

IS CORPORATE MINISTRY AN OXYMORON?

Authors: Mel and Susan Finlay

Opportunity is what you see.

That truism has been well illustrated in a recent television commercial. Several people are standing on what is represented as the steppes of Finland. Some of them leave, seeing no possibility for business opportunity there. Finland after all has a population of only slightly more than 5 million people; what could it possibly offer to the multinational corporation these individuals represent? Others, standing in the same spot as those who leave, see something different. Looking at the mountain range in the distance, one says, “Isn’t that Russia over there?” Viewers are left to draw their own conclusions about the opportunity Russia represents.

One group saw nothing but a small country; the other saw huge opportunity. Opportunity is what you see.

As Christians in the workplace we often miss opportunities for ministry because we simply don’t see them. Part of our blurred vision is attributable to our expectations. Work is work; ministry is ministry. We have difficulty peering over our own partition to see the opportunities for ministry that exist within the company. Opportunity is what you see.

Several years ago Mel was consulting to the Canadian office of a multinational corporation when one of their female employees was brutally murdered in an act of domestic violence. She was well liked and well known to the rest of the staff. Corporate executives asked if he would be available to any employees who wanted trauma counselling. There was nothing noteworthy in that, since many companies make trauma counselling available in such circumstances. It was simply a case of corporate executives

seeing an opportunity to provide a service to their employees and stepping in to provide it. Opportunity is what you see.

However, he was surprised when a new request was made. One of the executives said, “Mel, we know you’re a Christian. (Our employee) was also a Christian and we have had a number of requests for group prayer. Would you lead that?” Mel’s response was probably pretty typical of Christians conditioned to believe that ministry and workplace are to be kept separate, particularly those who work in large multicultural cities where respect for other faiths is one of the paramount values. “Has Executive Committee agreed to this, or is this your idea?”

Now, Mel admits that he’s not the fastest person on the uptake. God often has to be very obvious with him before he ‘gets it’ and sees the opportunity being presented. Not only had Executive Committee discussed the idea; they were unanimously in favour of it. The staff assembled at a time designed to accommodate the shift change for maximum participation. They had been told that there would be two aspects to the meeting. The first was an opportunity to discuss the tragic events that had occurred and ensure that everyone interested had the same information, including information on funeral arrangements, corporate policy on absence with pay for that particular funeral, and several other items. To no one’s surprise, all available staff were present.

The second part of the meeting, which was purely voluntary, was a time for prayer. The Executive in charge of the meeting introduced Mel, making clear that anyone was free to leave before he took charge of the meeting. Staff came from many different cultures, representing a smorgasbord of religious backgrounds, so he waited respectfully for some of them to leave. The Executive grew increasingly impatient with Mel, waiting for him to begin the time of prayer. Although he had mentally prepared for several contingencies, he was totally unprepared for what actually transpired. No one left the room.

Finally, the Executive said, “Mel, can’t you see everyone wants to be part of the prayer time? Get started!”

But Mel’s inability to see an opportunity wasn’t exhausted yet. Almost hesitantly, he said to the whole room but to no one in particular, “As a Christian I can only pray in the name of Jesus Christ.”

“We all understand that!” said the Executive. ”Now, get on with it!”

So he led a time of very powerful, deeply moving prayer. Metaphorically speaking, Mel had been among the group that couldn’t see the opportunity presented on the steppes of Finland. Thank God the Executives, several of whom were not Christian, could see Russia ‘over there’.

Opportunity is what you see.

However, one single opportunity seized does not make for corporate ministry. It may set the stage for it, but it does not inevitably lead to it. It takes determination and courage for conscious and deliberate ministry to ‘take hold’ within a corporate setting. Moving from a single ministry opportunity to a corporate ministry plan requires someone to seize the initiative and put wheels to an idea. Opportunity is what you see.

To our knowledge, no corporate ministry developed from the previously described episode. But there are many examples where companies have embarked on a ministry plan. Always voluntary in terms of employee participation, such plans have tremendous impact both individually and for a broader community.

One company we know of has a regularly scheduled time of prayer in the corporate board room, where outside prayer ‘warriors’ are brought in for a time of prayer with any executive and staff who want to participate, encompassing several different components: for example, that the corporate strategic plan, and all of its objectives, will be aligned

with God's will; that staff who travel as part their jobs and staff working in higher risk occupations or parts of the globe will be protected; that families will be secure in their love and commitment to one another; and numerous personal items related to health, financial strains, and so on. An open invitation is extended to all staff, with the explicit understanding that prayer is in the name of Jesus Christ. While attendance varies, depending on a lot of factors, both employees and executives who participate are convinced that this time of prayer is a valuable part of their lives. And it provides an opportunity for discussion of matters of faith with employees who do not participate, as in many instances they see the effect of prayer on their co-workers.

We know several executives who lend their corporate presence to non-profit organizations both in Canada and abroad. Some companies encourage their employees to participate in a "build" for Habitat for Humanity; others encourage staff to go overseas on water-drilling projects, to build houses or schools, or for numerous other purposes. While such activities are not part of the corporation's core business, they are an integral part of a corporate ministry plan.

One executive we know of tells his staff where he is off to when he takes vacation to go to a third world country and engage in voluntary work there. He uses these opportunities to share his faith with those staff who inquire about his motivation, his experiences, and his enthusiasm in the midst of obvious hardship.

But what makes these activities "ministry" rather than just "good citizenship"? The key is in the Name, the Name of the One on whose behalf they are done. For the Christian, the primary motivating factor is not the beneficiary of the activity – not the traumatized employee, or the family needing a home, or the AIDs victim, or the villagers desperately in need of potable water. Of course, each of these has intrinsic value in his or her own right. But for the Christian, the primary motivating factor is that such activity is done in the Name of Jesus Christ. It is done as an act of service to the One who gave His very life so that we could enjoy life to the full in relationship with God, the Creator of the Universe and Father of those who accept Jesus as their Saviour.

For the Christian then, corporate ministry, that is ministry undertaken within a corporation, is anything but an oxymoron. It may well represent the greatest opportunity for effective Christian outreach in this generation.

Opportunity is what you see.