

Bringing church to where the people are: Fresh Expressions in the marketplace

Natalie Chan writes about the work and witness of Dilys Chan in Hong Kong. Starting with gospel lunches and evangelistic events in her office aiming to bring people to faith and become committed members of the church, she found that there is no better place to build a church than in the marketplace, at their office. Simplychurch is now a network of six small church communities that gather regularly at the office or at home, hosted by leaders that Dilys has discipled and continues to develop.

“Why call it a church? Isn’t it just a fellowship in the office?” Dilys Chau was asked the same question over and over again when she founded Simplychurch, the first marketplace church in Hong Kong, in 2021. Its inauguration where six new members were also baptized by Dilys was without doubt an unforgettable event that I had the privilege to attend and witness.

A Pillar in the Society

I first met Dilys in 2012 through a prayer network in the Central Business District. I recall being impressed by her dedication to Kingdom work, to the extent that I thought she could not possibly be working full time at EY, one of the Big 4 professional services firm in the world. . A little later I found out that not only does she work full-time there, but she is also a senior partner, while actively serving in various roles for the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) Government and the local community. Among these numerous roles, she was President of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants Hong Kong in 2006/2007 and Chairlady of the Association of Christian Accountants from 2015–2017. She also received the Chief Executive’s Commendation for Community Service in 2021 and was appointed Justice of

the Peace by the HKSAR Government in 2023. She is named a hero by her alma mater City University of Hong Kong, the first female recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award, an Honorary Fellow and former Court and Council member.

Linking faith to work

“Your attitude determines your altitude.” Dilys believes that persistence, curiosity, and doing what others are unwilling to do are the keys to success in society. Her Christian faith instils in her a willingness to suffer losses for greater purposes and prompts her to ask the same question every day, “Have I made a good impact on the people around me through my words and deeds today?”

A strong Christian work ethic is the starting point of her faith journey in the marketplace. She quickly rose through the ranks at EY and became a partner in early 2002. While her influence in the firm grew, she proactively engaged her colleagues and tried to invite them to church as many good Christians do.

She helped organise numerous Christian activities with para-churches like gospel lunches and evangelistic events in her office. She also organised numerous cell groups and bible study

Dilys Chau



groups and is still very active with Alpha. All these are great initiatives and activities, aiming to bring people to faith and become committed members of the church. However, she also sees the limitation of this approach over the years. Many churches in Hong Kong still operate under the attractional model or its enhanced version, the engagement model which includes outreach but the aim is still trying to bring people back to inherited churches.

Are there more to gospel events and small groups?

While Dilys has been quite successful in bringing people to faith through personal witness, prayers, healings,



miracles and various activities mentioned above including Alpha, she finds it very hard to bring them to church, not to mention staying in one to grow into disciples. She found even a lot of the cell groups and bible study groups formed at the office over the years quite often degenerate into some kind of maintenance groups focusing on each other's wellbeing, not the kind of missional communities Dilys envisioned.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-3. 46-7)

To Dilys, church is not something that happens only on Sunday but the gathering of believers daily to bring the Kingdom of God to wherever they are. It dawned on her that there is no better place to build a church than in the marketplace, at their office where everyone spends most of the waking hours every day together, more than the time they spend with their families.

Rethinking Church

However, not being trained and ordained as a pastor, Dilys has encountered challenges and resistance to this idea. This leads her to rethink what does church really mean, what is it for and must it exist only in an institutional form? Dilys’ questions are echoed by many Christians across the globe, leading to the birth of the Fresh Expressions movement in 2004 upon the publication of Mission Shaped Church report in the UK.

“Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don’t go to church.” Instead of defining a church within its four walls, Church is “what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other.”

As missiologist and writer Michael Moynagh succinctly puts it, “The Fresh Expressions journey is not a theoretical idea. It is what we have observed more and more Christians doing across the globe. They know the gap between the world and the current church is too big for their friends and contacts to leap across. So they are starting new

Christian communities in the nooks and crannies of people’s ordinary lives.” That’s exactly the gap Dilys saw. Marketplace Church may not fit neatly into any existing theological framework but is no doubt created for people to encounter the Risen Jesus, and to sustain and deepen that encounter where they are and in their context.

From Maintenance to Missional groups

Dilys took the step to establish Simplychurch as she desires the progression of her fellowship at work to family, from maintenance to missional groups and from community to covenant. Their journey so far has been everything but straightforward. One of the major positives is that Dilys the pastor stays very close to her congregants daily at work, faith is very real and it is intertwined with everything they do. On the other hand, the gathering at lunch time can be brief and at times plagued by busyness and turnover. The greatest difficulties lie in the training and raising of new leaders.

However, Dilys has never set her sights to be just in the marketplace. Simplychurch see themselves as “Practising simple but authentic church communities in the Marketplace, extending and expanding the vibrant

and life-giving communities of Jesus to every corner of the City... being one in spirit and of one mind, building network, becoming a family of families.” There is a natural extension to home groups where they can have more time and space to worship, have meals and deepen their relationship. That also provides an avenue to engage the people who have left the company. Simplychurch is now a network of six small church communities that gather regularly at the office or at home, hosted by leaders that Dilys has discipled and

have authority to drive out demons.” (Mark 3:13-15) Our call to discipleship is first and foremost to be with Jesus, then to be sent out for mission. Community exists for the Mission while the Mission is to form community. Like the Fresh Expression journey illustrated below, community is never formed for its own sake but for missions which are compelled to form more communities until church takes shape. Most importantly, any fresh expression is part of the wider church and stays connected with the body of Christ.



continues to develop. Dilys continues to visit the churches to maintain their solidarity as a network, and to ensure that organic growth will continue.

The Fresh Expression Journey


“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to

Simplychurch stays connected with a wider network of like-minded churches existing in different forms, from micro-churches to mega ones. One thing for sure, the paradigm of church is shifting, not only in Hong Kong but globally, and we are seeing the fruit of the movement. Fresh Expressions now account for 15% of Church of England congregations, they are often led by lay people and complement other forms of church planting and revitalisation.

Going Forward

Our world is becoming more complicated, diversified and rapidly changing. The pace of change in inherited churches is yet to catch up. We need new churches, new leaders and new expressions to reach our city. Simplychurch is the first marketplace church in Hong Kong but for sure not the last. I and many others like Dilys certainly would like to see greater embrace for the paradigm shift and experimentation while the inherited churches do not feel left out. They could play the role of supporters and permission givers to pioneers like Dilys for a healthier and life-giving ecosystem. The Church of England has modelled this with the Greenhouse initiative.

I would like to close with an invitation from Bishop Graham Cray: *God has built experimentation into the fabric of creation. Civilisation is the history of experiments that worked. If experimentation is a vital part of being human, should it not be part of church as well? Many fresh expressions start as experiments, and we pray that they will continue to be filled with the Spirit of creativity.*

Dilys started out desiring to witness for Christ at work and bring colleagues to faith and church. She has kept her calling but realised when you cannot bring people to church, you bring church to them, daily, in the marketplace and beyond. 

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