

Sally Orwin interviews

Derrick Watson



Derrick Watson is a founding Director of specialist financial recruitment company Watson Moore based in Manchester and Leeds. The company places finance directors into entrepreneurial SMEs, many of which are backed by private equity. It has seen rapid growth from a staff of two in 2006 to its current 15. The expectation is to provide 'ethical excellence' to clients.

Earlier in 2006, Derrick also set up Oasis Manchester to engage and encourage Christians working in the city centre business community. His aim in this is to see 'lives and businesses changed' through the working out of the Christian faith in the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century city centre workplace.

Sally Orwin interviewed Derrick at his offices in central Manchester.

Entrepreneurial Beginnings ...

Derrick grew up in North Yorkshire showing his first entrepreneurial streak at the age of eight, selling chopped-up sticks in bread bags at 10p each in his local village. He moved up the schoolyard ranks to establish 'DW Race Products' selling hand-painted personalised BMX number plates made from plastic chemical drums to his 10-year old school mates. Throughout his teenage years, he supplemented his pocket money with a variety of ever-changing enterprises including video rental, freelance photography and

journalism, and eventually second-hand cars, one of which ended up finding itself in the hands of the headmaster's PA.

He speaks of his Nan and Mum who during these early years encouraged their family to attend the local Methodist Chapel Sunday School. Derrick went along with a number of primary school friends into his first experience of Christianity. He stayed longer than most, though by his own admission an occasional reward of Commando comics proved a not insignificant incentive.

At 18 he went on to read Law at the University of Birmingham and after qualifying in the City of London, worked initially for Halliwells in Manchester as a litigator. It didn't take him long to realise that whilst he loved winning new business he was less thrilled about actually doing the work of law. So at the age of 25 he took the plunge into financial recruitment and began working for Michael Page. After three years he was headhunted to go and work for a competitor, and took the opportunity to take three months out to travel through Vietnam, Australia and New Zealand.

It was during this period of travel that he came across church again, feeling unusually compelled to visit the churches he was passing, including a Vietnamese service. Upon his return to the UK he discovered three of his new colleagues were Christians, including his boss who eventually became his current business partner.



▶▶ The Pivot Point ...

It was three months into his new job that Derrick became a Christian. He recalls a 'pivot point' of coming to faith at the office Christmas party. Whilst he retained a healthy respect for the faith of his Nan which was focused very much on church, he began to recognise what he calls the 'binary' nature of the faith he encountered as a young boy. 'Christians were pleasant but they were not in my world,' he says. He didn't see Christians as having any kind of impact or influence in the commercial world in which he now worked. As a result, the Christian faith appeared ineffectual. It didn't seem to make any credible difference in the world beyond church.

It was the beginning of a desire to see the Christian faith effect dynamic change among colleagues in the world of his work as well as in the world of church. Settling in Manchester, Derrick's home church has been Holy Trinity Platt for a number of years now.



Holy Trinity, Platt

He began to research what provision there was for encouraging and supporting Christians at work in Manchester city centre. He wanted to provide a point of contact for Christians to proclaim the good news of Christ to those 'for whom church may or may not be appropriate.'

So he began an Alpha course in the private function room of a pub in the city centre, recruiting a number of leaders from different local churches. It ran for three years with

two courses per year attracting about 10-12 people each time. He eventually handed this over to Paul Nattrass who in turn developed it into a large multi-church event hosted at Old Trafford.

The Beginnings of Oasis Manchester ...

Meanwhile, Derrick had left his employer and set up his own recruitment business with two partners. It was three years into this new business, and with the experience of running *Business Alpha* behind him, that he began to look for a different model. He wanted one that would facilitate engagement with urban professionals in the workplace itself and during the working day. His research led him to *Oasis Edinburgh*. In 2004 he sold his share in his three-year-old business, and after getting married to Rachel in the same year began to lay the foundations for the launching of *Oasis Manchester* whilst working part-time on a self-employed basis.

He was faced with both a challenge and an opportunity. He had a model of how to support Christians in the work of discipleship and evangelism in the context of working in the city centre. He now needed to find those Christians. Approaching the launch in May 2006, he drummed up support for the new venture from about 60 Christian people from a wide range of churches.

The key question Derrick was asking at this point was, 'What does the gospel look like in a business context?' Within the context of Oasis, he came up with three key areas of engagement, encouragement and exploration which equate roughly to the three key Christian concepts of serve, build and reach.

Engage, encourage, explore ...

This provided the foundation for the launch of *Workwise@One*, a series of talks on the needs and challenges of day-to-day life at work. Running for a tight 50 minutes with a quality lunch provided on the spot, these covered a range of topical business and lifestyle issues. The series pushed boundaries in terms of addressing issues like depression



▶▶ which, whilst common in the workplace, are not addressed so easily in a public context. In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, Oasis ran a series of seminars on CV writing, interview technique and job-hunting strategies, all led by Christian professionals recognised as authoritative in their own field.

Working on the encouragement aspect of their mission, Oasis hosted the launch of Ken Costa's *God at Work* course in the north-west and followed this up with running the course over a period of lunchtime sessions in a city centre bar. More recently, they have run a course *Biblical Insights* looking at workplace-related issues through the lens of scripture.

In addition to this, a series of 'business-life groups' have sprung up meeting regularly for bible study, prayer and mutual encouragement in city centre coffee houses across the city centre. There is a regular breakfast prayer meeting held once a month at St Ann's Church, also in the city centre.

In terms of outreach, the focus has switched recently from *Business Alpha* to the more compact and condensed *Christianity Explored* course, again run either during lunchtime or immediately after work in the plush private dining facilities of a high profile local bar. One-off invitations have seen speakers such as Vaughan Roberts come north. There are strong links with the Christian fellowship at Manchester City Council with whom Oasis co-host a carol service with a short evangelical address in the Town Hall.

Derrick speaks firmly of resisting any temptation or drift towards becoming a 'holy huddle.' This is helped by keeping Oasis independent of any one church or denomination and he stresses the 'cross-church spectrum' of its work.

Men at Work ...

I asked Derrick about the integration of faith and work in his own life and business. 'For guys' he replied, 'the gospel is a superb

antidote to the increasing tendency for us to seek identity through work.' In the context of leading a values-driven recruitment business in a tough environment, he speaks of the danger of things 'getting out of synch.'

This means that to be known as a Christian means that those around you 'see the gospel in action' in your dealing with people with integrity. Occasionally, he says, this leads to interested questions about his faith which means preaching the gospel 'with words' although he continues to see 'daily proclamation' through his dealings with his



St. Ann's Church in Manchester city centre

clients and staff as the most effective. 'There is no hiding place and the business is small!' he says.

Words like 'authentic' and 'real' pepper his conversation, partly the bluff Yorkshireman who says it as it is, but also a sense of being on the front-line of Christian discipleship where nothing is hidden. He talks about how his faith has had a very real impact on how he operates within the recruitment business which 'doesn't always have the greatest reputation.'

He speaks of re-engineering the methodology of recruitment firstly on an individual basis and in turn within his business. The new focus on 'honouring the individual as an individual and not as a commodity or as a source of useable confidential information' went against a lot of his recruitment training. He explains 'In nearly all recruitment businesses, consultants are taught to question candidates for "leads"- i.e. try and get them to disclose details of other opportunities they are exploring and then contact the company directly to see if they can fill the position with ▶▶

▶▶ one of their own candidates. Clearly this works directly against the candidate, and whilst this had served me extremely well to date as a source of work it was clear this wasn't something I could continue with if my faith was going to count in the workplace.'

So he began to work more as a consultant, building strong relationships on the basis of honesty and trust both with candidates he was placing in jobs and with the client companies he was placing them into. This has stood his business in good stead during the recession: 'in tough times, money flows through the strongest connections' he says. This is evident in the growth Watson Moore have seen in the past few economically challenging years.

Having a 'no leads' approach, Derrick says, is surprising to recruiters who come to work in the business with him. All staff are encouraged to be generous with candidates, for example, to give time and skill in helping them develop their CV and interview technique, even if they might not be placed directly in the immediate future.

Candidates also receive an honest appraisal of the job opportunities presented to them. Rejecting the recruitment approach that places a priority on getting someone to accept a role just so the agency can take a fee, instead there is a focus to ensure the candidates have sufficient clarity about the costs and benefits of a particular job in order to make an informed decision about whether the opportunity is an appropriate one to pursue.

As Derrick explains, 'It's about using our influence in a recruitment process in a positive rather than a manipulative way.'

Fruit ...

I asked Derrick what fruit he has begun to see through his work both in the business and through Oasis Manchester. There are one or two more dramatic stories of God at work through relationships. Referring back to his



spell as an employee, Derrick speaks of a contact whom he met at a leaving do of one of his key clients who subsequently attended the first of *Business Alpha* course ran by Oasis and who re-discovered faith during middle age after falling away during his teenage years.

Most feedback relates to how people have been encouraged by coming along to Oasis events. There are stories of people coming to faith over time and then applying it in their working environment. He speaks of providing 'a simple catalytic framework of events and relationships', stressing that Oasis is not 'The Answer' but a way of facilitating engagement, encouragement and exploration among city centre workers. He wants to see it make an impact so that 'lives and businesses are changed' across the spectrum regardless of church allegiance or denomination. There is a recognition that this is work to be done faithfully and over time. He mentions the parable of the talents in terms of bringing 'who you are and what you have to the party.'

Having seen Oasis grow to a degree of maturity and in true entrepreneurial spirit, Derrick delegated the day-to-day running of Oasis Manchester to Pete Horlock in an exciting mission role created by the Diocese of Manchester. This coincided with the arrival of Derrick's twin boys born in 2007 followed by a second set of twin boys in 2009. When I ask what gets him up in the morning the answer, of course, is a combination of singing and noise from four small boys and a keen sense of responsibility, 'Because I have to get up!' he says with a laugh. I don't doubt that Manchester city centre workers are glad that he does. ■

Sally Orwin works as a coach and consultant in small businesses and charities and is a co-editor of this journal.

 A small black and white portrait of Sally Orwin, a woman with short dark hair, wearing a dark top.