

**David Jonathan Jones** looks at new opportunities for church engagement opened up by shift work

# SHIFT WORK + THE LOCAL CHURCH

## key points

- Becoming an F1 changes your relationship with your church in often dramatic ways.
- Starting in a new town, a new church and with new work patterns present a wide range of practical and spiritual challenges.
- Finding ways of meeting with and getting to know people in your church outside regular meetings and building a network of other Christian doctors is vital to keep you spiritually grounded.

**T**he challenges of the leap from medical school to foundation training are well known: shift work, prescribing power, navigating the sometimes chaotic layout of a new hospital, traversing numerous IT systems, remembering countless log-ins and door codes, and coping with the challenges of short staffing (and the occasional resulting lack of senior support) are some well-known examples. What I failed to anticipate or adequately prepare for, however, was the impact that life as a junior doctor would have on me spiritually.

In a heartbeat, gone was the guarantee of a work-free Sunday, or of a free Wednesday evening to attend my church home group, or of a civilised nine am start to my working day that allowed me time to pray and read Scripture in the morning. Gone were my normal workday hours which so conveniently synchronised with the normal working day of every other church member I knew. Suddenly I found myself with days off midweek when all my friends seemed to be at work.

I was once a reliable church member, able to serve on numerous ministry teams and meet friends to socialise, or have fellowship at a regular time every week. Now my rota changed every four months and any meeting had to fit around this ever-changing rota. Not to mention, a 5pm scheduled finish time

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that could, in reality mean anything from a 5-7pm finish time depending on the events of the day (staffing, patient illness, emergencies etc.). Then there were the night shifts, which hit me hard and seemed to eat into my days off. Rather than serve as true 'days off', this time had to be used to recover from rota-induced jet lag before soldiering through the next round of shifts.

Like many others transitioning to a new career stage, I had also moved to a new county to accept the training post I had been offered. Inevitably, this meant settling into a new church. How on earth could I start from scratch and put any firm roots down under these circumstances? Now it seemed, I couldn't commit to serve my local church in any of the roles I had previously enjoyed in my former church. I couldn't even commit to regular fellowship! I tried serving in a community outreach programme, but after another church member voiced frustration at my unreliability, I quickly stepped down. I felt spiritually disoriented, disengaged and disconnected.

I voiced my frustrations to my father-in-law (and friend) who happened to be an experienced church pastor, and then I heard it: simple, true, kind and obvious wisdom... how could I have been so blind?

'God has called you to a ministry of healing' he said. 'If all you can do is serve God through medicine then do that. Forget the other ministries; God has made you a doctor!'

Over the following months of ever-changing shifts and rotas, I prayed regularly, chaotically, spontaneously; read my Bible infrequently, un-routinely, yet reminding myself daily of God's grace. I am not saved by my works, my Bible reading or my prayers, but by Jesus's final great work. I opened up about my faith and found a work environment littered with Christians from all over the world: a lifeline, a 'church' in 'less-alone-ica'! My non-Christian colleagues became interested and would ask me about my faith and my ethical views. There were no dramatic conversions, but that was God's job not mine. I merely served as a witness.

I began using my weekdays off to meet one-on-one with pastors for coffee and I became fascinated by the similarities between their work and doctors: dealing with life and death, communication and counselling in times of crisis, being 'on call' for emergencies, and the rigorous academic study required for them to qualify. I also used midweek days off to meet retired Christian church members, mature in faith, as well as other church members I might not have naturally gravitated towards, but happened to be available midweek. (I even accompanied my wife to a mid-week women's Bible study, albeit to man the crèche on an *ad hoc* basis!)

As a fan of mnemonics, I adapted what God was teaching me into a mnemonic I could use to encourage myself whenever needed (see right). I realise now that, contrary to my initial belief, shift work has its advantages: I have begun building diverse friendships, serving in unique areas of Christian ministry, in which 'regular hours' workers cannot easily serve, whilst remaining mindful that medicine is my primary ministry.

We work not for the NHS but for God; we are merely on extended NHS sabbaticals!

*'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.'* (Colossians 3:23)

*'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.'* (Romans 12:1)

Thanks to the church members and leaders of All Saints Loose, Kent, who inspired this article and continue to offer endless encouragement, love and support. Thanks to Phil Playfoot (St John's, Crawley), my father-in-law and pastorally-gifted friend, for always listening.

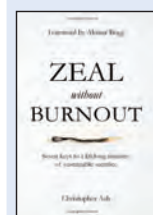
*David Jonathan Jones is an ACCS-Acute Medicine trainee in Kent*

## MEDICS: a mnemonic for shift workers

- **Meeting one-on-one:** Consider using some of your midweek days off to meet church pastors, retired Christian church members, and people you wouldn't naturally gravitate towards. You'll be surprised by how mutually edifying diverse friendships can be.<sup>1</sup>
- **Encouragement of others:** Physical absence doesn't have to mean total absence. Send emails, start remote discussions and consider sending written 'thank you' letters or emails to those who serve you and your family. These can have a huge and positive effect.<sup>2</sup>
- **Don't be late:** When you can attend church meetings, do everything you can to attend on time. Pastors will testify that this is very helpful and a great way to support them.
- **Intercession (prayer):** When you feel frustrated by work interfering with church-life. '*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*' (Philippians: 4:6). Be open and honest with trustworthy church friends/pastors about the struggles of life as a junior doctor. Non-medical Christians will often be fascinated by your career and curious to follow-up your struggles. This can help add perspective as you are forced to reflect on problems over time. We all accept that it is sensible in a clinical context to ask for senior help early, this is also true spiritually, so do not hesitate in asking others to pray for you.<sup>3</sup> The Great Physician is listening.
- **Charity:** Be generous with your time, (covered under letters M, E, D and S) treasure and talents. Treasure – as doctors we earn more than other church members and have the ability to rapidly generate income through undertaking extra locum shifts. Be financially generous.<sup>4</sup> Talents – doctors are uniquely gifted and trained in learning and teaching, communication, leadership and public speaking, where practical use these talents to serve the church.<sup>5,6,7</sup>
- **Spontaneity:** Rolling rotas introduce a randomness to your life that can be frustrating and might not fit with your friends who work Monday-Friday, nine-to-five jobs. Try to embrace the spontaneity this introduces to your life rather than resent it. Note down what midweek ministries there are in your local church; speak to the leaders and consider becoming an extra pair of hands. Few leaders will turn you away if you show up and show willing! Serving *ad hoc* in more than one ministry can give you a unique view of church; a view you wouldn't have had if you were able to reliably commit to one ministry of your choice.



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## references

1. A useful resource on biblical friendship is Vaughan Roberts short book entitled *True Friendship*. Aimed at men, but applicable to anyone working demanding shifts that make friendships difficult. Roberts V. *True Friendship: Walking through life with your Christian Friends*. Leyland: 10 Publishing, 2013
2. Hebrews 10:24-25
3. 1 Timothy 2:1
4. 1 Timothy 6:17-19
5. Romans 12:10-13
6. 1 Peter 4:10
7. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7