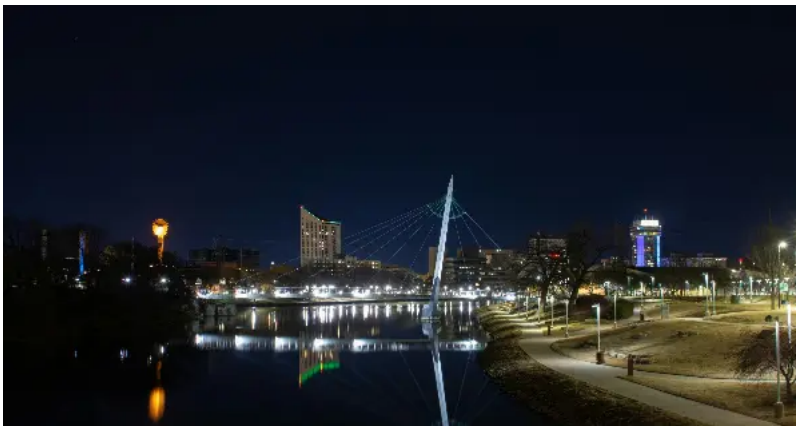


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Jessica Henning & Liz Sadler, Wichita Oasis

What challenges and opportunities have you encountered in building a progressive, secular community in Wichita through Oasis?

January 23, 2025 by [Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



Liz Sadler and Jessica Henning talk about Wichita Oasis, part of the Oasis Network founded in the 2010s. Liz shared how the group originated from Skeptics in the Pub, while Jessica emphasized its role as a progressive, secular community. Wichita Oasis offers activities focused on community, education, and service, such as movie nights, speaker events, and local outreach. Despite challenges like COVID-19 and maintaining diversity, the group has grown steadily, providing an inclusive space for nonreligious families. Both highlighted the importance of filling the void left by leaving religion, fostering meaningful connections without a religious framework.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are here with Liz and Jessica from Wichita Oasis. This group emerged in the 2010s as part of the Oasis Network, which grew alongside the Sunday Assembly. The Ethical Society of St. Louis and similar movements preceded them slightly but also gained attention during the New Atheist wave.

So, how did you two get involved with Oasis in Wichita, and how has it evolved? Liz, would you like to go first?

Liz Sadler: Wichita Oasis started when someone in our local community, who had heard about the Oasis Network, approached a group I was part of called Skeptics in the Pub. They were interested in starting an Oasis chapter in Wichita and asked if anyone would like to help. A few members from Skeptics in the Pub joined to help start it.

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Sadler: Yes, that's right.

Jacobsen: Was it also an opportunity for your family?

Jessica Henning: Definitely. My husband and I were looking for a community to fit into as a family. We attended Oasis a few times, along with other groups, to see where we felt most comfortable. Initially, it wasn't the best fit because our child was younger, but now that he's older, it has worked out wonderfully.

We were searching for a space to be ourselves. This progressive, like-minded community met regularly but wasn't centred around church or religion. It was important that our son could make friends with other children from nonreligious or open-minded families.

Jacobsen: That sounds like a meaningful experience. I remember a story from an old friend of mine, Dale, who's in her seventies now. When her daughter had a young child, I saw them altering children's books to remove religious content. They lived in an evangelical community and didn't want religious narratives to shape her granddaughter's worldview unintentionally.

I thought it was excessive then, but looking back, I can understand their perspective. Anyway, that's a tangent. To bring it back, what does Oasis mean to you?

Henning: Oasis has been about filling the gap many people feel when they leave religion—especially Christianity, which often provides an integrated community and support system. When people leave that environment, they often wonder, *What now?*

Oasis has provided us with a welcoming, inclusive space to build relationships and find support without the religious framework. For my family, it's been a place to connect with others who share our values and build a community where we truly feel we belong.

Jacobsen: Even though, at least from one story, it was simply going from skeptics to connecting with another community.

Henning: Yes. Adulting is hard for me, and it's nice to have a network and a place to go where the people are fantastic. I've made good friends there. There are only a few places I enjoy going to that offer that. Wichita has some great places—if you're into music or D&D, there are many clubs for different things—but finding a community with a little bit of everything is rare.

We play board games, go to movies, and do many things together as a community without centring around just one specific activity or topic. It's great for that. As I said, Wichita has many places and other groups with great people. There's even a progressive First UU Church, a good fit for some people.

But for us, it was a little too religious or spiritual. It was about finding a place to be myself, connect with like-minded people, and be my whole self—not just one aspect of myself tailored to fit a particular group.

Liz Sadler: To piggyback off that, much of the same is true for me. I started attending because the skeptic's group was something I went to monthly. Then, this other thing, Oasis, started up. I thought, "Okay, I'll check that out too," and I started going.

At first, the crowd consisted mostly of the same people, but over time, it shifted, and now it's mostly different folks. I stopped going to the skeptic's group but kept going to Oasis. The intent behind Oasis feels different. It's more about being a community than a club.

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That's what Oasis is about. There's no single thing that defines us. Sure, many of us are nerds and neurodivergent, but that's not the focus. We're here to be a community of people who share similar values. I keep going because it's what I do now—where my people and friends are.

Jacobsen: That's healthy because you're following a path that aligns with how people often find and engage with communities.

When I did a group interview with the Atheist Society of Kenya—their founder, executive director, and several members—a lot came out of that discussion. For many African humanists and atheists, their experiences are starkly different. They're often called satanic, possessed, witches, or worse, and those accusations can have serious consequences.

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Harrison Mumia, for example, shared that he lost his job at a bank because he publicly endorsed atheism.

Henning: That shows up for me, too—thinking about those broader challenges.

Jacobsen: For the resources they have, given the challenges African free thinkers typically face, the Atheist Society of Kenya managed to grow to about 120 members. That's all right, considering the circumstances.

Henning: Wow.

Jacobsen: Our stories are so different. Wanting to be your whole self is a very different narrative from losing your job at the bank and being called satanic. I'm glad you two have had a much easier time and were able to integrate and find a community for yourselves in a positive way.

What kinds of activities do you do in your Oasis?

Sadler: I'll let Jess take that one because she handles more of it than I do.

Henning: Sure. We do a mix of activities focused on community building, education, and service projects. For community building, we do things like movie nights, board game days, and Jackbox game sessions.

On the educational side, we bring in speakers or discuss relevant topics. For example, we've had a firefighter give a talk on fire safety, and a nurse teach us how to recognize the signs of a stroke—which, incidentally, came in handy for someone recently.

Jacobsen: That's great!

Henning: Yes, it's been very helpful. So, we mix educational programming with community-building activities. We also do service projects, like park cleanups or working with the McKinney-Vento program at our local school district. Through that program, we've created snack bags for homeless teens attending local schools.

So, those three elements—community, education, and service—are the foundation of our programming.

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Henning: It's one of my favourites.

Jacobsen: "Meaningless, meaningless..."

Henning: Exactly!

Jacobsen: "It's all meaningless." His account is that God reached him through Ecclesiastes. His joke is, "God reached you through Ecclesiastes?" That's less practical than fire safety, stroke identification, and trash pickup. Those are much more useful. How big is your community, and what does it look like?

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Henning: It has varied in size over the years. When it first started, and I attended on and off, there were 40 to 50 people. Over time, there were natural ebbs and flows. Then COVID hit, which made things difficult because everything had to move online.

I wasn't involved much during that period, but the community tried to stay connected through Zoom calls and similar efforts. When we returned to meeting in person, the group had dwindled to about 10 to 15 weekly attendees.

We're back up to around 20 attendees each week, though it's different from the 20 people every time. Overall, a larger group of about 30 to 35 attend semi-regularly. We've been growing over the last two years, particularly following the elections, bringing more people looking for community and local engagement.

Jacobsen: Would having a dedicated building with tax-exempt status or government and grant funding for community activities help Oasis grow and offer more services?

Henning: We're already a 501(c)(3) nonprofit benefiting from tax-exempt status. People who donate can take a tax deduction, which is helpful. But we're still small and need to leverage more of those privileges.

We don't have a building or salaried employees, so we volunteer everything. We could grow significantly with a dedicated space or even one salaried staff member.

Sadler: With more resources, we could host more events, bring in additional speakers, and expand our outreach efforts.

For example, we could have someone manage email lists, make calls to spread the word about events, and plan activities. That would help us draw in more people.

Jacobsen: You could find someone like a retired accountant named Beth who'd be conscientious about everything.

Henning: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Does the local Kansas culture influence Oasis's style? Does it affect the music you play, the topics you discuss, or anything else?

Henning: Wichita feels like it's trying to be progressive, but it's still very center-right politically, even for a bigger city. We're not like Austin, Texas—a blue dot in a sea of red—but we're working on it.

People seek out Oasis here to find a sense of progressiveness and like-mindedness. I spoke with one member who moved from California. She didn't feel the need to join a group there because the culture already aligned with her values, and she found it easy to make friends. But here in Wichita, the culture is more conservative, so groups like Oasis provide a much-needed space for people to connect.

Sadler: Kansas culture doesn't specifically influence how we pick speakers or plan events. Still, it does shape why people are looking for a community like this in the first place.

When picking speakers, we focus more on whether their message aligns with our goals of community-mindedness or education. Does it fit within our values? Would people be interested in hearing them?

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Jacobsen: I might be one of the few people who've reached out to Oasis chapters, Sunday Assemblies, and Satanic Temple groups to ask if they'd be interested in doing interviews.

Sadler: There was a time at our previous location when we discussed ways to attract more people. Someone suggested putting flyers on neighbourhood doors.

However, we hesitated because we didn't know the neighbourhood well. It might have been a religious area, and we were concerned that seeing the word "secular" might lead some to think "Satan worshippers." For some fundamentalist groups, "secular" is still a dirty word.

Ultimately, we decided not to pursue that option, partly because we weren't sure it would be effective and partly because we wanted to avoid potential backlash.

Henning: We've tried to include local speakers to highlight the history of Wichita and Kansas. For example, we had someone from Humanities Kansas talk about the women behind the *Brown v. Board of Education* lawsuit, which originated in Kansas.

That kind of history is fascinating and helps us connect to the culture and community around us. However, I wouldn't say Kansas culture plays a huge role in shaping our programming.

Jacobsen: Do you get any hate mail? If so, what does it say?

Henning: The worst hate mail we've received is, "If you meet every week, aren't you a church?" Which is... a weird critique.

Jacobsen: That's an odd take.

Henning: If it's not their vibe, that's fine. But no, we rarely get negative feedback. Most people are positive or neutral when we explain who we are and what we do.

Jacobsen: That's nice. You're leaning into Unitarian Universalist territory, where almost no one has beef with them.

Henning: [Laughing] Almost no one in the universe seems to have an issue with them.

Jacobsen: Do you collaborate with local religious groups of a more progressive persuasion or other freethought groups when you want to organize larger events or activism in the area?

Henning: Yes, we're trying to get back into that. It petered over time, but we have a meeting next month to bring some progressive groups together to discuss a few projects—Project 2025 being one of them.

Right now, we share events that other groups will enjoy. For example, if a particular speaker is coming that might interest other groups, we'll share that information.

Charles, from the humanist group, is always wonderful. They have a monthly humanist meeting at the Unitarian church, and he always shares those events with our group. Hence, we know what's coming up. A bit of informal collaboration is happening, but we're aiming for more intentional collaboration in the future.

Jacobsen: It's interesting how you mentioned this effort had tapered off for a while. Over the past few decades in the United States and Canada—where I'm based—the trend, if you draw a line of best fit, has been a consistent increase in the number of atheists, agnostics, humanists, and progressively non-theistic individuals.

So, aside from COVID, what would you attribute this dip in participation to? Given the growing nonreligious demographic in the U.S., you'd expect more people to join.

Henning: COVID changed everything about how people interact—it shifted the culture, even for hobbies and social groups. It disrupted the landscape, and it took us a while to adapt and find where the need was.

Even as people started emerging from COVID-19, there was still much fear about meeting in person. Navigating those challenges as a

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We stayed online for over a year, and it wasn't until August 2021 that we started meeting in person again.

Another hurdle was that the place we were leasing moved just as we considered returning to in-person meetings. So, we had to find a new venue, which delayed our ability to transition back to in-person gatherings even longer.

Those combined challenges—fear of meeting in person, burnout from virtual events, and logistical issues with finding a new location—made it harder to rebuild the community after COVID.

The thing we realized was that we *had* to go back in person.

[Sadler's cat joins the call.]

Sadler\: They say hello!

Henning: [Laughing] Hello, Mila. We realized we needed to return in person because our Zoom attendance was circling the drain. It wasn't a case of everyone moving online for a while and returning in person. Some people returned, but fewer and fewer showed up online over time. When we transitioned back to in-person meetings, we started rebuilding from there.

You going to come up here, Mila, or what?

Jacobsen: [Laughing] You're reminding me of that scene from *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*—the cat in the box from the grandmother.

Henning: I've only seen that movie once, so I don't remember it well.

Jacobsen: Oh, there's a part where they hand the box over to Clark Griswold, and it starts shaking like crazy. The mom brought random stuff—like Jell-O, an old cake, and even the cat—in little boxes.

Henning: [Laughing] That's great.

Jacobsen: So, back to Oasis—what else should I ask? Much of online secular culture tends to be male-dominated. For instance, the ex-Muslim community was predominantly men for a long time, though that has started to shift. How do you see gender dynamics in Oasis and the local secular community, especially regarding community building?

Henning: That's a good question. Wichita has an atheist group, and while it tends to lean male, our Oasis community is closer to gender parity. We're not doing anything special or unique. Still, Wichita has a lot of badass women, so that helps!

Jacobsen: [Laughing] There you go! We also have to set realistic expectations. We talk about the 50/50 gender balance, but hitting 40/60 is often a reasonable green zone for many communities. Context plays a big role, however. For instance, in one of the African groups you mentioned, the approximate number of women in their group was zero. That's true—different societal and cultural pressures affect these dynamics.

Henning: Yes, we're pretty gender diverse, which is great. However, I've always been frustrated that we're not more racially diverse. We've been trying to address that shortcoming, but I need to figure out how to fix it.

Do we need to market to wider groups? We're working on that, but I still feel uncertain about the best way to make our community more inclusive racially. I've always felt frustrated by this.

Jacobsen: That's a common issue. I've heard similar frustrations from people like Dan Barker, Mandisa Thomas, and Bolaji Alonge in Nigeria.

Henning: Yes, it's pervasive. We all need to work on it as secular communities continue to grow and evolve.

Jacobsen: So, he's in Nigeria. He's an artist and photographer. Mandisa and Dan Barker went to Nigeria for an arts festival—the first for secular groups in the country. There aren't many people like that.

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So, it becomes layered in several ways. Not every case, obviously, but the trend lines point to those challenges. I'm glad at least to have tried to reach out.

What do you think? Is there anything I missed?

Henning: Are you part of a secular, atheist, or nonreligious community?

Jacobsen: Well, internationally, for a while, yes. I was on the board of Humanist Canada and part of Young Humanists International, which is affiliated with Humanists International.

We were transitioning from the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) to the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization (IHEYO), so I had many international friends and still do. Throughout the year, I keep intermittent contact with people doing important work in writing, journalism, art, and activism.

Locally, however? Not really. I grew up in Fort Langley, British Columbia, Canada. That's where Trinity Western University is located—the largest private university in Canada. It's an evangelical Christian university.

Henning: So, something similar to Liberty University in the United States but on a Canadian scale?

Jacobsen: Correct. It's evangelical in orientation and gets some benefits, like tax exemptions. It was about five minutes from where I lived.

They had a Supreme Court case regarding a proposed law school, which they lost 7–2. The issue was that students, staff, administration, and faculty needed to sign a covenant stating they wouldn't engage in premarital sex, LGBTQ+ relationships, drinking, or any behaviour contrary to evangelical beliefs. Essentially, anyone who doesn't believe as they do is condemned to "conscious eternal torment," in their own words.

After the court case, they made the covenant mandatory for everyone except students, making it optional for them. Of course, cultural pressure still pushes students to sign.

Henning: That sounds intense.

Jacobsen: It was the community I grew up in. I joke that I either ended up in the wrong profession or that alternate universes passed me by. I was meant to be an evangelical youth pastor playing acoustic guitar or a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. [Laughing] I know how I look!

But, alternate realities aside, I went into journalism and interviewed many atheists.

Henning: How did you connect to secularism, given that background?

Jacobsen: My experience was disparate. Growing up in that environment, there wasn't any local secular community—it was hush-hush. I gained access to these ideas and communities when I started writing and getting involved in journalism.

Of course, I blame the British. [Laughing] Before this, I was focused on ethical and sustainable fashion journalism.

Jacobsen: Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you telling me about Wichita. If I'm ever in the area, I'll send an email so we can meet for coffee.

Henning: Sounds good!

Jacobsen: Thank you again!

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