

One Route to Encouraging Faith in the University
Paper for Ottawa's Second Annual Faith@work Forum

Challenges and Opportunities

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Laurentian Leadership Centre, Ottawa, 21 September, 2002

Challenge/opportunity 1: Forming a new Christian fellowship: a first step

Universities are relatively secular organizations, so it is a challenge for many to form a Christian fellowship. To try this on one's own is perhaps not Biblical, as Jesus sent out his disciples in twos or in groups, and Paul usually had a companion in his missionary ventures. We are also aware of the need to encourage each other day after day, as advised in Hebrews. Yet to find that fellow traveler in a university can be a problem, because it is hard to distinguish the ten to twenty percent or so who are committed Christians (25% of all workers say they are "very religious"). Also, both professors and students tend to be extra busy people, far more so than the people I knew when I worked in government. One professor said to me that the serious student would probably work far harder than he would have to work in the work world, and that view accords with my own experience. The life of a student is also harder than that of a "retired"¹ Christian like myself, because the retired person, though sometimes busier than when he was working, usually has the freedom to ignore deadlines. Students have little freedom to delay assignments.

On joining the Department of Economics at the University of Ottawa in August 2000, one of the first things I did was join a Christian book group for professors, students, and others. The books chosen were challenging for me and the conversations usually above me, but I still found it a little beacon of light in what seemed a secular world. No mission partners came out of this group, though one member became an associate in the mission explained below.

I knew there would be many other Christian students and professors and my prayer was that some would reveal themselves so we could form a little Bible study, worship group, or even an Alpha group. But all those I met seemed very caught up in their studies and there seemed no sign of anyone who would like to set aside some time for Christ. Rather than ask people directly, I kept my ears open and waited for an opportunity. Had there been a prayer group or other fellowship group in my department I would have joined, but there did not seem to be any. Patience and alertness is needed at such times. I thought of hanging up a notice for a meeting and seeing who would appear, though I felt reluctant to do this, partly because it is so easy to get labeled at a university as religious, and then the chance of forming friendships is reduced.

Naturally if you share an office with others, they will get to know of your interests, and one colleague occasionally kidded me on my Christian commitment. I would use such times as opportunities to explain Christian truths as I understood them, but he said he found it very hard to believe. At least he seemed to accept my belief, and we became quite good friends. About a year after joining the University, this colleague asked me how I enjoyed the weekend, and I said it was great, the Bishop had visited our church and we had good conversations with friends after church. A visiting scholar from central China, who also shared my office, and with whom I nurtured a friendship, overheard this talk of church, and later when we were alone he asked me about Christian beliefs. This was the opportunity I was praying for, though it was

¹ "Retired" appears in quotes because, as Archbishop Davis said in a homily in about 1982, the Christian never really retires. He was over 80 years old at the time, and still very active in the Diocese of Ottawa.

not at all as I would have expected. Over the next couple of months we had many good conversations about Christian beliefs, and I passed on a Chinese-English Bible, a Chinese explanation of Christianity obtained by my friend Edward Ng, and several other Christian publications. A deeper friendship developed and during our conversations I often felt the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Challenge/opportunity 2: Expanding the fellowship and obtaining support

When two or three are gathered in Christ's name, no more are really needed, except for the need to bring the Good News to all in the world. I was thus interested in expanding the fellowship to include others who knew little or nothing about the Gospel. My colleague seemed interested not only in Christianity but also in improving his English. It was natural then to suppose that other Chinese students (there are 800 or so on campus) would also have these interests, and that is how we came upon the idea of helping the Chinese students by making use of the Bible. Even those with little initial interest in Christianity might be willing to join such a group in order to improve their English. Recruiting members, though, is a problem, especially when posters cannot be put up in the university unless the group is an official club. Our visiting scholar could invite his friends, though he knew few at this stage.

We really needed a student evangelist and she appeared at the department's Christmas party. I enjoyed speaking to several students about their courses and interests but only one seemed to be Christian, Liping Zhang. On mentioning to Liping that I was helping a Chinese scholar with his English using the Bible, she said that such an approach would seem to be an excellent way of reaching the non-Christians. She volunteered to join me in a venture to bring Christianity to others while helping them with their English. I mentioned that she seemed to have a gift of evangelism, and being a new Christian (one and a half years), she asked what evangelism was. Indeed she was a good recruiter, together with her husband Kevin Chen, and so I had found not only the fellow Christian partner in mission that I had prayed for, but her husband as well.

The next day I booked the library room in our department for two one-and-a-half-hour sessions a week, to begin the first school day in the new year, 2002. Because this was not an ESL (English as a Second Language) or formal course, we did not have to explain to the department any details about the group; we only said that we would be helping Chinese students with their English. We produced a notice (Appendix 1), one that we could hand out to prospective students—it clearly stated our two objectives, to improve English and to learn about Christianity so that an informed commitment decision could be made. Over the Christmas holiday Liping and Kevin recruited, while I developed notes for the first class. We also thought it would be good for each student to have a New Testament of their own, so we got in touch with Rowat Deeks of the Gideons to supply ten copies (I had heard of Rowat through Gord Walford of the Statistics Canada Bible Study). From our own money we purchased teaching supplies that would help us, commentaries for example. We also charged an initial fee of \$4 and put out a box for voluntary contributions, which also helped defray costs. The idea of voluntary giving came from our visiting scholar who had expressed interest in Christianity. We also obtained a donation of \$100 from St Martin's Anglican Church. We thought we should give a donation to the Gideons in view of their support for us.

Challenge/opportunity 3: Deciding on course content; evaluation

Besides the Bible, what teaching material, if any, should we use? How should we use the Bible? How should we determine the best content for a course? We have tried various resources. The *Spiritual Formation Bible* seemed a good one because it would allow us to train the development of the spirit. It was helpful and appreciated, though mainly by the new Christians. The *Parenting Bible* used in the 2nd term seemed more useful, because almost all students have an eye on good parenting and relationships. We also took turns reading from the book of Mark, in the 1st term (Winter), and John in the 2nd (Spring/Summer), and then listened to a professional read each chapter after we had read it.

One problem arose concerning the meaning of difficult verses, and one or two students seemed to want to argue for the sake of argument. Even with our commentaries we were unable to adequately respond to some of the questions and challenges, and we felt the Holy Spirit was not with us when we were drawn into debate. Admittedly this happened during only two or three sessions out of about 50, but even so it was

disconcerting to some of us. We therefore tried reading from a small book called *The Book of Hope*, which gives readings plus interpretations designed to cover the basics of Christian belief. This is available from Palm Tree Ministries in Ottawa. We have also tried readings from our New Testaments on some of the big ideas of Christianity, found in chain references in the *Prophecy Bible*. Finally, we found a couple of ministers keen to meet with non-Christians in order to answer their religious questions. It was a joy to find our prayers answered to meet this problem, and the very week when it cropped up.

We have also spent much time on impromptu speaking, mostly on subjects that interest the Chinese and educate them and me. These often turn into fun sessions and having an enjoyable time is one of the most important objectives of our work. The most important quality of effective teaching and learning, though, is the presence of the Holy Spirit: if many students sense the presence of God during an exercise, then we judge it a success. At the end of term 2 we circulated an evaluation questionnaire, and one set of questions listed the various exercises we had tried and asked if during each kind of exercise the presence of God was “often”, “sometimes”, or “not really” felt.

Challenge/opportunity 4: Dealing with opposition

Our ability to have a faith group at work depends on the freedom to meet and recruit. If there is opposition from management then that is a problem. A friend at one government department put up posters for an Alpha course, and was asked by his administration to take them down. He felt that he had to comply. In such cases one must communicate by personal invitations to friends, which is probably the best way of recruiting in any case. At the university we decided against using posters thinking that the administration might oppose the whole notion of providing a free service based on the Bible. Fortunately we had two excellent friendship recruiters in Liping and Kevin.

Still, we encountered some early opposition from a colleague with whom I shared my office. When he learned that I was helping the Chinese using the Bible he argued strongly that university space should not be used only for one ethnic group, that there was a conflict with the ESL department of the university, and that using the Bible was a form of propaganda. He threatened to complain to the administration. He asked to sit in on one of our classes, and I declined, saying it was only for the Chinese. Still, I said I would be open to other immigrants joining our group, and decided to call our group an English Study *Fellowship or Group*, rather than English *course* in order not to conflict with ESL. Why was this professor so keen to stop this effort? He was a lapsed Christian, and I do not know if it was worldly philosophies, evil spirits or personal rebellion and sin that was behind it. During his opposition, I usually felt it was important to be helpful and charitable to this man, and to pray for him. I had helped him previously by taking charge of his class, for example, while he visited his family in Iraq, and by correcting his written English, and I continued to help him after his opposition. In retrospect we should perhaps even thank him because it was his opposition that prompted us to try to form a university club that would help us to expand this ministry. We also have to thank the Statistics Canada Bible Fellowship for supporting us in prayer and words of encouragement on a regular basis. We even experienced some joy during our persecution, because we knew God was with us in our work.

Imposing constraints is not exactly opposition, but it can also weaken a fellowship. Thus when a minister offered us a room in his church in which to meet, but asked to be present at meetings in which the Bible would be discussed, in order to ensure the teachings were in accord with those of his denomination, we saw a potential problem: we would lose all spontaneity, and it would be impossible to discuss matters in an open manner. We had one observer present in each meeting, the Holy Spirit, and He was wonderfully sufficient. We prayed for guidance on this matter, and decided to search for other accommodation.

The principle of fellowship, which is that one should not associate with those who believe in “false doctrines as judged by a particular denomination” (if I understand this correctly), seems at variance with all faith at work groups except those restricted to only one denomination. This principle would mean the end of almost all workplace faith groups, because interdenominational fellowship is the rule, not the exception. I have long thought this an advantage, as it helps us to learn more from one another. In my own case I found the interdenominational aspect led to my growth as a Christian. I joined my first group in 1982, and found myself gently challenged by the evangelicals. Gord Walford once asked me, for example, if I

believed that Christ is the only way to salvation. I replied that I thought He was “a way” and the one I believed in, but perhaps not the only way. Gradually I came to accept more and more of the hard teachings of the Bible. I began to think that my Bible study group should not water down the message to accommodate my worldly views, but for a long time I tried to do just that. I now think that there is room for both liberal and evangelical/orthodox groups in the workplace, and that persons should be welcome to move back and forth between them, but not with the aim of “reforming” them. By focusing on the Word, the truth will eventually prevail.

In August we received the news from the departmental chair that we could no longer use the room in the department’s building. We had been using this for three 1½ hour lessons a week. So we began phoning other departments in search of a new place to meet. We also prayed that a door would open for us. One of our students found a set of empty rooms that were not reserved, so the first two weeks of September we used one of them. A note on the door said reservations should be made through our own department, so I sent a request to our administrator. She forwarded this to the chairman who then invited me into her office and explained that she would not approve the request because she did not think our group should meet anywhere on campus—off campus was all right though. After some polite questions she said that the problem was the use of the Bible, and that one professor had complained, though she personally did not mind. She said it was university policy, that meetings on campus were forbidden if the Bible was used, if I understood her properly.

Fortunately, St. Albans Anglican, two blocks from the campus, offered us a room without any restrictions. It was quickly viewed as inconvenient for some of the students though, and so we immediately began to think we would need to find another meeting place. About the same day of this realization an e-mail arrived from a student with whom I had become acquainted through a Bible study, while she had worked at Statistics Canada, earlier in the year. She said that we might be able to meet in the campus Spiritual Resources Centre, which is very centrally located. None of us had ever heard of this place. I visited the Centre and learned three things: we could indeed meet there, we could use the Centre to help set up new groups and a club, and there is no policy preventing Bible-based groups from meeting on campus.

From friends and fellow church members we usually received verbal support for our efforts. A non-Christian friend seemed always interested to hear of our study group, and offered several small donations to me – he would buy the coffee when it was my turn to buy coffee, and I agreed to donate the amount I saved. A couple of church members, though, said that our study group was a way proselytizing (a bad thing in their view), and one minister said the study groups were unethical: he did not believe in offering secular services with religion. In reply I said we were very up front about our goals and that most non-Christians were very thankful of the help we were providing—one even offered to set up a Web site, and another reviewed and evaluated several Christian books.

Challenge/opportunity 5: branching out, and new challenges

In our experience we saw the possibility of spawning new groups in five ways, though at this time we have little news to share. The first branch of growth is new study groups. We recruited leaders for two new groups, though none of the leaders had an association with the university, so both groups had few students. One of the meeting places was a kilometer from the campus, where meetings were held late Sunday afternoons, and this arrangement probably deterred students from attending. We pray that by becoming a club, meeting in the Spiritual Resource Centre, and recruiting English-speaking and Chinese student leaders from existing Christian associations, we will be more successful in the future. The second branch of expansion was to form an Evangelism Group from the new Chinese Christians, and this flourished in the second term, and focused on *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, by Robert Coleman. But with only two new Christians this term, the group seemed like it might die. Again, though, the Spiritual Resource Centre may help us to revive the study group, because it is convenient to many more new Christians. The third branch is to promote the development of new groups through a formal club (see Appendix 2 on the constitution). The advantage of an official club is that its groups would be permitted to meet anywhere on campus, and to advertise their existence. One goal along these lines is to have a Bible study available each day for all students, run by local clergy, church leaders or student group leaders. The fourth branch of growth is to encourage our graduates to form English groups in their homelands, but neither of two who have

committed their lives to Christ and returned home have decided to do this, though one plans to teach her child the Christian faith, and perhaps her child's friends. The fifth branch is just a dream at this point – to promote the development of similar clubs, both for improving English using the Bible, and for fostering evangelism and leadership training in other universities. But before we can take on too much we have to meet our most recent challenges, the loss of a wonderful co-leader, Liping, to the job market, and our visiting scholar who was instrumental in getting the whole mission rolling in the first place and who had become an excellent recruiter.

Generalizing from our experience: affinity groups and fellowship circles

An affinity group is a group with some major characteristic(s) or concern(s) in common. Our Chinese groups have in common their home language (almost all students have been Mandarin), culture and the desire to learn English, plus a willingness to learn more about the Bible. Many also want to form new friendships, for they miss their homeland dearly, and in this sense they constitute a friendship circle. While the desire to improve English no doubt predominates for most of them, the other interests are important as well. Regarding the Bible, the students support its use as follows: the Bible represents the best of English culture, it is well-written with rich vocabulary, it contains wise guidance on how to live better, it provides the map to true happiness in this world and the next, and it contains excellent stories. The first and last of these reasons were first proposed to us by non-Christians.

In any large organization there is the potential to form a wide variety of different types of groups, according to the representation of cultures and concern areas. Besides comprising different cultural groups, large organizations have many people with shared concerns: evangelicals, Catholics, classic literature, groups dealing with philosophy, theology, and music/choir, singles, divorced and separated people, single parents, parents with children who have drifted away from the Church and faith, time-pressed parents, husbands and wives with marital problems, and overweight Christians, for example. For each concern or interest area there is the potential for regular Christ-centred meetings. There are at least two possible models for structuring groups—one that places the emphasis on a group leader, and another that places the emphasis on a video teaching series. The latter tends to draw more people, if the experience at Statistics Canada is indicative, while the former tends to result in stronger group attachments, Christian commitment, and friendships.

In most organizations there are up to 15 opportunities a week for committed Christians to meet and either encourage and train one another, or reach out to others: five lunch times and ten breaks. Few of these time slots are presently used for such activities so there is plenty of room for growth. As we have discovered, finding a suitable meeting place is a problem in many workplaces, though the University setting presents a bigger challenge than most: as one person said to me, universities seem like islands of Christian repression in the North American sea of free speech. Although we have found that through prayer, support of other Christians and ministers, and perseverance, even big barriers can be overcome. The university with its Spiritual Resource Centre no longer seems like an inhibitor of spiritual growth, but rather an opportunity for spiritual growth.

We conclude with a summary of challenges and opportunities, and tips for forming, running and expanding faith at work groups.

Faith@work: A summary of challenges and opportunities

1. One in four workers in Canada say they are “very religious”: this is the pool from which faith group leaders emerge. Half are Catholic and half Protestant. University professors are probably less inclined than average to be religious.
2. Among full-time students of university age (over 18), in 1997/2000 the very religious comprised 8% (34% of conservative Christians, 8% of English Catholics—estimates for other faith communities are too unreliable to release). Some 4% (one in 25) of students volunteered in religious organizations (17% of conservative Christian students). 13% of students worshipped weekly (41% of conservative Christians—Baptists, Pentecostal, and smaller Christian faiths—and 20% of English Catholics).

Some 22% have a religious background. Though the pool of committed Christians is smaller among university-aged students than the employed population, it is still significant enough to provide leadership for faith groups.

3. The pressure of time is probably greater among students than workers, hence faith groups should economize on time, and not assign homework for example, and venues should be centrally located on campus. Money is more a concern too.
4. Also, faith groups will have wider appeal if they combine faith development objectives with other goals that are important to students, such as improving language skills or public speaking, leadership skills, parenting, and applying Christian principles to relationship or personal problems or concerns. Some 71%, for example, worry about not having enough money in the future (77% of liberal Protestants—United Church, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran—69% of conservative Christians and English Catholics, 74% of French Catholics, 69% of the religiously unaffiliated, and 67% of non-Christians). Also, only 41% of students say they are “very satisfied” with their life in general (33% of conservative Christians, 36% of English Catholics, 38% of French Catholics and non-religious, 43% of non-Christians, and 52% of liberal Protestants).
5. Friendship evangelizing groups may be effective among small groups of students who work together or live nearby. One small Ottawa company with under 20 employees has been able to set up a Bible fellowship, for example, suggesting that large organizations or groups are not essential. Closer friendships can develop in smaller groups, which can focus on questions of greater interest to all members. The formation of mission partnerships might be a good first step for both employees and students. Small informal groups can also avoid the problems and complications associated with club formation and reserving rooms. Invitations to church are also most effective when offered to close friends.
6. Very simple ways of running groups are important: students can learn the procedures easily and train for leadership, with the potential of multiplying groups.
7. Prayer is essential in all aspects of work with faith groups. Perhaps most essential is prayer before forming a group, before each meeting by leaders, for other group members, for opponents of the Christian fellowships, and for help when faced with barriers and bridges or opportunities. Prayer time, though, can save time.
8. Major barriers in the university setting include personal sin, evil spirits, and worldly philosophies such as Marxism. When faced with resistance to the truth of Christ it is usually impossible to discern the source of the opposition. Persevere and pray.

Some tips for beginning, running, and expanding faith groups

1. ***Beginnings:*** Form friendships, pray for a companion in mission, and look for every possible opportunity to form a new faith group. Attend existing faith groups too. Be patient, pray.
2. When you find your new companion, you will want to explore mission possibilities before you begin. Consider an affinity friendship circle or fellowship—think of the groups you would like to reach or associated with, and of the interest area that might attract members. Pray for guidance. Consider forming both a new faith-deepening group, and a new faith-outreach group. Two or three gathered in His name is all that is required.
3. Existing group leaders may discourage the formation of new groups, thinking their group might be diluted. Yet it is new groups and leaders that attract new people. The total mission pool is expanded, not contracted, by new groups.
4. ***Running a new group:*** Once a new group is formed, it is important to have one person to take full responsibility for its progress, but it is also important to develop leadership by delegating as well. Prospective leaders might also be encouraged to join secular leadership organizations like Toastmasters; these are places where friendships and recruiting can develop as well. Christ-centred training programs may be more effective for Christians, one based on the ***Master Plan of Evangelism***, or ***The Twelve Together***, for example.
5. Prayer and adequate preparation time are essential for the conduct of a new group. The leadership mission team should pray before each meeting, for each participant, for dedicated and devout leadership, for those opposing the group, for example.

6. Evaluation is also important. The co-leader can evaluate each session, and participants can be surveyed as well. Self-evaluation and asking God's guidance is perhaps most important of all. Evaluation is especially important after times of trial, and when the Holy Spirit did not seem present.
7. Encourage one another, day after day: this is too is important, especially in times of trial. Coffee breaks are great for this, or Psalm-breaks, when a Psalm is read.
8. ***Spawning new faith groups in the workplace.*** The secret of the rapid growth of the early church was to invest heavily in leadership training, as Christ did. Support might be given to help new groups get going, but it is essential to cut loose at some point and pray for the flourishing of the new groups formed.

There are up to five lunch hours at work each week available for outreach and development, and up to ten coffee breaks. Most of this time is not presently used by committed Christians.

Appendix 1: Notice for our faith group

ENGLISH STUDY GROUP FOR CHINESE STUDENTS

AND VISITING PROFESSORS

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- a. To improve English: speaking, vocabulary, grammar, reading in public, pronunciation, volume, pace, and emphasis. To better the Canadian average.
- b. To learn about God to the point where a good decision can be made, whether or not to love him, or, for Christians, to get to know and love God better.

METHODS:

1. Public reading, listening and discussions, using Biblical sources.
2. Public and informal speaking, evaluation, and ongoing correction of English.

TIME: Mondays and Tuesdays, 1:00 to 2:30 pm, January 7, 2002, to April 9, 2002

PLACE: 200 Wilbrod, room 04, Ottawa.

STUDY BOOKS AND MATERIALS: to be handed out at class.

COST: \$4.00 plus *voluntary* contributions at each class.

CLASS SIZE: 6 to 10 including instructors.

INSTRUCTORS AND TUTORS: Dr. Frank Jones and Liping Zhang

Appendix 2: A draft constitution for a university club

CHINESE-ENGLISH STUDY CLUB (CESC)

CLUB OBJECTIVES:

The club comprises study groups having four objectives:

1. To improve English: speaking, vocabulary, comprehension, grammar, reading in public, pronunciation, volume, pace, and emphasis.
2. To develop friendship among Chinese of diverse backgrounds.
3. To learn about God to the point where a good decision can be made, whether or not to love him, or, for Christians, to get to know and love God better.
4. To promote the development of similar clubs and study groups.

CLUB METHODS AND ACTIVITIES

2. The methods are public speaking in a supportive environment, public reading, discussion, and listening exercises, plus development of other speaking skills, such as how to effectively run and participate in a business meeting.
3. The club celebrates in various ways: events for Chinese New Years, Mid-Autumn Day, Christmas, Easter and other festive days; and supports members in need.
4. The Bible and biblical literature are used to teach English and thereby introduce the students to major sources of love and friendship, English culture, rich vocabulary, and good grammar.
5. The Club shares basic data and experiences of study groups with the *Christian Commitment Research Institute*, which in turn supplies guidelines and resources for group leaders and guest group leaders.
6. The services of the club are delivered without purpose of financial gain for its members or group leaders, and any revenues received are used solely to promote the club's objectives, as decided by the executive members.
7. This Constitution can be amended by a 2/3 majority vote of members.

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS:

The club has three executive members: the president, secretary, and membership development vice-president. Executive members are committed Christians and are elected for a term of two years by a majority of the members attending an annual business meeting, or a specially arranged meeting. The founding executive members are:

Position	Name	Student no.	e-mail
President			
Secretary			
Vice-President			