Christians are the only people who have a contribution to make in the workplace, but as Christians we should be particularly motivated to give our best to our employers, colleagues and the people whom we serve in the community.

There are over 140 Christian workplace groups affiliated to Transform Work UK (TWUK). They range in size from three or four people to 150 in the Audit Commission and, in BT, in excess of 1000. There are in fact lots of Christian groups in the workplace, and, one of the key aspects of this is a trend towards employers being increasingly prepared to support Christian groups as well as other network groups within the diversity framework. I think that is very encouraging and we should be grateful for employers who are taking that step. Tonight's meeting is jointly sponsored by TWUK and the London Councils Christian Network (LCCN) and is another example of the way things are moving. Jim mentioned at the outset how encouraging it is to see LCCN come from nothing to reach out across the whole of London. It is fantastic!

There are over 50 national professional groups affiliated to TWUK for example, the Association of Christian Teachers, the Lawyers Christian Fellowship, and the Veterinary Christian Fellowship. The Christian Fire Fighters was quite recently established in 2007 but Christians in Communication was established in 1887, showing that Christian groups have been around a long time and there are all manner of different types of professional groups in existence and operating. Again, it is very encouraging.

Here are a couple of questions I would like to put to you. The first is: Why and how do Christian groups fit into Diversity Frameworks? I hope that by the end of the evening we will have some ideas for ourselves about that. I then want to offer a challenge to the Christian groups. Is it a positive experience? If it is not it should be. It should be something about which we can be joyful. I think it is important to recognise that diversity is at the heart of the Christian faith. If there are any HR managers here, I imagine some of you may think it is not always the case. Sometimes people say, *'Why should Christians be in the diversity framework?'* I think as Christians we would argue we should have a place in diversity because it is at the very heart of our Christian faith.

We have often heard remarks such as, *'Christians- they are a bit prejudiced aren't they, and they don't always take the right view of members of different diversity groups do they?'* At these times we have to remind ourselves of how Jesus behaved. Jesus treated women with respect in a patriarchal society. He mixed with the marginalized and outcasts, he healed people with disabilities, he was prepared to touch people who had leprosy- totally taboo in those days. He healed people with mental health problems and, significantly, at a time when there was a great deal of prejudice and rigid laws he embraced people of different nationalities and of other faiths. He crossed boundaries, associating with people who lived by different moral codes. He befriended tax collectors who in there days swindled people out of their money. He mixed with prostitutes. Jesus did not always approve of what people were doing but his first step toward them was out of love and friendship. Our basis for being part of a diversity framework flows from Him. It flows from the very centre of our Christian faith.

So why should we be interested in work? Work lies at the very heart of the Bible. From Genesis and Exodus through to the gospels there are references to the importance of work and its position in relationship to the community. TWUK does not see any distinction between being a Christian and the workplace; the secular and sacred, our faith is one and the same. If we are work for employers, we work as Christians - we don't "switch off" and become a Christian when we go home. We are Christian one hundred percent of the time.

Thus we have Jesus at the heart of diversity and we have work at the heart of the Bible and that is the context from which we begin. I suggest that Christians have a legitimate role in the workplace. In that context with Jesus as the starting point, the issue is one of love and friendship for one another and for all our work colleagues. It requires the absence of prejudice, support for colleagues in the workplace, perhaps defending them when things are wrong, putting an arm round their shoulder no matter what their faith is. They do not have to be Christians; it does not matter what other groups they belong to. This is our starting point. Christian workplace groups are totally opposed to discrimination and prejudice. Holding Christian views does not mean we are prejudiced against people, but we are entitled to hold our own views on things as everybody is. However, our starting and finishing points are love and friendship, commitment to our organisation, commitment to our colleagues, commitment to those we serve. The idea of a Christian group is not a clique meeting only for Christians.

Diversity networks are for those groups, which experience discrimination. That doesn't happen to Christians, does it? I'm sure we have all been faced with this question or perhaps we have even held this view. Christian groups can be discriminated against but that should not be our starting point. I want to suggest that there is a difference between equality and diversity. Equality at its simplest is about fairness and I do not believe it is possible to have diversity without equality. To me, diversity is about added value and about celebrating the skills, talents, personalities and the people that we are. It is about bringing who and what we are to the workplace. In that sense Christians have a place in diversity frameworks, because we bring ourselves to work and we bring ourselves committed to our employers.

There are different levels of Christian groups within any diversity framework and it really does not matter where you are. It depends on what is right for you and for the organisation. There is the 'Early Formation stage', when one Christian says to another Christian in the organisation, "I wonder whether we can meet and perhaps pray or share the scriptures?" Sometimes people will make contact, go out and have a coffee and pray in the lunchtime away from the premises. The next phase is crucial and I would say it is crucial for employers; I see it as a minimum that Christian groups should be striving to achieve. This is the 'Organisational Recognition stage'; when the organisation is aware that you exist as a Christian group and agrees to give you the use of rooms to meet, pray, read the Bible. They may agree to your use of notice boards or the e-mail system, all of which are important. When you have achieved these, you are getting organisation recognition.

The next phase is something with a bit more impact namely the 'Organisational Integration stage'. This is where the organisation starts to recognise that it is not a question of them helping you but actually of you offering something to the organisation. Examples include having meetings with managers on a regular basis keeping them informed about what you are doing, or writing up reports for them to demonstrate that you are making a difference. You may even be consulted about policy, allowed to share in policy-making and being able to make a real contribution to the workplace. The fact is that as a group you have something to offer the organisation, the organisation accepts and as a result you become gradually integrated into the organisation.

The final phase is the 'Organisational Celebration stage'. At this point the organisation is proud to have a networking Christian group, and is willing to declare to the outside world, "We have many diversity groups including a Christian one and they are useful and helpful". Some organisations have seen the wisdom of this in recruitment policy. The organisation is convinced that "This is good, we're really pleased to have you!" At this level you're working along diversity networks and positive relationships start to develop in the workplace. That is fantastic! However, it is not necessary to go through all

these processes. You need to be where you want to be and to have what is right for the organisation. Some of the contributions a network group might make towards its organisation include: commitment and increased productivity, increased commitment to colleagues, working positively between the networks, making the most of your skills and abilities to raise ethical standards. This involves real change. If people are prepared to work with their whole being I believe they become much more satisfied employees. I believe there is much more commitment to the organisations, colleagues and clients. One of the signs that all is not well within

an organisation is that employees regard clients as a problem and begin to blame them. The presence of a contributing active networking group can counter this by fostering a much more positive attitude amongst employees. This can apply to all network groups and it also includes Christians. As Christians I think we want to be included in that framework.

In conclusion, Christian workplace and professional groups are about serving our colleagues, our organisation and our community faithfully. This should always be at the top of our list of aims and objectives. We do this because of what we believe. Clearly this is not exclusive to Christians but we would like to play a part in it, and it is our hope that employers would recognise that and in particular within the London Borough Councils.

Caroline Waters, Director, People and Policy, BT plc

I have been invited to speak to you about BT's philosophy as a hard-nosed business. Why do we support diversity groups?

I will tell you a little about the history of BT Christian Network and how the group fits in with the eleven different people networks at BT, what benefits are brought to a hard-nosed business by having a Christian network and I will explore the business case for Christians and faith in the workplace.

What is BT's philosophy concerning support for diversity groups? At BT we believe it is essential to develop and share good practice to do with religion, belief and non-belief. This is because we actually have represented in our workforce all of the above. We must not fear belief or non-belief. They coexist; we need to embrace them and understand how to do so in the workplace. As a business, we are aware that we are all going to face certain issues, particularly in the current economic climate, and therefore it is really important for us to work with expert groups.

We regard our networks as expert groups because we need to develop solutions that enable us to create a much more inclusive workplace. Talent is the only thing in which the business should be interested; it is the only thing that should differentiate people in the workplace. Talent does not have a passport or a belief system; it is not gender-based; it just is. Talent lies within every one of us. I believe we perform to our best level and release that talent when we are able to be ourselves.

When BT talked to its employees it became obvious to us that their deeply held beliefs could not be left at the door. In order to get the best out of people, we had to be confident about making decisions about the way their views were incorporated at work. We could not pretend that they did not exist. We also understood that if you hold to a religion or philosophical belief you are going to encounter barriers in the workplace.

Some of those barriers might be operational. Think about BT. We operate twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty five days a year. That is demanding and requires certain things that may be difficult in the context of faith for certain people. With thirty million customers and a hundred thousand colleagues there might also be some attitudinal issues.

We had to really think about that. We thought we had structured a lot of provision into our policies on equality and diversity, but those policies had both intellectual and physical manifestation. They included issues with catering, uniform, and flexible working, all valid. However, my main aim was to give our people a voice. I wanted to engage with them and really understand what real, practical advice people needed to really integrate and really feel able to contribute. I also believe that the difficult issues had to be faced and tackled.

We employ adults at BT! They are capable people managing their lives and hold to their beliefs, capable of standing up and expressing their feelings in a mature way. There is absolutely no reason why this could not be possible in our workplace. I really wanted that for the people working for my business.

When Peter here approached me, in November 2003, about creating a Christian network I felt sure it was the right thing to do. We already had a family of networks and I thought this would be a great addition to that. Of course BT has always had prayer groups or Christian groups. Christians in Communication was in fact developed by BT's forerunner, the Post Office, and yes it was established in 1887. That is a very rich history of Christianity in the workplace. However, when I thought about it, there had not been any interaction with the business, other than shared premises. The groups had been tolerated and supported but I wanted more. I wanted involvement and consideration and I thought that with Peter and his emerging leadership team we could achieve that.

Therefore I asked them to put together a business case. We are a business and there are certain rules about how to become a BT network. All our networks are covered by a common and transparent governance process. They are required to meet certain criteria, such as holding elections for key posts and holding an annual AGM. They have to be open and transparent in order to win the right to carry the BT brand because we wear it with pride.

In March 2004 the network gained the blessing of our global equality and diversity board. It is not so long ago since BT Christian Network (BTCN) comprised just a few people and I'm proud to say that today they have over eleven hundred members in sixteen countries and twenty- two fellowship groups. The network is going from strength to strength.

The network provides a voice for Christians in our business. We do not always find that voice easy to hear to as it is not always easy to listen to different people, but we believe at BT that difference is all about this. Difference makes us strong. The unique perspectives and experiences of the network are changing what we do and the way we do it. The network informs our policies and sometimes challenges our business decisions. We are open to that challenge because it is not possible to be a little bit diverse. You cannot speak with one voice and behave otherwise. I do not believe a responsible business does that.

BTCN offers us advice on everything from advertising strategy to programming our vision service. We understand that among 30 million customers we are in contact with people of every faith and background and we really want to understand how to become more relevant.

The network is integrated into BT. Its primary objectives, now quoting from their web site, is "To act as a central reference point for Christian information in BT, to provide a Christian perspective on business policy and strategies and to support and encourage Christians in BT- a fine ambition for any network! It provides a very valuable service to its members, which is why it has developed such momentum and is growing. Their services include a newsletter; they have a fantastic web site (probably to be expected of BT!), which reaches right around the globe. It includes a prayer for today, details about upcoming events, global activities, local activities useful links, a recently launched free Bible programme and all sorts of interviews and pod casts.

BT has around twenty-five thousand Customer Service people and they have their own radio station. I even found a little pod cast of Peter talking about Christianity on it because I think the network has to be meaningful for everybody in the organisation. We must find ways of communicating with people and

our Customer Service people find it hard to leave their station, so they listen to the radio. An obvious way of reaching out to them.

The BTCN prayer team is a fantastic resource. It comprises a group of 50 people to whom anybody can turn to ask for prayer (by e-mail or other ways) whether it be a personal matter such as an ill relative or a difficult business issue at work. This is a fantastic way to demonstrate integration between life and work and work and life. In today's world I do not think these can be separated. Peter can give you much more information about the other services. We have many case studies of BT people who are members of the Christian and other networks who will tell you that their experiences have given them skills, which they are now using to further their careers. We see this as a development tool, something that is positive in every aspect of working life.

As I said earlier the Christian network is very much part of our family of networks. There are eleven of them and they include our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender group, which is called Kaleidoscope. We also have a Muslim group... there is a network for everybody. The chairs of those networks meet about every six weeks either face to face or by video conferencing. They often jointly sponsor discussions of issues and host events and they have even tackled some subjects, which could be thought of as taboo in the workplace such as homosexuality and Christianity. We are a mature organisation and we want people to be who they are to debate. The bottom line is respect for each other. Respect is where it begins and mutual respect binds people together. They may not agree but they do try and understand each other.

We believe that encouraging network groups is actually strengthening our community as well as our workplace because there is still certain segregation in our housing, health and education systems. For many people from a diverse community, contact and integration occur only at work. This is incredibly important not just for individuals but also for a nation moving forward.

As I said, at BT we have 30 million customers, in 170 countries, sharing an identity and a common set of values and purpose with over 100,000 colleagues, 16,000 of whom are based in 61 different countries around the world. At any time when working for BT, around 45 percent of us will be serving a customer who comes from a fundamentally different background and culture. We need people who can understand and anticipate the needs of those diverse customers. Of course there is a place for Christians just as there is a place for every group. All employers must take positive steps to create an environment where it is possible to contribute, to be yourself and bring that to work.

What we are attempting is to create an environment where everybody has the same opportunities to develop and progress, based on merit without bias, and I believe the only way we can do that is by demonstrating that everybody has a contribution to make in their own way. However, that is only possible if you are part of a progressive organisation, one that embraces and supports change and one that believes in its people. These people within BT are creating a diverse and market-relevant product we need. They form a vital part of our workforce. I have absolutely no doubt that the Christian Network is an important element in achieving that. I have seen the power of the network; in fact I think the Christian Networks are powerful resources for employers if they care to reach out to them, not just for business in general but also for parliamentarians.

Inclusion, integration and tolerance must be part of daily activity, for without them we cannot create a thriving, successful and relevant business in an incredibly diverse world. It is my passionate belief that those things lie at the heart of establishing a thriving and sustainable society of which we want to be part. Each of you has a role to play in creating that world. It starts with confidence in who you are and confidence in your employer to let you be that person. Thank you.

John Casey, Chair, Christians in the Audit Commission

First may I thank you for the invitation to come and talk tonight. I would like to speak to you a little about our story within the Audit Commission and hopefully give you a working example of some of those themes about which Adrian was speaking a moment ago. I would also like to say to Caroline that I applaud the leadership from BT - it is fantastic. It is a great example of what we want to achieve collaboratively.

I will talk about the impact our own organisation has had, its relationship with the other staff networks, and some of the challenges we still need to overcome together.

Does anybody here have teenage children? Quite a few! You will recognise that raising teenagers is really about going through a time of change - not just for them but for you. One feature of the development of the diversity agenda seems to me not unlike that parent-teenage relationship and I hope to illustrate this.

It came into sharp focus for me this week when I had a breakfast meeting with the chairs of the staff groups at one of the Fire and Rescue authorities. It was fascinating to listen to them. They are only about 12 months old and still working out their identity and how they relate to their parent organisation. The host organisation itself has a history of not being altogether very diverse and may be perceived as having taken a somewhat paternal approach.

It has recognised the need to improve its diversity performance and is genuinely attempting to do so and must be given credit for that. However, their method has been to set up staff networks because they believe it to be a great idea. They have appointed management champions and invited people very enthusiastically to form these networks, but there is a question about who is the driving force behind this. Are the networks intended merely as a tool for the authority or is a more mature relationship to be sought? To return to the teen parenting analogy, the same issues arise, namely who makes the decisions, what are the standards, what about rights, responsibilities and expectations?

These networks are at a very early stage. Their primary aim at this moment is to support their members in matters of equality and treatment. They will move rapidly into a season where it will be necessary to manage a more mature relationship together. Listening to them has made me aware of both how similar and diverse our own journey in the Audit Commission has been. I present two challenges that have come out of that.

First, if you are working within an organisation the question must be asked, How mature is your own diversity agenda and what implications does that have for the staff networks you aim to encourage, bearing in mind the relationship between them?

Second, (something referred to by Adrian and posed by Mr Alistair Burt MP) Is Christianity a legitimate diversity cause? You will have already experienced some strong answers to that and I hope our own story will add weight.

The Audit Commission is literally 'all over the place!' That is to say, it has a national workforce with a central directorate, regional centres and local offices leading to obvious complications in how the network is organised and how it communicates internally. Referring to Christians in the Audit Commission (CitAC), we originated from very informal and humble beginnings in a curry house in Bradford when five of us met together just to say, 'You are a Christian- so am I; what are we going to do about it?'

Now CitAC represents the largest network within the Audit Commission, 7.5% of our workforce. I believe that a clue to our growth lies in that beginning and I really want to emphasise this, because it is something that has already been inherent in both of my colleagues' presentations. It is that, we did not start because we considered ourselves a harassed minority. There are always issues of inequality and

discrimination that need to be addressed in the workplace but we did not start because we felt there was a lack of opportunity. On the contrary, we were born out of a real desire to serve the organisation. We believe God called us; it is part of our mission as Christians to serve our workplace faithfully. We wanted to find and support one another in living out our Christian faith at work. We saw no sense of conflict between ourselves as Christians and as workers for the Commission.

The first step was to establish our identity as Christians in our workplace. We began by circulating a weekly communication entitled Thought for the Day – a series of Scriptural thoughts for each working day, together with a covering email including prayer requests, reports and personal stories. We took advantage of national staff conferences to hold breakfast meetings, eventually identifying a steering group with various people taking responsibility for some of the roles, which were emerging.

Next we approached the Commission's senior management to see how we might engage more effectively as a staff group. To our delight and surprise the then-Director of HR received us with great enthusiasm and actually challenged us to be more visible, more representative and to make an active contribution to the Commission's life. We were invited to comment on the Commission's policies and decisions, and to assist with staffing needs and issues. Subsequently, the Commission developed its first diversity scheme and invited CitAC to become one of the Commission's first recognised staff groups. In effect CitAC provided the working model for the Commission's emerging approach. It demonstrated how people would connect and how it would feel organisationally to have a staff group. In this way it was remarkably formative in terms of getting the Commission involved.

We now have five staff networks. They are a standard point of reference for the Commission in developing policies and practices. Directorates and teams throughout the Commission work with them in varying ways, offering and seeking advice, engaging us in consultation and developing corporate strategies. Each network has a sponsor at MD level and the network chairs all participate in our Diversity Strategy Board.

Apart from CitAC the other four staff networks are: DART, which represents people with a disability, ENRG which represents people from black and minority ethnic communities, Flexinet, which supports flexible workers and OUT which represents people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Each network has a sponsoring director who sits at the most senior team within the commission.

En route, we have discovered that the benefit of a broader approach to diversity, is not just about addressing discrimination – there is legislation to deal with that. Diversity is about celebrating and making the most of who people are and what they bring to work. I am avowedly and unapologetically a Christian – it is what makes me who I am. The fact that I am able to be 'authentic' at work is a great joy for me and is one of the things that makes me proud to say I work for an organisation that values its people in this way.

So what has CitAC done and what impact have we had?

We have:

- Provided structured input on diversity issues
- Initiated and delivered projects e.g. a piece of research on 'Volunteering and Giving' that has led to changes in HR policies, with direct consequences for expanding the skills and knowledge of our workforce
- Organised the Commission's first diversity conference in 2005 at Westminster which blazed a trail for subsequent, highly successful conferences
- Given weekly prayer support for the Audit Commission. In the last few weeks we have prayed for the Audit Commission Board, its Audit Committee, its management team, local teams, the Audit Commission and colleagues as we go through times of structural change, together with the work of the Commission nationally.
- Offered prayer support on an individual basis to colleagues. For example, we received this specific piece of feedback from a colleague going through a relationship crisis. They wrote: *"I could not have persevered during the second half of last year without this support - and can truly say that the*

support I received through CitAC helped me to feel strong and safe, loved and cared for at a time when I was feeling quite devastated and rejected."

- Networked with other groups and organisations, to encourage them and share good practice. E.g. British Airways, the Home Office and other Whitehall departments. This has meant acting as ambassadors for the Audit Commission in promoting good diversity practice within the public sector.
- Been a means of boosting recruitment and retention of staff. The very existence of the staff networks has been a major boost to recruitment and retention. We also have documented evidence that CitAC has been a key factor influencing people's decision to stay with the organisation. One member of staff writes:

CitAC ... has seized an opportunity to mobilise Christians in the workplace in a practical way. Never before have I been at such liberty to profess my faith in work & meet with other Christians officially. It is one of the main reasons I continue to labour at the Commission as it is a truly enlightened organisation in this respect!"

We have done this by being organised, and therefore visible and vocal - we have provided a voice and a point of reference for contact and consultation

How do we relate with the other staff networks?

Our relationships are characterised by a very fruitful and respectful relationship with the other staff networks. We do not submerge our individual identities or agree to endorse each other's agenda. What we have found is common ground.

This year the network chairs agreed a common set of objectives, namely to:

- Support network members
- Support the Audit Commission by:
 - Challenging
 - Consultation and engagement
 - Raising awareness by celebrating diversity

We also agreed some arrangements for joint working by:

- Formally coordinating diary network events,
- Chair meeting regularly,
- Co-ordinating a joint perception survey of the networks;
- Possible joint newsletters
- Network stand at national conference and sub-regional away days.
- Joint network page on D&E Intranet homepage
- Working together on PMS
- Exploring some of the big issues

One example of joint working was the designing of this year's diversity conference in conjunction with Comms and the Diversity Team.

There must be dynamism; there must be increase. It is my hope that I have demonstrated the values of a Christian network group to you this evening.

Loris Richards, Coordinator, London Councils Christian Network

Good evening everyone, it is a privilege for me to be here this evening to represent the London Councils Christian Network (LCCN). First I give thanks to God for Merton. I look forward to working there every day with my colleagues and friends. So much has been happening in Merton. It has been amazing to reflect on where we started and where we are today.

We began by praying together in any location available. The group grew phenomenally! People began to approach us for help and we started to see things happening, as we supported one another as

Christians. Later those of other faiths and none began to come to us and ask for prayer. We would quickly pray for them; they would leave and soon afterwards we would receive an e-mail to say that an operation went well or describing an improved situation after receiving our help and prayer support.

It is always good to know that although I am at work there is a way of meeting with other groups in order to share our difficulties. It is not our aim to solve problems, as we do not have the expertise or capability to do so, but in encouraging people to talk and pray, we can relieve some of the burden. People come to work with their troubles and to know there is someone with a listening ear is a great blessing.

How does a Christian Fellowship engage with its workplace for mutual benefit?

It is a support group not just for fellow Christians but for all employees. One example I would like to give you is what happened on the day of the London Bombing. Our group was called upon to provide a helping hand. We are located in Morden, which is where the Northern Line terminates. The Christian fellowship was ready and waiting at the ground floor reception to provide a cup of tea and a listening ear to anyone who approached us. We offer help to whoever, whenever, however. There is no restriction.

We have made available a confidential prayer box for all employee requests, and pray for those needs daily. Sometimes people just open the door, drop in their prayer request and disappear. We do not need to know any specifics; all they have to do, is put it in the box. When we go to the prayer room the box is placed in the centre of the room and prayed over. Often we receive an e-mail thanking the team and informing us of the outcome. We pray regularly for fellow colleagues who are experiencing crises relating to medical, family and workplace issues.

We pray daily for the Chief Executive and we make sure he knows it! He is a good man with many decisions to make and a great deal to manage; he - and all other Chief Executives- need to be covered in our prayers. We pray for the members of the Council's cabinet, the heads of departments, our managers and customers who use the Council's services.

We encourage Christians and all employees of Merton Council to perform their jobs to the best of their abilities. This is essential. We have to do our jobs effectively and efficiently. If we are absent, we should be missed!

This prayer coverage has had a tremendous impact. Combined with the leadership's initiative to focus on the area of sickness/absence, it has resulted in workers taking less time off due to sickness. It is amazing but the members of the Christian fellowship never want to go on annual leave! They prefer to be at work. They miss being together because the network is so strong; when one is hurting or suffering they all feel it. Sometimes this takes the form of practical action - a visit, some flowers. Colleagues feel better when they realise this is not HR checking up on them but the Christian fellowship visiting in love. It also demonstrates that we practice what we preach!

Members of MSCF have also been seeking the Lord for wisdom, guidance and understanding concerning how it is possible to tell others about Him without causing offence. We have been surprised by how much can be shared without upsetting others. One of the ways we do this is to invite all those on our mailing list to a Bible study at the Baptist Church opposite the Civic Centre. When colleagues enquire about our weekends, we enjoy telling them that we attended church and generally exude excitement about the time we spend with God. It has been known for people to ask, "what we are on, and can they have some?"

Another activity in which members of MSCF have been involved in is working with the Youth Offending Team. On a voluntary basis they mentor young people and encourage them to be the best that they can be, assisting them to look at their innate skills and alerting them to the fact that they can make valuable contributions to their communities. It is a question of changing one person's life at a time. Working for the council is much more than being in the office; it is about community involvement. It is

the desire of MSCF to see lives changed for the better, regardless of faith or profession. It is possible to have a positive impact on society, and this is just one example.

Members of MSCF recently connected with a multi-faith organisation known as the Local Safeguarding Children Board that focuses on protecting children in the London Borough of Merton. This is a group facing the challenge of doing something for young people in our community, in a climate of rising gun, knife and drug crime.

Members of MSCF are involved with a local school and provides support and assistance with fund-raising. These events form a tremendous platform for community fellowship and cohesion as teachers, children and their parents are actively involved. The Mayor has attended events to encourage the children.

MSCF has developed an effective working relationship with the local Baptist Church and participates in the annual Christmas Carol Service held for local business and the Council's staff. For some people it is the first opportunity they have to attend a church throughout the year.

Personal Development Weekend Away

These developmental weekends began with members of MSCF meeting for a weekend away for quiet reflection, Bible study and teaching. They have now been extended to include the London Councils Christian Network membership; the fellowship is awesome and we spend time getting to know each other better. They allow us time out to seek a closer relationship with God as well as supporting and encouraging those of us experiencing challenges. They invigorate us to continue offering constant support for fellow colleagues when we return to the workplace. Places are funded by participants. Each individual is encouraged to identify his or her potential and to 'step out of the boat' in order to realise their purpose in contributing to the enhancement of the workplace and their everyday lives.

The London Councils Christian Network

Some members of MSCF have left and gone to other boroughs. They have been able to assist the development of Christian staff groups in those boroughs. MSCF have provided support to these networks whenever possible. Alongside this we began discovering Christian groups in other London boroughs.

The London Councils Christian Network was birthed in 2007 and is therefore still in its early stages. Its purpose is to encourage work place support and fellowships in all the London Boroughs. Our primary role is to pray for God's guidance concerning the direction taken and all strategic decisions made by the Chief Executives and the leadership as a whole. For those of you new to LCCN seeing us in action for the first time, please consider your duty to pray.

In addition to providing support, LCCN hopes to share best practice across the existing London Councils Christian groups in the 33 Boroughs in the longer term to reach outside London with this. LCCN would like to encourage all councils in London to support their Christian groups. At this time our experience informs us that this is a major focus. Some of the groups are not permitted to identify themselves as Christian or even share Scripture together. This means we need to pray for managers and diversity teams. They need to see that we have much to offer; that allowing us to be who we are in the workplace will produce great benefit. We have had experience that encouraging continual prayer for the leadership in decision-making, and being a source of practical support can be beneficial to any workplace; though the issues and challenges will be specific to their council/community.

With this in mind, LCCN hopes to encourage and foster the forging of stronger links within our community: to provide training and support for leaders and members of LCCN network groups; to become the preferred source for mentoring and to support and encourage each other as individuals. Leaders and members of LCCN now meet together on a regular basis. To find out the details of the next meeting email: info@lccnetwork.org.uk

Questions

Paul: Southwark Council.

Do you get funding from your organisations, do you have a paid member of staff and if so how is he/she funded?

Caroline Waters

We do have funding on an equal basis for all of the networks. It is not as much as we would like but we make do. As part of the overall governance structure of the networks each has a budget, which is managed throughout the year and overseen with help. We do not participate in spending decisions but we help with the accountancy process. A member of my team who is completely independent is paid by BT to do that.

Loris Richards

We do not have any direct funding but we do have access to resources such as the intranet and photocopying. All our other activities are paid for by us e.g., catering for outside meetings.

John Casey

Support from the Audit Commission comes in kind. We are given staff release time to run the networks – all the networks, not just the Christian one. We are also provided with facilities such as access to the intranet and so forth. We have a central diversity budget, which is allocated out to all the networks and then used in a coordinated manner. For example, publicity will be organised by our communications people and the individual networks to supply what they need.

Keith: Redbridge Council

Does LCCN have a prayer network whereby we could support each other's councils in prayer?

Loris Richards

This is currently under development. There is such a network operating within Merton with a team meeting everyday at lunchtime to pray. We have just put a secretary in place and are still fitting people into jobs and we are hoping that just such a network will arrive soon. At present we meet once a year at Ashburnham for a weekend of prayer.

Mina: Havering Council

Having been involved in staff support networks generally through my career, I have found that often they become a "tick box" exercise for the organisation to meet legislative targets. Sometimes the group itself becomes an activist lobby in terms of trying to find a power base and a strong voice. My question is do you intend to share widely any ideas or strategies in terms of good practice to avoid this? Also, do you have any training for organisations to help them from going down either of these roads?

Caroline Waters

This is a problem. It can often occur when introducing something new. At BT we have tried to make sure the groups are autonomous and that their voice is authentic and free, but we have also tried to engage in a way that retains the BT identity. People expect something of our brand, which means they expect us to behave in a certain way. There are rules and we have to communicate. As a representative of BT there is an agenda. There are things we want to achieve as an organisation and the question is always how best to do that together. How can we contribute? Sometimes we do disagree but not very often and we have learnt to accommodate each other. The skill of the Chairs is paramount here. I am absolutely blessed with some of the Chairs I have, of which Peter is a prime example. He is always open to new ideas, full of inspiration about what we can do and very clear about

why something is good both for the network and for the business. If you have good Chairs you will persevere but the right to disagree must be respected or there will be no growth.

Loris Richards

We meet with the groups and remind ourselves that we are here to work, and to serve Merton regardless of our faith. The prayer room is a multi faith room and we have a rota system. As we come out, the Muslim faith group may be coming in. We greet each other and agree to pray for each other.

Adrian Miles

I think ultimately it is a matter of growing the maturity of the groups and of the organisation. However, I would like to mention Transform Work UK. We receive e-mails and phone calls from Christians individually and from groups explaining one or more difficulties that they have. We have carried out a number of workshops for groups that are trying to move on in potentially conflicting situations with the organisation. I would encourage, any group seeking input from Transform Work UK that we would come and assist although ultimately we do not do it for individual people. Our aim is to get alongside and help groups through some of those potentially difficult situations.

Howard: Islington Council

I was wondering whether or not the message of Christianity and diversity is accessible to Joe the plumber or Tim the civil servant.

Caroline Waters

It depends on the language you use. One of the things that BT has done with all of our diversity policies is to go for the crystal mark, which is about talking in plain language, making your messages relevant and resonant with the people. The other essential element is authenticity. If you want to help people understand the relevance of the message and give them confidence to be who they are, it is necessary to be authentic both as people and organisation. This word may be considered over-used but it means there can be no mixed messages. To illustrate this, I would like you to undertake a little exercise. Please make the OK sign, take that sign and put it on your cheek. (Caroline put the OK sign on her chin). Some of you were unsure of what to do. It felt uncomfortable because it was a mixed message. The vast majority of you copied my action despite being asked to do something different. That demonstrates the power. For Joe the plumber or Tim the civil servant to really understand diversity and go with you, you have to show them.

Closing Remarks

Jim Dobbin MP

This has been a fantastic evening. I have certainly gone through a learning process and I think we all have. I want to thank you all for attending and making contributions and wish you all the very best in your work, in your workplace, in your prayer groups, whatever that might be. May I thank all the speakers, John, Adrian, Caroline and Loris. Please do not forget Transform Work UK- they are here to help. If there is anyone still wanting to communicate a point or view or ask a question please do get in touch with Ros Turner who is the Groups Support Manager.

I think it would be very applicable if we end with prayer.

Oh God, we thank you for the discussions we have had here this evening. We ask your blessing on all at work so that great good may come from this gathering. Amen