

<b>Institution:</b> The University of Manchester		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31 (Theology and Religious Studies)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enhancing church practitioner training, public understanding and the work of Christian communicators through a new paradigm for explaining early Christian diversity		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000-2016		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Peter Oakes	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 1997-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Oakes's research draws on archaeological and textual evidence to provide new insights into the social diversity of early Christian communities. The research has had an impact on: (1) Christian communicators, who draw on the research to encourage audiences to consider <i>realia</i> of ancient life and the diversity of early Christian communities in order to better understand and use the New Testament (NT); (2) trainers who have used the research to develop learning programmes for trainee church practitioners; (3) individual learners and members of church study groups, whose understanding of NT life has been enhanced; (4) Christian group leaders who have adopted the research to underpin and articulate their organisations' policies.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>When Christians have envisaged the members of early Christian groups, commonly seen as paradigmatic for current practice, they have generally done so in an unrealistically undifferentiated way. Oakes's research across the period 2000-2016 held the central tenet that the varied lives of first-century Christians in the Graeco-Roman world are critical to understanding New Testament (NT) texts. His work involves close engagement with archaeological evidence of first-century non-elite housing [1, 2]; mathematical modelling of the socio-economic profiles of first-century Christian groups (typically 'house churches') [1, 3]; and reading of NT texts in relation to these profiles as expected hearers—including reading these texts among the remains of Roman houses [1, 3]. The research has significantly challenged scholarly and popular conceptions of house churches in the Roman empire as undifferentiated collections of Christians, drawing attention to significant diversity in the social make-up of these groups.</p> <p>Oakes's early research at Philippi in northern Greece produced a new model of the Christian community that lived there: the first Christian group in Europe and the original recipients of one of Saint Paul's epistles [3]. The research generated a demographic model of the church (probably the first so detailed one for any such community) with its diverse, non-elite, non-military, social make-up, based on Oakes's demographic modelling of the city population.</p> <p>With funding from AHRC and in-kind support from the British School of Art and Archaeology at Rome, Oakes used the uniquely-preserved evidence of first-century life at Pompeii to rethink the early Christian communities in Rome and elsewhere [1, 2]. Calculations of space-distribution in the Vesuvian town produced the 'model craftworker house church' [1]. The model has challenged earlier conceptions of ancient urban Christian groups that commonly assumed 'poor' Christians were meeting either in the big houses of a few elite members, or as egalitarian groups in squalid apartments. Oakes's research argued that the house church would typically have comprised a diverse range of (up to a few dozen) members from non-elite strata of society: entire and part households (including slaves), individuals from non-Christian families and people without family contact—a range of members whose age, occupation, gender and legal status would determine their experience of life in the Christian community and its challenges [1, 4, 5].</p> <p>A key vehicle enabling the above research to be accessed by a wide range of Christian educators and lay people has been Oakes's creation of imagined first-century characters representative of particular social types and situations [1, 3]. These social types—from Sabina the Stoneworker to Primus the Bathstoker—are expressed in imaginatively 'thick' description but rooted in rigorous engagement with archaeological and textual evidence.</p>		

### 3. References to the research

1. Peter **Oakes**, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (London/Minneapolis: SPCK/Fortress, 2009, 2013, also licensed to Logos Bible software). 125 citations via Google Scholar. Available from HEI on request. Reviews include: “*Ground-breaking work...modelling of actual communities... allow[s] us to enquire how the texts might be heard by real human beings in multi-faceted real-life situations,*” *Expository Times* (2012).
2. Peter **Oakes**, ‘Nine Types of Church in Nine Types of Space in the Insula of the Menander’, *Early Christianity in Pompeian Light: people, texts, situations*, B. Longenecker, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 23-58. Available from HEI on request.
3. Peter **Oakes**, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTS monograph series 110; Cambridge: CUP, 2001, 2007). Available from HEI on request. In one of the most prestigious biblical monograph series. 202 citations via Google Scholar.
4. Peter **Oakes**, ‘Methodological Issues in Using Economic Evidence in Interpretation of Early Christian Texts’, *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, B. Longenecker and K. Liebengood, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 9–34. Available from HEI on request.
5. Peter **Oakes**, ‘Constructing Poverty Scales for Graeco–Roman Society: A Response to Steven Friesen’s “Poverty in Pauline Studies”’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (2004) 26:3, 367–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X0402600306>. 48 citations via Google Scholar.

The research was supported by AHRC: AH/F013191/1 ‘From Pompeii to Rome: Paul’s Letter and its Hearers’ (2008-2009), GBP20,214, PI **Oakes**. It was also supported by the British Academy: British School of Art and Archaeology at Rome, which provided support in kind in 2007 (research facilities and consultation at Rome; sponsoring and arranging research at Pompeii).

### 4. Details of the impact

Oakes’s research has provided public communicators, such as Christian writers, preachers and trainers, with a new paradigm for explaining both social diversity among the early Christians and the implications of that diversity for understanding of NT texts. There is also evidence of enhanced public understanding and of shaping and presentation of institutional policy. The significance and reach of the impact spans the range of historic denominational divisions and theological perspectives, including groups on both sides of modern ‘culture wars’, although people who have consciously deployed Oakes’s research into that sphere have done so one-sidedly in support of community diversity.

#### 1. Changing the communicative paradigm for Christian writers and preachers

The research informed Paula Gooder’s novelisation of the life of one of Paul’s co-workers in *Phoebe: A Story* (Hodder & Stoughton/IVP Academic, 2018). In a testimonial, Gooder, author and Chancellor of St Paul’s Cathedral, states that Oakes’s research “*gave me the idea of a different genre of theological communication which has proved to be very popular...It framed the exegesis of Romans in a different way allowing a new way into the text.*” [A.i] Sales of *Phoebe* to January 2020 are approximately 12,500 in the UK (with additional US sales). The book is being translated into Danish, Dutch and Korean. Novelisation of Bible stories goes back centuries. Oakes’s paradigm shift is in expressing early Christian communities through archaeology-based socio-economic models, instantiated through imagined characters that represent types within the model, then interpreting the text through interaction with the model and the character types. This provides a fresh, more historically rooted and rounded route to novelising. Because Oakes’s approach has a grounded interpretative pay-off for contemporary readers who view Paul’s letters as guides for life, the novel can effectively carry such pay-offs too, crucial for Gooder as a church-based communicator. For instance, in a published interview, Gooder states: “*what life was like for slaves...was hard to write but felt really important... many people today...suffer similar experiences through modern slavery, abusive relationships and so on.... In this area I was inspired by Peter Oakes’ writing (especially Reading Romans in Pompeii [1]) where he explores what it would have felt like for different people to hear parts of Paul’s message*” [A.ii].

Oakes’s models also newly resource communication to children, seen in Paul’s vividly populated social world (e.g. p. 82, using [3]) in the 2017 children’s book, *Paul: Man on a Mission: The Life*

*and Letters of an Adventurer for Jesus* (Lion Hudson/Kregel) by Baptist youth leader and writer Bob Hartman and theological trainer Conrad Gempf. The book's debt to Oakes's research is acknowledged by the dedication: to "Peter Oakes, whose work showed the way".

In 2019, Neil Hudson, Pentecostal Minister and Director of Church Relationships at London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC), a prominent public training and media organisation, published a how-to book for training in churches, *Scattered and Gathered: Equipping Disciples for the Frontline* (IVP, 2019). Central to Hudson's strategy is the operation of small mid-week groups, explained in a chapter explicitly based on Oakes's group model and its implications for reading Romans 12 (citing [1] at pp. 98-126). Also from LICC, three times since 2016 the *Word for the Week* blog and email (approximately 14,500 subscribers) by Antony Billington, their then Head of Theology and an Evangelical Free Church Minister, has presented the dilemmas of Holconius the cabinet-maker, one of Oakes's social-type characters [1] [B.i]. In each case, Oakes's research provides not only the communicative strategy but also the topics (self-worth, mutual support, revenge) and NT interpretation. These pieces are also syndicated in church newsletters via Parish Pump ([www.parishpump.co.uk](http://www.parishpump.co.uk)) [e.g. B.ii], which has a circulation of approximately 400,000 in the UK, Europe and South Pacific, across Anglican, Baptist, United Reformed and Methodist churches [B.iii].

Scot McKnight, a Baptist NT scholar who is among those most read by church ministers and lay people (approximately 48,600 Twitter followers), has made regular use of Oakes's research since his November 2013 blog post that "Oakes has offered to us a new way of thinking more realistically and concretely about who was in the earliest house churches" [C.i]. Two of McKnight's 2019 church-facing publications, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Baylor UP) and *Preaching Romans* (Eerdmans), are heavily indebted to [1]. As he notes on the first page of *Reading Romans Backwards*, the book's whole approach is related to Oakes's but uses clues in Romans 14-15 to reshape its model group. In the practical essay collection, *Preaching Romans*, McKnight's model sermon contribution reads Romans 4 and the Anglican tradition of Passing the Peace via the question of how to analyse these in relation to Oakes's model. *Reading Romans in Pompeii* [1], *Reading Romans Backwards* and *Preaching Romans* are the second, fourth and fifth of the '5 Books Every Pastor Should Read' on Romans in Nijay Gupta's widely read Crux Sola blog [C.ii].

Oakes's models enable preachers to open their congregations' eyes to early Christian diversity and its implications. For example, a 2018 sermon at Selsdon Baptist Church, Surrey, hinged around a slide listing the types of people in Oakes's model craftworker house church. Oakes's model was used to contrast a football coach quote, longing for a team full of Ronaldos, with Paul's approach in Romans 12 [D.i]. A 2017 sermon at White Plains Presbyterian Church in New York used Oakes's model to encourage the church to consider the implications of the diversity of Paul's hearers and the *realia* of their lives [D.ii]. Oakes's models also change the mode in which preachers can set up the ancient context of NT books for sermon series. Instead of general geographic and historical data, preachers can introduce the types of community for which each text was composed. Sources [D.iii] and [D.iv] are Lutheran and Methodist examples using [1] and [3] for churches at Rome and Philippi.

## 2. Generating new and engaging Christian training in professional and lay settings

McKnight, as well as reaching Christian communities through books and Twitter, is one of several of the world's most prominent theological trainers specialising in Paul's letters for whom Oakes's research has shaped the basic structure of major courses they teach. Oakes's research provides the first aim of McKnight's New Testament Contextual Theology course at Northern Seminary, Illinois: "To practice reading Romans 12-16 in the context of how Romans could be read in a typical Roman city – and we will use Pompeii (see P. Oakes assignment)." [E.i] Approximately 700 trainees took this course between 2013 and 2020 [E.i].

Roman Catholic, Mark Reasoner, at Marian (Franciscan) University, Indiana, uses a video-interview with Oakes alongside [1] for an approach to Paul's letters that aims to be more sensitive to material conditions and social realities of ordinary, first-century life. Approximately 90 students

in total took the course in 2019 and 2020, of which approximately half were church trainees [E.ii]. Measurable benefits to participants in a 2020 survey at Marian University include a rise in the number agreeing or strongly agreeing that “I can picture what everyday life was like for first-century Christians” from 8/42 surveyed prior to using Oakes’s materials to 14/22 after. Similarly, for “I can talk about how the New Testament relates to the conditions of first-century life”, the figure rose from 9/42 to 16/22 [E.iii]. One participant in a 2019 survey wrote, *“I now see that the NT must be kept in the perspective of whoever is hearing it. I am more sensitive now to diverse audiences because I see one person might react differently to certain parts of the NT than another.”* Another participant commented: *“The words of a text are going to be perceived differently by people of varying backgrounds, so it’s important to see how the writings affected the different groups. You can always learn from someone else”* [E.iii].

At St Mary’s Ecumenical Institute, Baltimore, Michael Gorman’s Cities of Paul course includes site visits to Pompeii that use [1] as the key preparatory reading to help *“make the New Testament come alive for students by experiencing the (ruins of) the material world of the first century and connecting that experience to actual texts”* [E.iv]. The most recent course had 18 students, including a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, teachers in church contexts and a writer of religious books. Gorman writes: *“Oakes’s work gave the students categories to use in their thinking and understanding of social realities that they had not previously known. I am sure the experience was highly informative for all students and paradigm-forming, or -altering, for most”* [E.iv].

Lay Christian communicators and clergy have also used Oakes’s research to provide new learning events for their communities. For example, a 2017 Christadelphian summer school at Fircroft College in Birmingham, run by members of different Christadelphian churches in the UK, adopted Oakes’s models and imagined characters to study Colossians (*sic*). The workshop was attended by 12 church members, many of whom lead lay activities in their own church [F]. One participant then started using the same approach to give further presentations, sharing Oakes’s research with churches of various denominations and social groups around central southern England. Some participants at these events have, in turn, led similar teaching activities for other groups [F].

### 3. Producing a step-change in understanding by individuals and study groups

Sales of [1] are 2,561 (to June 2020) plus many packaged licensed copies. Its accessible style enables direct sales to the public. An online review comment demonstrates new understanding: *“I walked away...with new eyes that help me to see Romans in a richer more complex and far more practical way than I’ve ever seen it.”* [G] The same is true of a participant comment from a public teaching event in 2017 using Oakes’s research: *“By focusing on ‘real’ individuals whose lives can be recreated from...archaeological evidence... the workshop not only brought some imaginary early Christian converts to life, but also shed fresh new light on Paul’s letter”* [F].

To further develop direct public access to the research, Oakes created an open-access online resource aimed at church groups and individual members of the public, ‘Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii’ [H.i]. Between November 2019 and June 2020, the site received 2,272 visits, including 1,455 distinct users [H.ii]. Initial public feedback indications match those for the Marian University students using the same resource [E.iii] but, if anything, with a higher proportion of participants reporting significant changes in understanding.

### 4. Shaping organisational policy and its presentation

Christian group leaders have adopted Oakes’s research on social diversity in early churches to underpin and help articulate their organisations’ policies. The reach is international, with documented instances in three continents. A 2018 online teaching pack by Matthew Heesing, Turner Valley, CA and Christ Fellowship church in Texas, uses Oakes’s work as a resource for teaching which legitimates these communities’ core attitudes on diversity [I.i]. Another Christ Fellowship church teaching pack cites Oakes in its encouragement to members to challenge discriminative attitudes. Tackling issues of diversity is central to the agenda of Maastricht’s Damascus Road International Church. In their 2017 blog, [1] is the reference point when relating diversity in their community to that of early Christian communities: *“we have a huge variety in cultures, nationalities, denominations, and backgrounds... much closer to how the church was*

*intended to operate*" [I.ii]. Oakes's analysis of the economic challenges faced by his characters provided Judith Gardiner (Anabaptist) with the basis for discussions at Wood Green Mennonite Church, London, on how money is used in the church [I.iii].

The Kerusso Trust (2019 income GBP110,000; net assets GBP810,000 [J]) operates a ministry training course in Malawi and supports a girls' secondary school and other activities. Its key founding trustee, Jonathan Groves, describes "*the whole approach of the charity's trustees*" as informed by a "*three horizon*" approach, applying parallels between NT responses to the situations of Paul's original readers in first-century Rome (the first horizon) and those of modern congregations in rural Malawi (the third horizon) [second is Western scholarship] [J]. He sets out the approach in his 2015 book, *Reading Romans at Ground Level: A Contemporary Rural African Perspective* (title cf. [1]) which systemically uses cases from Oakes's work to illuminate issues "*faced by churches in rural Malawi*" and thus to identify ways in which "*Paul's message can be meaningful*" [J] in that context. In a testimonial provided in 2020, Groves writes that [1] "*inspired my imagination into how [Romans] might be interpreted faithfully, practically and contextually in rural Africa. This was key in helping us establish the framework for our biblically informed leadership training programmes. Over the past eight years, these programmes have gone on to train 1000s of church and community leaders across Malawi, who otherwise would have no access to such training.*" [J]

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. **Impact on the work of Dr Paula Gooder:** (i) Testimonial from Gooder (4 June 2020); (ii) Published interview with Gooder: <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/can-scripture-engage-our-imagination-an-interview-with-paula-gooder/>.
- B. **LICC communications:** (i) Antony Billington's LICC 'Word for the Week' blog posts citing Oakes, as republished on Billington's blog in 2018; (ii) Example of newsletter: 'Trinity Tidings', Trinity Lane United Reformed Church, Plymouth (June 2018); (iii) Email from Parish Pump editor, providing circulation data (20 March 2019).
- C. **Other prominent communicators:** (i) Scot McKnight's blog: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2013/11/04/who-attended-those-earliest-churches/>; (ii) Crux Sola blog: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/cruxsola/2020/06/romans-5-books-every-pastor-should-read/>.
- D. **Impact on preachers:** (i) Selsdon Baptist (evidence submitted in PDF); (ii) White Plains Presbyterian: <https://revgeary.wordpress.com/2017/03/06/lent-1-when-in-romans/>; (iii) United Methodist, Monument: <http://bobkaylor.com/roads-lead-rome/>; (iv) Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod: <https://kimberlinglutheran.com/2014/01/08/philippians-lesson-1/>.
- E. **Impact on theological training:** (i) Email from Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary (3 June 2020) and course syllabus; (ii) Testimonial from Mark Reasoner, Professor of Theology, Marian University (25 May 2020); (iii) Data from Marian student surveys (2019, 2020); (iv) Testimonial from Michael Gorman, Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, St Mary's Ecumenical Institute (10 June 2020) and course syllabus.
- F. **Impact on training led by lay Christian communicators and clergy:** Christadelphian summer school (Fircroft College, Birmingham, UK, 2017): workshop report from leader (14 November 2020) and testimonial from participant (20 November 2020).
- G. **Impact on individual understanding:** Review of [1] at: [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6996896-reading-romans-in-pompeii?from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6996896-reading-romans-in-pompeii?from_search=true) (2015), accessed 23 January 2020. 37 ratings, average 4.03/5.
- H. **Impact of 'Entering Early Christianity via Pompeii':** (i) Virtual guide available at: <https://www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/religions-and-theology/research/centres/centre-for-biblical-studies/virtual-guide/>; (ii) Website analytics.
- I. **Impact on the articulation of organisational policies:** (i) Matthew Heesing's online teaching pack; (ii) Maastricht's Damascus Road International Church blog: <http://drummaastricht.blogspot.com/2017/11/15112017-difference-and-division.html>; (iii) Wood Green Mennonite Church blog: <https://wgmc.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/money-6-how-we-share/>.
- J. **Impact on The Kerusso Trust:** Testimonial from Jonathan Groves, founding trustee (17 November 2020).