

Oasis Stories:
The First 20 Years

Vol. 1

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Now What?

Introduction

How do you describe Oasis' first twenty years? Love in action? Words becoming deeds? Changed lives? Developing relationships? Fostering community? Describing the essence of the Oasis Dufferin Community Centre is almost impossible.

After all, the story of Oasis is stories. So that is what we have done with this book; told stories.

In reading these accounts you will notice some amazing, recurring themes. Other than its founder and first Board Chair, almost everyone discovered Oasis by accident (or as Brian Seim more accurately describes it, Providence). Everyone involved with Oasis was struck by its welcoming spirit of acceptance, care and love. Strikingly, those who came to give received, and those who received could not help but give. The chronicles are also replete with the profound change in people's lives.

But be warned. If you read this book, your life will almost certainly be altered. You cannot read this book of God's hand at work and be the unmoved.

The Genesis of Oasis

Phyllis Ortiz – Founder

And he said unto them, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16: 15)

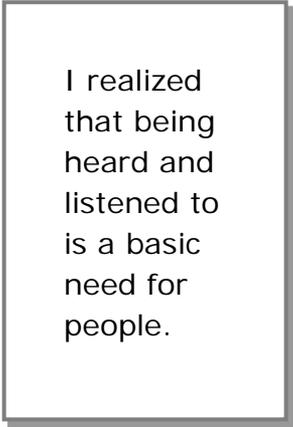
This bible verse, also known as the Great Commission, has impacted my life in a profound way. God used it not only to call me to Bolivia as a missionary, but also to inspire me to start Oasis Dufferin Community Centre.

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I came to know Jesus when I was 18 years old at a Youth for Christ rally in the Ottawa Valley. I felt such a thirst to know more of Jesus and burdened for those that did not know Him. After seven years as a teacher, I went to Ontario Bible College, where God placed missions on my heart through many mission conferences that I attended. I soon recognized that God was calling me to Bolivia. Drawn to the country by hearing stories from other missionaries that I knew there, I believed it was God's

providence opening the way for me through Canadian Baptist Ministries' organization.

While in Bolivia, I learned so much about the slower Latin pace of life. I enjoyed the priorities placed on community and family as opposed to the fast-paced individualistic society of North America. I loved listening to people and trying to understand their life, and I realized that being heard and listened to is a basic need for people. I was also impacted by the poverty that I saw in those around me. I accompanied one of my dear friends to the morgue to identify her mother's body, and tried to imagine the pain that she was feeling when she couldn't afford to bury her mother. Another man from our church was quite ill in a hospital, and I was his only visitor because he was so poor. It showed me how upside-down our value system is when we place importance on wealth and materialistic possessions, while others in this world are living with absolutely nothing. It

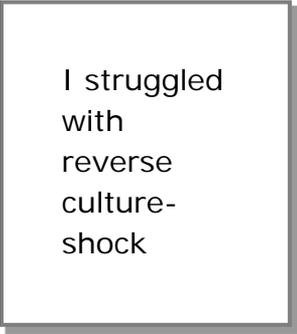


I realized that being heard and listened to is a basic need for people.

really taught me a lesson when I witnessed these people who had nothing, yet had the capacity to be happy.

In 1987, after seventeen years in Bolivia, I returned to Canada with my Bolivian husband and two children. I assumed it would be difficult for my family to adapt to life in Canada, since they had only ever known Bolivia as their home. However, I was surprised to find that I was the one

who had the most difficulty. I struggled with reverse culture-shock, which I would classify as a depressed state produced from not being happy with my surroundings and wanting to return home to Bolivia. I found this quite



I struggled
with
reverse
culture-
shock

surprising because I had grown up in Canada, and yet this country seemed different. Or maybe it was I that had changed.

My husband was a pastor at Dufferin Street Baptist Church in Toronto. As I looked around the community and congregation, I realized that there were many new

immigrants and refugees from countries in South and Central America. If I was having such a hard time adapting to my own country, these people must be experiencing the same, if not, worse, feelings that I was. I wanted to help them. I wanted to welcome, protect, and comfort them; to provide a safe and refreshing place for them to call home. As I looked to the church, I felt that the programs offered were not complete enough. There needed to be more outreach programs to help support and provide for these newcomers. After about three years, God showed me a vision of somehow making people feel that they had a home away from home. I presented this vision to the Baptist Women, and in 1994 the idea was approved to have a community centre at Dufferin Street Baptist Church.

As I thought about the Great Commission again, I realized that it applied in Toronto as well. It said to “go into all the world...”; yet the world had come to me! Toronto is one of the most multicultural cities in the world. We *can* go into all the world, but we don’t *need* to, because the world has come to us. We can go on the subway and not hear a word of English. The Great Commission in its original language

can actually be interpreted into “as you are going”, not “go”. It means for us to be sharing the gospel with everyone no matter where we are, sometimes even where God has placed us in our home country. It doesn’t necessarily mean we have to go to a third-world country. Paul said in Romans that God has ordained every tribe and every nation to be in the location that they are in. We can also trust that God has ordained these people to be here in Toronto right now. And I believe He has ordained us as His children to be willing to talk to them and share the good news with them.

Oasis is a community centre focused on reaching new immigrants and refugee claimants. We saw a need for ESL, housing, assistance moving into new apartments, immigration concerns, etc. We were initially a ministry to women supported by women, but we have broadened over the years to reach everyone in the community. We had programs such as hairdressing, parenting classes, business courses, bank teller training, and cashier training, aimed to provide short courses for women that would help them get a job that would lead to a career. One of the most important programs that has been operating since the beginning

is the food bank, and it is one of the biggest needs of the community. The other important program is counselling that has developed over the years. There were repeatedly women coming out of abusive situations in need of counselling, emergency housing, food, clothing, and more. Erika, my daughter, held an instrumental role in developing this program. She created women's support groups and individual counselling programs.

God has ordained these people to be here in Toronto right now

As more people came to Oasis for help, I had to learn how to do things that I never expected to. The number of people that I was able to network with is what kept Oasis afloat throughout the years. I had no idea how to start a community centre, and so I found people to help me. I needed immigration lawyers, counselors, and contact with women's shelters to help the people that came to Oasis. I learned soon that I was not Wonder Woman, and I needed support from others. For example, one man from

Kenya wanted to bring his children to Canada, but he needed help with DNA testing. Certain tribes in Kenya had tribal marriages that were not legally correct, and therefore the father and children had to be tested for matching DNA. These situations were often beyond my abilities, and so I arranged the right contacts to help these people.

Oasis follows a creed that is called "wordeed". It consists of proclaiming the word of God through deeds. It means to show who Jesus is by caring for each person who walks through Oasis' doors as a whole, including their emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. I once heard an evangelist talk about five steps one should take when evangelizing. Each step gave the same instruction: to form a relationship with the person. We have to form a relationship with individuals before we have permission

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to share the gospel with them. So often we don't proclaim the whole gospel until we have seen that person become more of a whole individual emotionally and physically, so that they can see what we are talking about in action.

One woman recently joined our food bank. She was taken under the wing of a friend of mine who used to be an intake worker here, and she became a Christian through the ministry of this friend. She is now a participant in our bible study each week and is hungry for more of God. It is such a blessing to see her transformation.

It is a blessing to see *all* the transformations of people who have come to Oasis. We cannot take credit for any of it. God has done all of it. It is such a privilege to be used by God here and to even see the fruit of some of the seeds that we have planted.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

Providence

Brian Seim – Past Board Chair

Two men knocked on the door of Oasis one day. When Phyllis answered, they asked if they had found the place called Oasis. Phyllis invited them in and they began to tell her an incredible story.

They were from Romania and were attempting to migrate to America. They had arrived in Mexico and attempted to sneak across the U.S. border, but were caught and placed in jail. While there, they learned from their jail members of a place called Oasis in Toronto that had helped some of their friends. One man said that while he was in Canada, it was the only place that felt like home because the people really cared.

After being released from jail and taken out of the U.S., they smuggled across the border again and made their way to Buffalo. While there, they met more people that told them about Oasis in Canada. The people had been helped in various ways at the community center, but one man had been counseled by Phyllis personally from a

traumatic experience that had taken place in his life.

Phyllis could not believe the incredible orchestration of this story. The two men were now sitting in front of her, asking about why Oasis was so special. She explained to them about Jesus and the importance of Him in their ministry. The two men asked if they could know Jesus in that way, and she led them to the Lord.

They learned from their jail members of a place called Oasis in Toronto that had helped some of their friends

(Story paraphrased from Brian Seim's book, "Moved with Compassion")

When we first created Oasis twenty years ago as a community centre for refugees and immigrants, we had no idea that God would ever use it in ways as great as this story illustrates.

I had grown up in a rigid church background and did not become a Christian until I was older. As a musician, I took off and attempted to make my own way in the world. I went hitchhiking across the west, attempting to do gigs whenever I could. One night, in the middle of a snowstorm, my hitchhiking ride did not come through. I prayed and told God "I'll serve you if you get me out of this, and I'll even give you the credit tonight. However, you do have me in a bind, and I do not even know who you are, so you need to provide that information too."

Forty-five minutes later, a car picked me up and I gave God the credit. They were on their way home from a bible study, and they explained to me that it is impossible for us to live the Christian life. The only one who ever did was Jesus, and the only way is for Jesus to live it through us. Suddenly, I understood. God had

I was in an elevator with nine other people ... where there were four conversations going on in four different languages

arranged for that car to pick me up, and for me to finally realize how to live the Christian life.

After I had gone to a bible school, I was in an elevator one day with nine other people in Edmonton's "CN Tower", where there were four conversations going on in four different languages. I realized, similarly to Phyllis, that I could preach the gospel to the world even in Canada. That was the beginning of God calling me into missions. In 1986, I was faced with the reality that Canada's church was not ready for the new immigration order from 70 000 immigrants a year to 380 000 a year. I realized that something had to be done to help these new Canadians adapt to Canada's culture. This led me to become a missionary with SIM (Serving in Mission) to help churches develop ministries to newcomers.

In 1992, Phyllis approached me about the birth of a church-based community center in the Dufferin and Hallam area of Toronto. At the time, I was already doing one in the junction, so she was hoping to get some help in starting her own. In reality, I was only a few steps ahead of her, so we were learning together. We began to pray and test the waters.

Oasis was different than some other community centers that we had tried. We consciously set it up so that it had close ties with the Convention Baptists but also nurtured relationships with other churches and denominations from the very beginning. We knew that we needed better resources than a poor church could give to a whole community.

It was out of Kincrest and Oasis that a movement of church-based community centers sprung.

Out of the birth of Oasis was the second successful church based community center that we had set up for immigrants and refugees in Canada. Since then, nineteen more have developed. The original was Kincrest Neighbours in Vancouver. It was out of Kincrest and Oasis that a movement of church-based community centers sprung.

Phyllis began by doing an audit of the community to understand the existing programming. We began to recognize the

difference between refugee claimants and other new immigrants. Refugee claimants are looking back to return to their countries, whereas new immigrants are looking forward to Canada. This is a huge piece that is consistently being missed in diaspora ministry globally. Also important to note is the difference between refugees and refugee claimants. A refugee is one who comes to Canada already completely supported by the United Nations in relationship with a church, organization, or government. Canada receives 9000 refugees a year, but about 110 000 refugee claimants a year. This latter category includes people who are coming with a legend of abuse and inequality within their country of origin, but are not necessarily accepted as refugees.

We noticed a great number of housing issues among the refugee claimants located around Dufferin and Hallam in Toronto, where there were block houses for them. At that point, there was little government infrastructure and few services for them. Therefore, Oasis decided in the early days to focus on refugee claimants since they seemed like they needed more help and also since immigrant needs were being met in other parts of the neighbourhood. However,

Oasis later adapted to reach out to both refugee claimants and immigrants.

The problems of the refugee claimants are still largely the same today. They are looked on as liars, whereas they do have a legitimate claim for status here in Canada. We decided to make Oasis a community for these refugee claimants to find others who were experiencing the same inequalities of society.

About three to four years after the creation of Oasis, the police services contacted us to ask if we would teach a Canadian family life class. They wanted new immigrant families that do not share the same values in issues such as spousal rights, education of children, etc., to be taught the Canadian way of life. They wanted to prevent future jail time for these parents, who might otherwise break a law without realizing it. Phyllis and I both recognized that social services were not the enemy, and agreed to teach these classes. The only request from the police services was that we choose a certified social worker to teach it. We chose a woman from our board, and it turned out to be a great opportunity to disciple fifteen couples during the sessions that occurred every three months. Phyllis'

openness to programs and opportunities like this is really what made Oasis grow.

The Police, Fire Fighters, MPPs, and City Counsellors have since made their presence known at Oasis to show their involvement in the community. We developed a relationship with the city community center across the street from us, and ended up teaching some courses that they did not have space for. These opportunities helped us to further develop relationships in the neighbourhood, and Phyllis' openness to partnerships like these was beneficial for Oasis.

Oasis decided in the early days to focus on refugee claimants

Oasis has continued to develop and respond to the changing needs in the community. The economic and ethnicity of the area is rapidly changing. While it is still a lower to middle class community, there are less immigrants moving in. Oasis is wrestling

with this change as the poor are being pushed more out of the community. This change is going to alter the role of Oasis or its location.

However, providence has had its control over all the steps we have taken

with Oasis so far, and will continue to have its way.

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Oasis – A well-watered Garden

Erika Abele – Director of Women's Programs

*"The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched
land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail."
(Isaiah 58: 11)*

In these words there seems to be the indication that if you care about the things that God cares about, such as those who are under resourced, you will be blessed. For me this doesn't mean that God will keep you from suffering. Rather, this blessing may come in several forms, including closer intimacy with God. We are told that we will receive strength from God. Then we see this beautiful image of being like a well-watered garden, a place where many are nurtured and cared for.

I have found my calling here at Oasis to journey with people as we learn from each other. Out of that, a great desire within me has developed to serve this community. I have become aware of God's deep love towards all of us, and how out of that a greater desire within me has developed to serve and help others around me. This passage also reflects the healing that God produces in our lives. I have seen that through the counselling program at Oasis. Oasis, in many ways, has become a "well-watered garden...whose waters never fail" because God has chosen to use us to love and help the community around us.

...this blessing may come in several forms, including closer intimacy with God

* *

I lived in Bolivia until I was ten years old with my parents and brother. My dad was a doctor in rural communities. I remember travelling with him to visit patients, where I was exposed to poverty.

Those experiences challenged me to not run away from pain but have the courage to move towards it.

When I was ten years old, we moved to Canada. I remember as a teenager hearing about my mother's plans to start a center for newcomers to help with practical needs such as language, food assistance, housing, and immigration. I did not get involved with Oasis, however, until I finished my B.A. I was wondering what to do next, and my mother asked me to fill in as a receptionist at Oasis for a while. As I started, I began to get more involved at the food bank and become aware of the needs of the community. I considered how Oasis helped people as they were in transition points in their lives.

I noticed that there were a lot of programs offered for newcomers in the city, but one of the major gaps was that a language barrier often prevented these people from accessing the help that was offered. I realized that my ability to speak Spanish and understanding of the Hispanic culture was a great asset to connect with people and point them in the right direction to obtain the help that they sought. As people came with questions about social

assistance, lack of furniture, etc., we were able to walk them through how to find social assistance or a furniture bank.

I began volunteering on a more regular basis in 2001. I joined the staff when I became the Director of Women's Programs, which included overseeing the support group for women, individual counselling for women, and also the intake at the food bank. Over the years, I have also been involved with various programs such as the ESL café and the homework club for children.

These women that I have counselled over the past years have changed my life.

I started the counselling program at Oasis with another counsellor, Carole Ann Stephens, when we noticed a trend around women of Hispanic descent being adult survivors of child abuse, in an abusive relationship, or other issues surrounding violence.

This reflected a need to provide support for women who were affected by violence. We began to offer educational programs such as

workshops about violence against women, physical health issues such as breast cancer screening prevention, and much more.

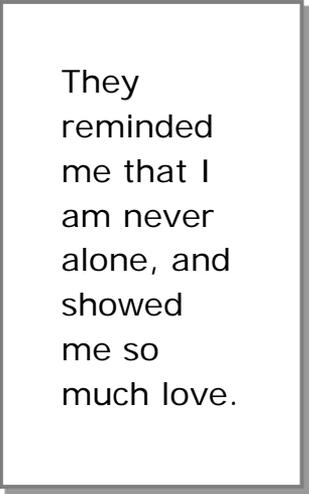
These women that I have counselled over the past years have changed my life. I have witnessed their resilience, faith, and strength. It has increased my faith and pointed me towards God. Seeing women who have been refugees and experienced trauma in their countries, then leaving their country of origin to come to Canada and face many barriers, has shaped and changed me as a person. It is a blessing to see the transformation in women as they come to Oasis when in a difficult place in their lives, to later being on their way to wholeness and well-being. Their desire to form friendships and give back to the community at Oasis has been especially encouraging.

A Counsellor's Testimony:

I moved to Canada from Mexico with my children and husband. When we got here, my husband was working all the time and did not have time to teach me about the new country. I had no idea where the subway was, where to buy food, how to speak the language, and so I stayed home

most of the time. It was a very difficult and scary experience for me.

I heard about the program for exercising with babies that Oasis was offering, and was thrilled to find that the people there spoke Spanish! They were so welcoming and I felt at home immediately. I soon joined the counselling program that Oasis offered, which provided me with so much support as I went through difficult times. I became a born again Christian and it has impacted my life in an incredible way. I learned through Oasis about Jesus, the Bible, and salvation. Counselling taught me to pray when I was feeling sad and angry, and reminded me that God is with me through everything. I felt such peace in my heart and soul, and found strength to keep going.



They reminded me that I am never alone, and showed me so much love.

When I separated from my husband, it was a very difficult time. It was a time when I most needed help, and the people at Oasis

stayed with me through it all. They reminded me that I am never alone, and showed me so much love. They provided me with the tools to overcome the obstacles in my path. I am now learning to forget the bad things of the past and to find happiness in this new life. Counselling has helped me to close the chapter of the past and move on to the rest of my life.

The Spirit of Oasis

Mary Cowan – Board Member & Volunteer

A new commandment I give unto you; that ye love one another... (John 13:34)

A few years ago, Oasis was holding a bazaar. I went to see if I could do anything to help, but stumbled across Phyllis in great distress. She had declared that nobody could buy anything until the next day to ensure fairness for everyone. After she had said that, a dear lady came to buy some pots. She said she had nothing to cook her food in at home, which indicated the greatness of her need. Phyllis wished that she had not made the previous declaration, yet she had to give everybody a fair chance. She decided to tell the lady to come back first thing in the morning to get the pots. It was an anxious night for us as we prayed that the lady would come back. The next morning, she did indeed get the pots.

This story indicates the concern that Phyllis, along with all the others at Oasis, had for the individual people of the community. This spirit of care and love for one another defines the atmosphere at Oasis.

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I spent ten years of my life as a missionary in India. When I was five years old, I remember a missionary telling the children at my

It was an anxious night for us as we prayed that the lady would come back.

church about the children in India who were in need of so many things. That was when I first decided that I would go to India to help the children. When I was six years old, I had an accident when the side of a barn fell on me. I was in the hospital for a while. The nurse that was taking care of me was quite rude. I would accidentally drop a crayon in the bed and if it marked up the sheet, she would yell at me and slam the door. This experience also gave me a desire to go to

India and show kindness to the little children.

One Sunday morning, when I was singing in the choir at church, God reminded me about this idea to go to India. I remember feeling scared and telling Him to leave me alone. After a while, I eventually did submit to God's call and travelled to India as a missionary with the Canadian Baptists. I taught midwifery to students with a grade eight education. The choice was either to teach them at that age or not at all, and the skill was needed there.

The sacrificial love of those people is what I also found at Oasis.

Many people in India were just as loving and caring as the people at Oasis. I remember one time when we were stuck with a flat tire on a road in India and were waiting for help. We were in between two villages, so there were not many people nearby. There was only one mud hut quite a distance away. Soon we noticed two women walking towards us from this hut. They

invited us to come have supper with them. However, we knew what this meant. They were inviting us to come and eat *their* supper. We still had food in our car, so we did not have any intention of eating their food. However, it is incredibly insulting in that culture to reject an invitation. So we desperately tried to show them that we still had food. Eventually, we seemed to satisfy them without insulting them. However, the fact that they came that entire distance on their own two feet to offer us their supper was amazing. The sacrificial love of those people is what I also found at Oasis.

After ten years in India, I was forced to come home because of what the bugs in India did to my health. I was devastated to have to return to Canada. I experienced the same reverse culture shock that Phyllis had when I returned. I realized how much our country had here and the lack of appreciation for it, while India had almost nothing and was in desperate need.

I decided to search for a place where I could help people in Toronto. I had read and heard about Oasis from my church, and thought that it sounded like an ideal place to spend some time. I did not know how I could help, but decided to go and see what I could

do. I loved the people the moment I met them. The love that was shown between the people is what caught my attention. I noticed how people at Oasis cared about

I am sure part of the reason why Oasis was able to remain afloat was due to Jim's scrounging.

those they were trying to help. I attended one of the board meetings, and then accepted the request to become a Board Member.

I was involved in many of the programs at Oasis. I helped with the registration for the walkathons and volunteered in the ESL classes. I was

amazed at how almost everybody that attended the courses offered at Oasis was able to get a job afterwards. The courses were taught so well and with so much care and love. The food bank has always been one of the most urgent needs of the community, and some of the food came from as far away as Hamilton. I attended the Christmas parties and was always amazed at how much Jim Walker, one of the other

volunteers and Board Members, could scrounge from businesses in order to get donations of clothing and food. The budget of Oasis was \$37 000 in the first couple years, and so I am sure part of the reason why Oasis was able to remain afloat was due to Jim's scrounging.

At Oasis, I learned how to relax more with people I did not know. When I was growing up I was extremely shy, but I learned here how to greet others, talk to them, and become friends with them. Also, my Christian beliefs were confirmed and strengthened as I kept learning about all that God could do. I made many life-long friends at this place that have always taken good care of me. For example, as my health made it more difficult for me to climb the rickety stairs at Oasis, Pastor Sigfrido would always follow me up to make sure I made it. Those little gestures made a big difference, because it reflected the atmosphere of love and care at Oasis. Even though the programs and people may continue to change, the spirit of love and care at Oasis will remain the same.

Finding the Pearls

Gladys Castro – Oasis Board Member

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people. (Ephesians 6:7)

One of the programs that Oasis used to run was the yard sales. Several times a year, people from the neighbourhood or sister Baptist churches dropped off bags of items for us to rummage through. Those days were incredibly tiring and time consuming, but they were also a lot of fun. While exploring the different items, we would find objects that we considered “pearls”, or in other words, “priceless”.

Oasis can be seen in a similar way. The people that come are from various ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. Yet the people are such pearls once you get to know them. They change from being a collection of people to priceless individuals.

* *

In 1986, I moved as an immigrant from Colombia to Canada. I joined the

Spanish congregation at Dufferin Street Baptist Church, and through that learned about the new community center that Phyllis

Ortiz was starting in the same building. When Oasis was searching for two members of the church to be on the Oasis Board, I agreed to be one. Since

In Canada, it is easy to feel alone due to the individualistic society.

I am an immigrant and also have experience working with refugees in Toronto, I was interested in the work at Oasis.

In Colombia, I was aware of the physical needs of people. I saw suffering in how people did not have enough money to buy food or visit the doctor. Yet I was surprised to learn about the extent of suffering and abuse that people encountered in Canada. It is not so much physical suffering, but more psychological and emotional. The loneliness and wounds that people carry are devastating to see in a country that prides itself on wealth and happiness. At Oasis, I encountered a lot of situations where women were seeking help

in escaping abusive situations, whether physically, sexually, or emotionally. In Colombian culture, it is rarer for psychological and emotional suffering because there is such an emphasis placed on family and community. Latin American people are not used to being by themselves. In Canada, it is easy to feel alone due to the individualistic society. Depression is common for Latin Americans in Canada because they find it difficult with the language barrier to find somebody to talk to.

At Oasis, I see the love of Jesus in a practical way, almost as if you can touch it.

The Spanish congregation at Dufferin Street Baptist Church often calls Oasis "our sister", since we share many of the same people and even the same old building. Often, people come to Oasis for the programs and eventually start attending the church as well. It is through these longer acquaintances that I have noticed the transformations in individuals. When they first come to Oasis, many are wearing long

faces and crying in desperation. However, after they have been at Oasis or have started attending the church for a while, their eyes and smiles are alight with hope and gratitude.

The programs offered at Oasis have ranged over the years. They have included prayer meetings, walk-a-thons, yard sales, homework clubs, computer classes, cashier training, community dinners, breakfast for children, holiday parties, etc. The breakfast for children on Saturdays included food, games, and sharing the gospel with the kids. I remember many kids accepting the Lord in those times.

At Oasis, I see the love of Jesus in a practical way, almost as if you can touch it. Not only is He living through you personally and reaching out to others, but others are also reflecting His love to you. When you comfort someone who is suffering, it is as if you are with the Lord Himself, because He is there with that person. Even if I come exhausted, the moment I enter Oasis I know that I have the strength to serve, and all the tiredness disappears. It is very fulfilling to serve others and feel Him in all the people that you are with.

Those that come to Oasis often have a desire to give back and end up returning as volunteers. It is not just a place to go to receive help, but to discover that it is indeed greater to give than to receive. The hearts of these people are so beautiful that it is as if you are looking at the Lord's heart. Each heart at Oasis is like a priceless pearl.

Each
heart at
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A Fruitful Harvest

Don Dearlove – Past Staff Member

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. (Matthew 9:37)

About twelve years ago, on an early wintry morning, a man was standing at the corner beside the church where Oasis is housed. He was middle aged and holding two bags, yet it was his distraught face that caught my attention. I walked up to him and we started to talk.

Asking him where he was from, he answered, "Cyprus, the island in the Mediterranean that the Greeks and Turks have been fighting over forever."

I asked him if I could help him with anything, and he told me that his family was back in Cyprus. He came from a Muslim background. I led him to the Lord, and he started to weep. We kept praying for his family, and later he was able to bring them to Canada. He taught them the Bible, and continued to come to Oasis to volunteer for a few years.

I realized that my years at Oasis were the most fruitful years of all my ministry work. Some days I would say something to a person, and would have no idea that it had such an impact on their lives. It has been such a blessing to be able to see that fruit.

* *

I was saved in a Baptist Church when I was twelve years old, but I had wrong priorities in life. I was ambitious and attempting to make something of myself. I was not baptized until I was thirty-seven years old. I came to realize that I did not have to be perfect, and had a desire to help others.

In 1997, I began working at Dovercourt Baptist Church as the Director of Outreach. It was through this that I learned about Oasis, as it was located just down the street from Dovercourt. My goal as the Director of Outreach was to bridge the gap between the church and the community. I came up with the idea to produce a video of different people in the neighbourhood. I got to know Phyllis Ortiz because she was one of the people that I wanted to interview. I noticed that Oasis was fulfilling a role that the community needed. I also noticed how it

was excelling at uniting the church and street mentality, which are usually very distinct and difficult to bring together. As Dovercourt began to focus more on youth work than community outreach, I transitioned to Oasis and was hired as Phyllis' assistant from 2000-2004.

My main role in the beginning was to oversee the food bank, but could be defined more broadly as looking after the food and

I realized that my years at Oasis were the most fruitful years of all my ministry work.

social needs of individuals. Over the four years that I was at Oasis, we introduced some new programs. We started a legal clinic and continental breakfast in the old church, where we would have discussions on the landlord and tenants act, immigration, rental issues, the employment standard act, and much more.

We introduced the ALPHA introduction to Christianity course. We also changed the

manual screening process of intake at the food bank into a computerized set-up.

I witnessed the impact that Oasis had on many people's lives in the area. I met one man who had been a drug dealer and was attempting to change his life around. He was searching for God, and as he began coming out to the food bank, I was able to give him a Bible. He became a Christian and restored his relationship with his son. Phyllis and I led another woman, who was an alcoholic, to the Lord. She tried to give up drinking, but eventually went back to it. After a while, I got a call that informed me she was dying. I went to see her and read Psalm 23 to her before she died.

I went to see her and read Psalm 23 to her before she died.

Oasis has taught me not to be fooled by the appearance of people, but to really read people's hearts. To accept people, you have to get to know them, and to be a friend you have to be transparent with them. I learned how to be a more open person, less

pretentious, and less oblivious to things that others care about. God taught me how to be gracious to people, especially because I learned about how hard some people's lives were. I began to understand that it could have been me in their situation, and that taught me how to see others differently.

A Life Transformed

Terry Allott – Food Bank Coordinator

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5: 17)

Not long ago, a woman asked me how long Oasis has been open.

“Twenty years,” I replied.

Her response has since stayed with me: “Oasis has probably fed a mid-sized city by now!”

It is true. Oasis has fed people, not just physically with the food bank, but emotionally and spiritually each week for the past twenty years. It all began with a woman named Phyllis Ortiz who had so much love in her heart for God and for others that she reached out to help her neighbourhood and community. Each life that she touches has been changed, including mine.

To all those involved with Oasis, I want to thank you for changing my life.

Through you, I met God and found His love.
I found good in this world. All because there
was a place called
Oasis.

Oasis has
probably fed
a mid-sized
city by now!

**

I was sent by
my parents, along
with my siblings, to
an Anglican church,
which I attended
until I was fifteen years old. I called myself a
Christian, but it was like saying I changed
my socks today, in that it did not mean
anything. When I was twenty-five years old,
I lost my mother to cancer. I was very angry
at God. Instead of seeing the situation as
God taking away her pain and bringing her
home, I accused God of taking her away
from me.

Many years later, in 2004, I was
walking up Dufferin Street. My life was in
shambles. I had recently got divorced and
my children were angry at me, making up
excuses about not having time to see me. I
was angry at myself and felt guilty. I was a
very broken human being when I happened
to notice Oasis' sign. I had been looking for a
place to volunteer for a while, and decided to

ring the doorbell. I met Chris Ortiz, who set up an interview for me with his mother, Phyllis Ortiz. At that interview, I felt so

God has
redeemed
my family.

comfortable with Phyllis that I ended up telling her my whole story, including all my struggles and problems. Then she asked me something that nobody had ever asked me before: "Can I pray for you?" I said yes, and felt like a whole weight had been lifted off of me. I felt strange as I walked away, but I knew that it was God who had directed me to this place. He had decided that it was time for me to meet Him.

It was the hardest day of my life, but it was the happiest day of my life. It was the hardest because when Phyllis asked if she could pray for me, I felt like I was so broken and unfixable that only prayer could help me. It hurt my pride. I did not want to trust God. Everything I had put my trust in, including myself, had failed miserably. I was afraid that if I put my trust in God, He would fail, too. However, now I can say that God never fails. In the end, it was the happiest

day of my life because it was the first step towards a new life. It was the end of my old life, and the beginning of one filled with God's forgiveness and grace.

I began volunteering regularly. In one of the bible studies I attended at Oasis, I just broke down. I explained how guilty I felt, and how I was such a failure. I finally gave myself over to God. I was one of those Christians that had to be broken down and brought to the very end of myself. I tried God because I had tried everything else before, and nothing had worked. God was my last resort, and He turned out to be exactly what I was looking for.

That evening, after I had given myself to God, a miracle happened. My daughter phoned me.

"Dad, I know we talk on the phone, but I need to see you."

We met at Dufferin Mall. We apologized for treating each other so horribly, and we cried together. Our relationship was restored, and now I am the one she calls when she has a problem or when something good happens in her life. This would never have happened before.

Both my daughter and son attend churches now, and we often talk about God together. Even my 3-year-old grandson says "God is with me". God has redeemed my family.

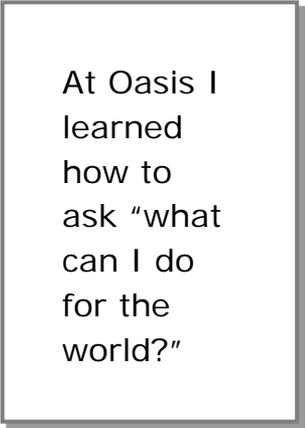
I remember Chris Ortiz telling me that when God comes into your life, He makes major changes. This has proved to be true. It has been a complete 180 degree change from who I used to be to who I am now.

Instead of staying at home and watching Television, I go out and look for where God is working. I just want to work with Him. I used to feel like I *had* to go to church. Now I *want* to go to church. The world's mentality of life is "what can the world do for me?", whereas at Oasis I learned how to ask "what can I do for the world?" Ten years ago, I would have said that I am just one person who cannot even help my own self, let alone the world around me. Today, I have learned from watching those at Oasis how to care for those around me. I am a volunteer who does whatever task is required, but my usual role is to operate the food bank on Wednesdays. To the community, I am not just the food bank man. I am somebody that they see on the streets, at Dufferin Mall, and is genuinely

interested in who they are and what is going on in their lives.

I never realized before that to be a real Christian, to have the real experience of God's love, means that it is an everyday thing rather than something you do once a week for an hour. No matter where I am or what I am doing, I am in a conversation with God. I am never alone anymore. There is never anything that I have to worry about because He is always with me.

Everyone that walks through this door has a story to tell. They may not always tell us their story, but so many of them do because they feel comfortable with us. I have heard stories that grab your heart. A mother once told her son that he could not go to Johnny's birthday party because her cheque did not come in until the end of the month, and she could not buy him a present. These stories make you want to share Jesus with them. Sometimes, however, you need to meet their



At Oasis I
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needs before you can tell them about Jesus in a way that they will understand.

A man named Joe said that he wanted to be saved and asked me to pray with him. He was saved and baptized, and so was his mother. He said that I did this for him, but I said that God did it and just used me in the process. I asked him why he wanted to be saved, and he said, "I looked at you, and you had something. I didn't know what it was, and when I asked you, you said you had Jesus." We have not done anything here at Oasis. God has done everything. This building, this centre, was Phyllis' vision, but it was and continues to be God's deeds. He led every single one of us to this place, including myself.

You need to meet their needs before you can tell them about Jesus in a way that they will understand.

Those that come to Oasis cannot escape the fact that God is already in here all the time. We feel Him, hear Him, and

know His presence. He does the work, and we are just His tools.

* *

A long time ago, when I was in a very angry state of my life, I asked God to make me rich so that I could have power and control over other people's lives. Today, I am not rich in the sense of money. However, if you meet my friends, I am the richest man in the world. At Oasis, we are not just friends; we are a family. Friends are people that you spend time with, but family members are people that support each other. This has become a reality for me only because I just happened to walk through the doors of Oasis that day ten years ago.

The Photo

Greg Matthews – Volunteer

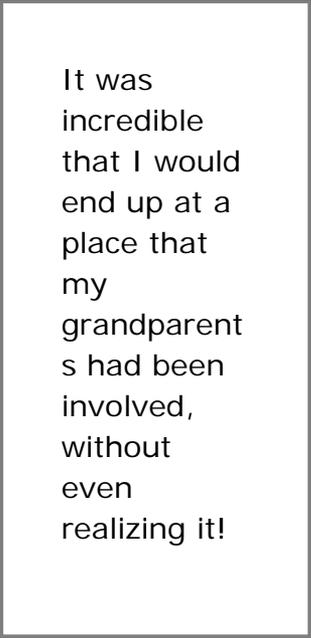
I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. 2 Timothy 1:15

During the Fall of 2009, I returned from a missions trip in Kenya with Canadian Baptist Ministries. I came back motivated to live out my faith in practical ways, no longer satisfied with just going to church on Sundays. When CBM missionaries from Bolivia came to talk at my church, I met Chris Ortiz. He told me about his work at Oasis and I decided to get involved - initially volunteering at the food bank. One day I was rummaging through a pile of objects in storage, and I stumbled across something incredible: a photo on a plaque taken several years prior of my youth pastor, some other kids from my church, and myself! It was a bizarre find – I realized I must have visited Oasis before!

As I got more involved, I discovered I had other connections to Oasis. I learned my grandparents were friends with Phyllis Ortiz (former Director of Oasis), and used to

volunteers and donate to Oasis. We would be walking through the kitchen and Phyllis would point out an oven my grandfather had donated, or tell a story of their help. It was incredible that I would end up at a place that my grandparents had been involved, without even realizing it! Similarly, this photo that I had discovered of myself showed that I had been involved too – having attended one of Oasis' walkathons.

After a year of volunteering at the food bank, I started working with Oasis. I came on staff as a grant-writer and to work with the Urban Training Ground. I wrote grant proposals to larger foundations and did other projects to try to access new funding. At the time I was also studying NGO project management in college, and found it so valuable to directly apply my new skills in a practical context. I also learned so much



It was incredible that I would end up at a place that my grandparents had been involved, without even realizing it!

from how the staff planned and ran programs, and their passion for their work. However, the most inspiring part was the love each staff member showed each other and to clients of the centre.

With the Urban Training Ground, I was fortunate to be involved with training

I realized that service is not just one sided – it's a reciprocal relationship

students in mission work.

The program focused on urban missions and leadership formation for youth, providing them with a better

understanding on how to do ministry in multicultural and urban contexts. Other times, groups of students would come to Oasis before going on missions trips in other parts of the world. Their training involved team-building exercises, development of positive group dynamics, and discussing the theology behind why a church should be doing community development through the idea of integral missions. This means learning how to integrate both 'word' and the

'deed', as exemplified in the ministry of Jesus.

At Oasis, I learned what it really means to serve. I originally came because I felt like I had a calling to serve and help others, but I realized that service is not just one sided – it's a reciprocal relationship. It is not just about giving but also receiving; a relationship based on love where both parties have gifts to give and needs to be met.

I am continually amazed at the impact Oasis has had on its community. As a small organization with relatively few staff, Oasis has an incredible impact on so many people largely because of the level of respect, dignity, and love it shows to clients and participants, inspired by the love the staff themselves have experienced from God. It's a reciprocal relationship that starts with the love of God, and ends with a beautiful web of interdependent relationships: folks helping folks with respect, dignity, and love.

Anything is Possible

George Buckingham – Volunteer

I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)

One day, as I was making my rounds on the street as an Outreach Worker for LAMP's Harm Reduction services, I met a boy who was about twenty-one years old. I knew from first sight that he was in bad shape. He had holes in his running shoes and a coat with a broken zipper that was not fit to wear in the wintertime. He did not know how to use drugs safely because his arm was infected. He had only been on the streets for four months, yet he looked like he had been through as many years as I had.

As I began talking to him, I could tell he was intelligent. I told him some of my stories as a drug addict.

* *

I spent thirty years of my life as a drug addict, and about ten of those years were spent in prison for violence. My life was

a mess. I remember my family would go to church, yet reflect abuse and heavy drinking to me throughout my childhood. I started smoking weed when I was eleven years old. I continued to develop a dependence on alcohol, pills, and cocaine throughout my teenage years. My sister introduced me to cocaine. It made me feel amazing for a moment, but then the feeling disappeared and it made me desperately want more of it. It is an incredibly evil drug that manipulated me, convincing me to keep smoking it continually. The turmoil of my life led to self-inflicted cutting on my arm. It was not a serious attempt at suicide, but a cry for help.

I continued to develop a dependence on alcohol, pills, and cocaine throughout my teenage years.

It was a rough thirty years of my life. It was all about survival, learning how to look after myself. It was a "dog-eat-dog" world. On the streets, I was angry at the whole world. I blamed everything on

everybody else. I never knew where my next

meal would come from. I learned how to be a good hustler. I would work with dealers and run for them. Once I got a good reputation from them, my name got around in the neighbourhood and I held my head up high. I would rob from stores rather than people.

Whenever I was in jail for stealing or violence, I would cry out to God. I would promise to follow Him if He would only help me. Yet those promises were always empty promises, as I never followed through. One time, when I was before the judge after threatening a cable man on my property, I was convinced that I had to change my life.

"Mr Buckingham," the judge said sternly as I stood before him in court. "You talk a good talk, but look at your record. You should be ashamed of yourself. The next time you get in trouble, it is going to be marked in that you are to be in front of me, and it is *not* going to be a picnic. You are going to go away for a long time. Something has to wake you up and teach you a lesson."

It did teach me a lesson. I realized if I didn't change, I would either die from using drugs or end up in the penitentiary for a long time. I began to attend St. Margarita's

Church, attempting to turn my life around. This is where my faith journey started because I noticed that these Christians did not treat me differently. It made me want to

draw closer to God.

Finding Oasis was the best thing that has ever happened to me and I will treasure the memory forever.

They accepted me for who I was, even though at times I was stoned while in their congregation.

They never put me down for it or pushed me aside, but treated me as one of their members. It was out of this experience that I

decided to return to Harbour-Light Addiction Recovery Program.

I had gone through these programs a few times, but had always returned to drugs. After completing this program, I moved out of the neighbourhood to try to stay away from the drug community that I was involved with. However, I was so alone after moving that I was afraid I would relapse. I cried out to God for His help and said "God, I am begging you...I promise you now, that if

you put me on the right path, then I will follow you and I won't leave that path."

It was around this time that I started going to Oasis for the food bank. From the moment I walked inside, I felt overwhelmed by how they treated me. I wanted to go back because I realized that it was a rare place. They treated me as a human being, regardless of who I was or what I had done. I noticed others there who were obviously still using drugs, and I saw the way that the Oasis staff treated them with dignity and respect. I started volunteering at Oasis, and have never left. Finding Oasis was the best thing that has ever happened to me and I will treasure the memory forever.

I believe that if I did not have Jesus in my life, I would have gone back to using drugs and would probably be dead by now.

It was at Oasis where I really accepted Jesus into my heart. These people have impacted me and led me to see the

world and others around me differently than I used to. Since I lived on the street for so many years, I still carried many of those rough attitudes and habits with me. At Oasis, I learned how to love others and understand where they are coming from. My actions began to change, and others started to notice and ask what was different.

“My walk with the Lord, I guess,” was my answer.

It was not an easy transformation. I believe that if I did not have Jesus in my life, I would have gone back to using drugs and would probably be dead by now. I knew I did not have the strength to do it. Some days I was so tempted, and I just had to pray: “I cannot do this today, Lord. I need you to help me again,” and somehow I would get through the day.

I have learned to take it one day at a time and see each morning as a fresh beginning. I have a saying on my door that reads “This day was given to you fresh and new, so you may choose to do what you want with it. It is your choice if you want to throw it away or make something of it.” I do not plan far ahead in life, because I take it

day-by-day. The Lord helps me through each one.

Erika Ortiz was a great encouragement to me during this time. I would meet with her weekly and vent to her. Some days I would tell her that I did not know if I was going to make it through another week without using drugs again, and she would give me a powerful scripture verse that kept my eyes on God. I would often sit in Erika's office and cry, and the fact that she did not look at me any differently during those times made a huge impact on my life. Even when I had two small relapses since I officially stopped using drugs, I was able to go to a friend and talk to him about it. I knew that he would not label me or judge me, but would guide me through it.

Terry Allott also was like a big brother to me. He impacted me in so many ways, especially when my best friend Dorothy died last year. She had been with me through all these years of drugs and violence, and had stuck by me through everything. Terry was the first person to call me and drop everything to be with me during that tough time when I lost her. He, like so many others at Oasis, was always there to support me.

After all the years and difficulties that I have been through, I never thought I would be who I am today. As an ex-drug addict, I know that there are only so many times you can fall down again before you decide not to get back up. I lost many friends that had decided life was not worth living anymore and committed suicide. Therefore, I have dedicated my life to helping those that are going through what I have experienced.

I am also going back to school this year to become an Addictions Counselor.

As a Harm Reductions Outreach Worker, my job is to meet those who are using drugs or other harmful substances and teach them how to minimize the risk to their lives. Many people are dying from overdoses or spreading HIV and AIDS because they do not know how to prevent it. Harm Reduction attempts to stop these from spreading. We realize that we cannot stop the people from using, as I can testify to from my thirty years of experience, but we aim to make it

safer for everyone so that they can live longer.

I am also going back to school this year to become an Addictions Counselor. I have the experience that will help to understand where the addicts are coming from, and may be more encouraging to them than a counselor who has learned all the professional information but lacks experience. I also believe that I would not be on this journey towards becoming an addictions counselor if it was not for Oasis and the encouragement that they have shown me over the past five years. Even though I am working full-time now, I volunteer as much as I can at Oasis because they have become my new family. As long as they are here, I will be here, because they help me to see life differently.

* *

As I talked to this twenty-one year old boy that I met on the street, with the arm bruising and holey shoes and broken zipper, I tried to reason with him.

"If you do not stop now, when you get to my age you will find that it is so hard to get society to accept you again. They will

label you as an addict and a thief. You still have a chance because you are so young. Go back and talk to your mother, or find someone to talk to. This addiction will destroy your life. Otherwise you will spend much of it trying to gain the trust that you lost, as I am still trying to do now."

Not long ago, a boy walked into the office at LAMP Harm Reduction Services. His face had a glow that was full of life, he was wearing clean clothes, and his hair was cut. It took me a while to realize that this was the same boy that I had talked to on the street. He came back to thank all of us for helping him. He had gone back to his mother, and although he was not completely off drugs, he was beginning to turn his life around. To be a part of his journey towards healing was worth more to me than anything.

* *

About a year ago, Oasis was searching for a new Pastor for the English congregation. As I was helping to look through the resumes, I recognized one name: Joe Abbey-Colborne. He had been one of the staff at an urban ministry outreach to the homeless and marginalized called

“Sanctuary” while I was on the streets. I remembered meeting him, and when he was hired at Oasis, we met again.

Joe’s own recollection: “The George that I knew from Sanctuary on the streets from fifteen years ago was a very intimidating man. He was a surly, angry, well-armoured guy who had lived for years on the streets and was hard-core. There were not many people on the streets that I was afraid of, but he was one because I recognized his unpredictability and never knew what he would do next. When I ran into him at Oasis again, I was shocked. He had changed so much. He is a different person now. It is such an encouragement to see how God has transformed George over the past fifteen years.”



God has
transformed
George

To have someone from your past come back into your life and see the change in you is incredible. It is a chance to show them that anything is possible if you just believe.

An Expression of Hospitality

Joe Abbey-Colborne: Pastor of the English Church

“And it came to pass, as [Jesus] sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.” (Luke 24: 30-31)

Meals are an expression of hospitality. Many Bible stories reflect their importance in the Middle Eastern culture. In the story about two disciples walking to Emmaus, Jesus breaks tradition and does something completely unacceptable in their culture. He is invited for dinner at the disciples' house, and when they sit down, Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and gives it out to the others at the table. This was the host's job! It was an incredibly bold move, a glaring social faux pas. However, by doing this, the disciples recognized the presence of Jesus in their midst, since before they did not realize that He was their risen Lord. In this moment, when the tables are reversed and Jesus, the

guest, is elevated to the role of host, He becomes recognizable for who He really is.

This Bible story has inspired the transformation that

We have transformed from a patron-client relationship with our guests to a mutually-edifying community.

our Community Dinner at Oasis has gone through this past year. We have

transformed from a patron-client relationship with our

guests to a mutually-edifying community.

Although our goal was always to show God's love to the people in the community through

this dinner, we had

unintentionally assumed a service provision mentality of efficiently providing food for as many people as possible. This technique is not wrong, but we realized that we wanted to establish relationships with the people and invest in their lives, not just provide services for them. It had been a one-way relationship, but we knew that a relationship could only really exist if it was two-directional.

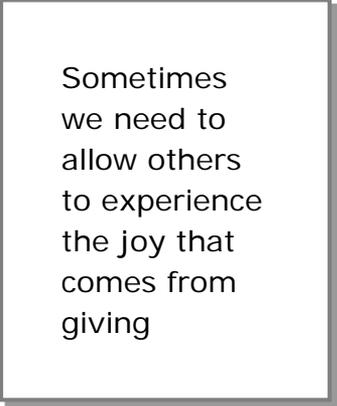
We began to copy Jesus' example. We wanted to break the social traditions and allow the guests to assume the host's role, so that Christ could be glorified through us. Our aim is to no longer have a distinction between hosts and guests. Everyone is not only welcomed, but expected to participate in cooking the meal and cleaning up afterwards. It is a very different approach, and many people did not know how to respond at first. Some people did a lot to help, some did very little, but the fruit of this experience is promising. We are developing mutually interdependent relationships with those who come regularly. Although our community may be smaller than before, it is healthier because we know things about people and they know things about us. People clearly articulate the feeling of inclusion that they experience here. They feel valued and know that their presence here matters because they have the opportunity to give back to others. Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and sometimes we need to allow others to experience the joy that comes from giving.

I was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, the last of 8 kids. From the time I was a child, I wanted to be a priest. I ended up in a Baptist church as a teen, got more into the arts and theatre, and then moved from Alberta to Ontario with my wife, Donna, to pursue a career in theatre. I transitioned into social services and started working with street kids and youth, but when the social services' spending was cut in the 1990s, I went to work at an urban inner city ministry called Sanctuary that reaches out to the marginalized.

Growing up in church, I always thought that I had to project a healed, redeemed, victorious image. Yet my work at Sanctuary challenged this concept. It was a faith community where people would come in all their glorious brokenness, many of the people being prostitutes, drug-addicts and homeless. I began to appreciate that Jesus shows up most clearly in the places of our lives where we are the most weak, not where we have everything together. It started to change from something that I read about in the Bible to become reality before my own eyes. Those who were most willing for their brokenness to be shown

were the people who became the spiritual core of the group.

I began to reconsider the verse “[b]lessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”. The spiritually broken are the core of the Kingdom of Heaven. If I look at people who are spiritually broken, like those attending Sanctuary, I needed to recognize my own spiritual poverty and identify *with* them. If I see them on the other side of a barrier, I am in actuality the one who is outside of the Kingdom of Heaven. This has influenced my perspective on ministry. I began asking questions like *how do we restructure our faith communities so that the spiritually bankrupt are at the center?* There needs to be another reversal of social norms.



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I believe that God called me into ministry to save me, not necessarily to do some great work through me. My first encounter with Jesus was after I came into

ministry at the age of 40. It was my first real encounter because it was not borrowed from my family or church community. I began to encounter Jesus in the people that I met on the street. I realized something was life-altering, and noticed that it was the presence of God. He was touching me and drawing me closer to Him through meeting these people living on the streets.

One cold winter night, a native man was sleeping at a church that was hosting an "Out of the Cold" program. Another native woman that he knew from the streets, who had a lot of mental health issues, was begging the staff to let her come in for the night. They told her that they did not have any room for her. She kept saying "I'm bleeding you out", but they could not understand what she was saying. This native man came to them and said, "she's menstruating, that's what she's saying to you." He brought her in and took her to the washroom to clean her up. That was when the staff finally began to help out as well. This man was so angry at how the staff had treated this woman that he left and said she could have his bed.

The next day, the native man was standing in the doorway of my office at Sanctuary. He had one hand on either side of the door pane, and his head was hanging low.

It has been my experience in ministry that Christ is not seen in the places where I am capable, but in the places where I am a mess.

"Where was Jesus last night?" he kept saying to me. "The church is supposed to bring us to Jesus, to bring us into the presence of God. Where was He last night?"

As I looked at him, I realized something profound. The way he was standing, like Jesus on the cross, showed me what to say. "Jesus was there. He was standing so close to you that you could not see him. You listened to her when nobody else would. You challenged the church when they said they were doing something in Jesus' name. You were willing to give up your place for her. You were willing to go out on the street even though you could die out there...for her. So Jesus was there. He was living inside of you."

Paul talks about how we are like broken jars of clay. If a jar is covered in cracks, and a lamp is placed inside of it, the light shines out of the broken places. It does not shine through the thick and solid places, but the broken cracks. It has been my experience in ministry that Christ is not seen in the places where I am capable, but in the places where I am a mess. I am not in ministry because of my abilities or leadership skills, but because I am willing to be broken and vulnerable so that Christ's presence can be seen through me.

I have been working at Oasis for the past year. I heard about the opening from Chris Clarke, whom I had known from the Jeremiah Community when I was at Parkdale Neighbourhood Church. I was floating around, trying to figure out where God was calling me to next, and felt drawn to Oasis. I came to visit a few community meals as a participant, wanting to observe and experience the center from a newcomer's point of view. I saw that it had a lot of potential, and I felt at home because the people were like those I was used to working with from Sanctuary and Parkdale. I assumed the role as the Oasis Community

Centre Pastor. My role is to develop the faith community at Oasis.

My experience has taught me that coming in and becoming a part of the community is a very long and slow process. Even though I have been here for a year, I am not yet part of the community. I still have a long way to go, but that is fine. I am not as impatient as I would have been. I am developing deep relationships with people, and meeting God through these relationships. If the opportunity to join Oasis had not come along when it did, I would have inevitably gone into some other work different from ministry. It was a reaffirmation that God still wants me in ministry.

My experience has taught me that coming in and becoming a part of the community is a very long and slow process.

More Testimonies

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24)

Janet – Volunteer

When I got laid off from work, my friend called me and told me about the food bank at Oasis. I started coming in 2006 monthly, and since then have continued to come regularly to volunteer. I got involved raising money, going to the Christmas parties and walkathons. I started attending the bible studies because I longed to “love your neighbour as yourself, and to do unto others that you would have them do unto you”. I

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had grown up in church, but longed to have more faith in God. I always looked forward to coming to the classes, as I felt very comfortable at Oasis.

Oasis is a special place because they welcome anybody and everybody here. They love all people, no matter their colour, race, or background. I was always a person who liked to give to others and show love to them, but coming here has taught me how to have more faith and patience. I hope that I never have to move away from Oasis, because I will miss it too much.

Pastor Tie – Volunteer

I came to Canada in August 2009 from Malaysia. It was a big transition to uproot and move here, but I knew that God was calling my family here to plant churches. My wife and I discussed how we must put our trust in God, the supplier of our needs, rather than in ourselves and in our own ability to provide for ourselves. I started a Chinese-speaking church at Ossington Centre. I was searching for an ESL program, and one day came across Oasis when I was walking up the street. I was impressed by

how friendly the people were. I got to know Chris Ortiz. Since coming to the community meals on Tuesday nights, I have developed very different perceptions of people coming to the community center.

The church I planted has since closed, but now I am taking a course in Community Outreach. Oasis has been a great introduction and learning experience for the studies that I am now doing. I have learned more about what society is like and how to help people. I realized that although some people look healthy and young physically, they are in need of help in other ways. The Chinese churches are often lacking in the field of community outreach. They are much more focused on themselves rather than on the people in the community around them. When I return to church ministry in the future, I would like to incorporate what I

When I return to church ministry in the future, I would like to incorporate what I have learned at Oasis

have learned at Oasis by reaching out more to help the physical and emotional needs in the community in addition to the spiritual needs.

Cecelia Hamlin:

I learned about Oasis through a fellow church member, Olga Hyman, who was an active participant in Oasis' annual prayer walks. I was inspired by her, along with Phyllis Ortiz', passion to reach out to the community. I became more involved with the annual prayer walks in areas such as registration and recording funds. I even participated in a prayer walk or two, even though both my knees were replaced.

Once I retired, I volunteered with the Homework Club for children. We would spend time reading with them, eating food, and playing games. What a joy the children were!

Around 2010, I was asked to join the Board of Trustees, which I served on for several years. This position led me to directly witness God's miracles in the ministry of Oasis.

Through Oasis, I have learned that everyone is not called to be a missionary,

but all are called to serve. Geographically, an oasis is a place of refreshment. It is life-saving and serves the multitude. It does not bear a sign as to who can and cannot make use of what it provides. It provides life and welcomes all. The multitude made up of people of all cultures and identities mingle at the desert oasis with one purpose – to sustain life. I learned that this is what Oasis is as well. It has opened its doors to the multitude. It provides and meets their needs in so many ways, as is shown in its many programs. Oasis has instilled in me the values that I cherish so highly regarding serving others – to always serve with love and sincerity.

Sophia – Administrative Support Specialist

I have been working at Oasis for the past year. I am the Intake supervisor at the weekly food bank, and among other things I do the finances and website for the organization. I moved to Canada from Colombia, and was shocked to discover that a “first-world country” had such poverty. However, it was not economic poverty. It

was poverty evidenced in the depression and suicides of the people.

I have learned as an Intake worker that this job is not just about counting numbers and providing food. It is about taking people under your wing and investing in them. I have learned something new about Christianity as well – how to first *show* love to people who are suffering, and *then* to talk about God's love. Oasis has radically impacted my life because my faith has grown so much after seeing it lived out in a whole new way here.

It was not economic poverty. It was poverty evidenced in the depression and suicides of the people.

Rob Patterson:

Oasis consists of people who do the very best with what they have. At times it does not seem like they have much apart from an old crumbling building and the

depths of faith. However, that has been enough to keep them going and continue to grow as a spark of light on Dufferin Street for Christ's sake. They use what little they have, and trust that Christ will do a good work through them.

I was a missionary in Africa for many years. I read about Phyllis' work at Oasis through the Baptist women's magazines, and

I have learned
from Oasis ...
how to take risks

upon returning to Toronto got in touch with her to share our missionary journeys. I became a professor and

speaker, now a Professor at Tyndale University. Phyllis often asked me to speak at events. As I got to know Oasis more, I became aware of its potential as a place for mission training. I started urging Oasis to welcome mission teams and kids who could come and learn what missions can look like in Toronto. I encouraged partnerships with Liebenzell, a German mission organization, and other organizations, which has made Oasis stronger as a result. My real point of assistance has been in helping them

organizationally and working with their board to analyze and strategize the best direction to take Oasis.

Oasis shines in being the salt and light in terms of their location on Dufferin Street. Their strength has always been relational, reflecting the hands and feet of Christ. They are looked at to be the mouthpiece of the community in terms of the church. They have always had a faith community gathered, but their living it out with the training opportunities and support has been incredibly impactful on the community.

It has been a privilege to witness the transformation in Chris Ortiz over the years. I have had a part in pushing him to move beyond doing the mission to teaching the mission. It takes a certain amount of confidence to believe that you are doing a ministry with a level of excellence that could teach others something. When Chris was still seeking God and his commitment was not as strong, I asked him to spend a weekend with students who were travelling to South America on missions. Due to his background, he had cultural and language advice that was beneficial to them. The weekend had more of an impact on him, however, because he realized that God could use him to teach

and lead others. It was incredible to see him grow from a young man searching for purpose to following in his mother's footsteps in terms of his passion for mission.

I have also been meeting regularly with Erika Abele over the last decade to pray, talk, and support each other. She attended the counselling program at Tyndale. I have learned from her quiet influence through counselling and saving people's lives in secrecy. I have learned from Oasis in general how to take risks and to be faithful to every little thing that Christ has given me.

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A Glimpse of Heaven

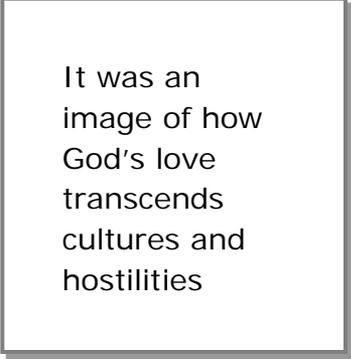
Chris Ortiz –Director of Oasis

All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name. (Psalm 86: 9)

A couple of years ago in Toronto, an event took place called "Heaven's Rehearsal". It was a time when people of all nations came together as a diverse yet unified community to worship God. In my opinion, it was a reflection of what Heaven will be like.

Oasis, too, is a glimpse of Heaven. God's love is shared with everyone here regardless of background, race, or history. It is a place where every broken person – physically, emotionally, spiritually – can be made whole again, into a new creation, because of Jesus.

I remember a time when I saw a glimpse of the reality of Heaven inside Oasis' century-old building. While volunteering in the food bank, I was working with three other men to receive and distribute food. It was an unlikely combination: Terry, a server in the U.S. Military; Saeed, an Iranian server in the Iran-Iraq war; and Tariq, a professor in Iraq. At this time, the U.S. and Iraq were at war with each other. To have all three of these men in the same room, working together and ignoring humankind's divisions that could have claimed their friendship, was incredible to witness. It was an image of how God's love transcends cultures and hostilities, and how Oasis really reflects the unity amongst diversity of Heaven.



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* *

I believe that the church and missions are meant to be interwoven, similar to the image of a DNA helix. They are not meant to be separate, and yet much of my childhood

was spent believing that they were distinct. I grew up in the church. My father, Sigfrido Ortiz, is a pastor, and my mother, Phyllis Ortiz, is a missionary. With such a heritage, one could say it was in my DNA to believe that the church and missions were interwoven. I had the church experience growing up, came to know God when I was in my early teens, but had a rebellious time in my high school years. It was not until I started a placement at Oasis, during my college studies at Humber for Business, that I realized the need to put my faith into action. Oasis was a place where I was able to walk the Christian walk, love my neighbours and care for the poor, rather than just understanding the concept of God. Missions are not needed only in places like Africa, India, and Bolivia; they are needed in Toronto, for as my mother says, "the world has come to Toronto". This is the new mission field, and we need to be both the mission and the church in our communities wherever we are.

My placement at Oasis in 2003 lasted for three to four months and consisted of working in the food bank and helping in administration. Afterwards, I completed my education at Humber College while

continuing to volunteer at Oasis. I began to notice the needs of people coming to the centre. I learned a lot from listening to their needs and learning about their hardships as refugees fleeing from countries. These emotional stories impacted me, and made me want to do everything I could to help.

I assumed that poverty existed only in third-world countries.

It was my first real experience of poverty in Toronto. I lived in Bolivia until I was five years old and had seen poverty there. However, I assumed that it existed only in third-world countries, and that I couldn't do anything about it in Canada. When I saw these new immigrants in Canada, I realized many of them had nothing. Some just needed help adjusting to the new country, but many did not even have food or warm clothes. God used these experiences to call me to a life of giving back rather than selfishly living for myself.

As a business major, I was learning about how to do things in an efficient and effective way. When I came to Oasis, this concept was challenged. Patty Russell and

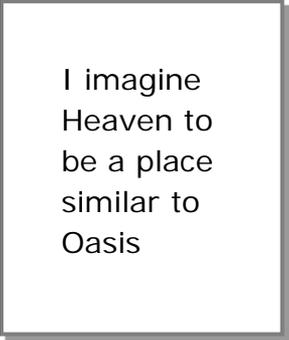
my sister, Erika, who was my supervisor during my placement at Oasis, taught me how to care for each person that I met rather than the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the organization. I am a task-driven person, and so Patty and Erika were instrumental in shaping me into a better person and leader.

My first experience with mission teams was when a team of students came to Oasis to learn about the Latin culture before travelling to Bolivia as missionaries for six months. Since I had lived there as a child, I was asked to help prepare their team by describing life in Bolivia and the language. About a year after my placement at Oasis, I went to Bolivia on a short-term mission trip with the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec Youth. By learning about missions abroad, God ignited a passion in me to serve in Toronto and apply what I had learned while serving in Bolivia.

I worked full-time as the Director of Operations for about 4-5 years at Oasis. When my mother was thinking of retiring, the board agreed that I should assume directorship. In theory, the Director is responsible for leading the organization, building relationships with other churches

and people who support Oasis, and overseeing the volunteers and staff as they implement and carry out the programs. In practice, the Director does a lot of everything, such as filling in for those that are away.

Oasis' programs continually adapt to match the community's needs. When many single men who were new immigrants to Canada were volunteering at our food bank, we started a soccer game once a week to bond with them. The Oasis Futbol Club had weekly soccer games, and became an event where other people in the community would join us. We entered tournaments against other churches. Our team was like the United Nations of Soccer because we had people of many different ethnicities. We also had players of varying skill levels, some as basic as I and some who were semi-pro in their country of origin. It was a unique way to bond with people in the community and many of the friendships are maintained today. We were able to share experiences,



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our faith, and have fun. Many of the participants would give back to the community by coaching children's soccer leagues that Oasis is involved with.

Being involved at Oasis has impacted my faith and my understanding of what faith is. I imagine Heaven to be a place similar to Oasis, where broken people are made whole again, and diversity is unified.

Answers at the Bottom of a Burned Pot

**Richard Steinecke – Board Member &
Volunteer**

*For who is greater, the one who is at the
table or the one who serves?
Luke 22:27*

Standing behind a sink at the back of the dungeon-like Oasis basement scrubbing a pot with stubborn burnt-on food, I could only ask: What am I doing here? I had a thriving law practice. I could pay people to do this. Recently I had surprised my colleagues by saying I wanted to pull back from practising law to spend more time doing “volunteer” activities. Is scouring blackened cooking utensils in a crowded storeroom really what I had in mind?

The answer was a resounding “Yes!” My whole adult life had been spent “sitting at the table”. While my parents arrived in Canada with nothing and we had little when I was young, they showed me what hard work could achieve. After graduating from law school with no debt I worked in a prestigious firm developing expertise in a

specialized area of law. Sixteen year previously I started my own firm that now had nine lawyers serving more than three dozen highly respected clients. At church I had served on the deacons / elder board and almost every committee. I had also sat on the board of a number of charities including taking my turn as President.

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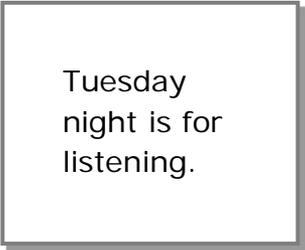
Even at Oasis I was now the chair of the board. We sat around a table every couple of months approving innovative plans for Oasis and solving its big "challenges". With my colleagues on

the board we had organized fund raising events. I was particularly proud of initiating the Great Stair Challenge and the Spring Fun Run to attract the younger, more active donors. And the Fall Oasis Benefit Concert was becoming an annual event. I had even donated a precious weekend of my time helping design a strategic plan for Oasis. At the Christmas and other events I often gave

greetings on behalf of the Oasis board of directors.

But sitting at the table meant missing out on the real ministry of Oasis. The highlight of our board meetings occurs at the very beginning. We share our light supper with a staff person who works on the front lines. We question him or her about what it is like to talk with people struggling with poverty, abuse, mental illness, loneliness and alienation. We heard stories of joy, love, sacrifice, and blessing along with tales of frustration and helplessness at what could not be done. Clearly our staff and front line volunteers were not sitting at the table. They were serving. And that was where the action was.

Committing to the Tuesday night community dinner was a big step. It means saying no to clients who wanted an answer to a question right away. It means missing another family dinner. It means skipping my rejuvenating jog for yet another day (talk about a “first world” problem). It means coming home late, tired and emotionally drained.



Tuesday
night is for
listening.

But it means a lot more. Only by attending weekly could I develop relationships with people in the Oasis community including other volunteers. It means learning the regulars by name. It means taking time to joke with people who enjoy a bit of humour in their lives.

The Tuesday night community dinner means hearing stories. Haunting stories of oppression from around the world. Guileless stories of shocking abuse that people in my professional world would never reveal. Tearful stories of intractable medical conditions, of sudden illness and of lifesaving treatment. Nostalgic stories of childhood events like pulling jars of Newfoundland money from the walls of an old house. Proud stories of criminal activity that escaped detection or which resulted in incarceration. Sad stories of loss and alienation from families. Tuesday night is for listening.

Tuesday night dinner also means cooperative cooking. An unbelievable number of the members of our community have cooked in the past or at least worked in the food service industry. Some are even accomplished but unemployed chefs. They enjoy contributing their skills helping prepare the community meal. I have actually learned

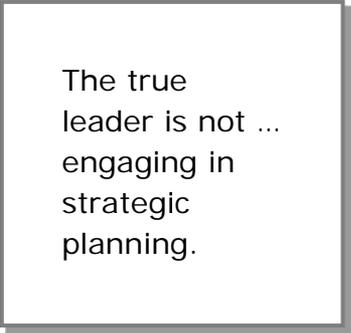
a lot of cooking tips watching them operate in the kitchen. Less than a week ago one community member grabbed a pan, took ingredients I would never have thought could be combined, added incompatible spices and fried them at an impossible heat to make me (he did it for me!) a delicious non-meat dish. The expression of joy on his face as I ate it was indescribable.

Tuesday night community dinner is not without its frustrations. Seeing someone load up their plate depleting the bowl so that others get smaller servings boils the blood. Watching people run out after eating without lending a hand despite being asked to help is disappointing. Hearing someone being teased in a not entirely good natured manner provokes one's ire. Tuesday night dinner is people with all of their imperfections on display.

Tuesday night community dinner also means being vulnerable. I am used to being the expert in the room with the answers to the complex and nuanced problems facing the client. I am relied upon to help them make crucial decisions for organizations which can significantly affect peoples' lives. That is not my role on Tuesday night. On Tuesdays I don't have the answers. I don't even know

what questions to ask. I don't know what to say. I don't have good stories to tell (somehow my traffic woes while driving up to the cottage don't seem worth sharing). I don't know what to do. All I can do is listen, nod, and ask God for help.

But I was there. I was not in the other room sitting at the table. I was with the servants. I was a servant.



The true leader is not ... engaging in strategic planning.

Jesus asked the question at the last supper: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves?" He gave two answers. From the world's perspective, he said, obviously the person sitting at the table is greater. However, Jesus modelled the true answer by serving his friends and, even, by washing their feet like a slave. The true leader is not sitting at a table engaging in strategic planning. The true leader is with the servants, ministering to others and receiving unexpected blessings.

Now let's get that pot scrubbed.

Now What?

If you have read these stories you probably want to do something. But what?

First, start where you are. Every day you have opportunities to show Jesus' love with people you encounter. You also have the chance to start or deepen relationships. As Mary Cowen said, that is the spirit of Oasis and that spirit can be exhibited anywhere.

Oasis can always use volunteers. As you have seen in this history, many of the programs offered by Oasis occurred because someone came forward to provide them.

We also welcome you to participate in Oasis events. The walkathon, spring run, fall concert and Christmas volunteer appreciation events are always more fun when more people attend. Or bring a group of young people for a one-day Urban Training Ground educational session.

And, of course, donations are always welcome.

But do something after reading these stories. You will be blessed.