

God is my coworker

Some companies are finding a place for spirituality

By James D. Davis

Religion Editor, Sun-Sentinel, July 9, 2006

Johnnie Groot prays and studies the Bible with others at three venues each week: Sundays at church, Monday nights in a home study group, and Friday mornings at work -- with his employer.

He loves it all.

"It keeps me on the right path, like lines on a street," said Groot, a West Palm Beach resident and estimator at Hedrick Brothers Construction Co. "If I get the message two or three times a week, instead of just once, it makes me a better father and employee."

Multiply Groot by thousands, and you have the quiet but swelling wave of prayer groups, Bible studies and discussions of faith in the halls of commerce. Although some have met for years, prayer groups have increased -- in number and visibility -- in recent years.

A 2003 study by Yale researchers found more than 1,200 formally organized and publicized workplace faith groups nationwide, nearly double the number in a study three years earlier. In addition, Yale professor David Miller estimated that for every group that announces its existence, perhaps 20 or 30 others meet quietly and informally.

"People are tired of a schizophrenic life, divided into church and family and work," Miller said. "If faith is important, they want to live it the whole week. They no longer want to leave their souls in the parking lot."

The trend is apparent up and down the South Florida coast as well. Praying with peers, studying Torahs or spreading prayer mats, consulting Bibles in financial decisions, workers are no longer content to confine their spiritual side to a couple of hours on the weekend. They want to bring it to the 40-plus hours they spend making a living as well. And they insist that both they and their jobs are better off because of it.

"The marketplace is where everything interacts," said John Nardone, founder of the Kingdom Marketplace Alliance, which conducts prayer meetings for area executives and CEOs. "When employees are allowed to exercise their faith at work, they can operate as complete persons. They can focus on work and handle stress better, and embrace people who are different from them."

One example: Dr. Samina Qureshi, an internist who works in Lighthouse Point, portions out her week like a budget: time for work, time for studying the Quran, time for caring for her family.

"Worship is not just praying," said Qureshi, a founder of the Islamic Center in Sunrise. "It's also how I treat my kids and work in the business, and how I'm growing as a person. That balance is part of the teaching of Islam."

How would a faith-friendly firm work? Maybe like Hedrick Brothers Construction in West Palm Beach. President Dale Hedrick conducts the Friday morning Bible study, which draws five to eight people per week, and manages the 110 employees by The Book.

"The Bible is the best book on business ever written; everything on leadership and management is there," Hedrick said. "If God is who he says, he can guide us."

He lets workers open meetings with prayer and has them all sign a "social contract" -- an agreement to show respect and concern, honor confidences and communicate honestly.

He even forewarns applicants: "We openly express our faith around here. If that's uncomfortable for you, we probably won't be a good fit." Some don't come back after that, he said.

Those like Groot who share Hedrick's active faith praise the company atmosphere. It seems to work as well for those who are less demonstrative. One worker is so private about her beliefs -- unlike many fellow employees, she doesn't attend church -- that she asked not to have her name used. But she said she hasn't felt ostracized by the open prayer and references to religion. And when others pray during company meetings, she listens respectfully.

"I've worked for people who treat you like scum," she said. "Here, they've been supportive, almost like brothers and sisters. They're down to earth, God-fearing people. It's the first company where I feel completely and utterly accepted."

The need for acceptance by God as well as other people is one reason for a cultural shift toward spirituality, said Jeffrey P. Greenman, a professor of Christian ethics at Wheaton College near Chicago. That shift helped spawn books like *Left Behind*, *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Da Vinci Code*, and the movies based on them.

"People are asking about meaning, values, ethics, contemplation -- where you are in the wider universe," said Greenman. "Spirituality is not just in church or mosque or synagogue, but in all of life."

Miller, executive director at Yale's Center for Faith and Culture, also cited the business upheavals of the 1980s -- technology, downsizing, globalization -- that both made fortunes and destroyed careers and launched a search for divine guidance.

"Both those who were devastated and those who were blessed were asking the God question," he said. "They turned to their faith for healing and encouragement."

In the eyes of many, the perceived separation of work and faith also led to the flood of recent corporate scandals: Enron, WorldCom, Tyco and others. The resulting soul searching goes "beyond normal business ethics or rules," Greenman said.

"It goes to character issues: trust, leadership, intentions, goals, values. And when you talk about those, you're into spirituality."

So far, however, workplace spirituality hasn't taken over the business world; there is no corporate consensus on religious or spiritual activities, Miller said. Many employers allow meetings off the clock, but still fear that explicit policies allowing or forbidding the meetings would draw criticism from one side or another.

"This is the kind of issue that's radioactive," said economist Ken Goldstein of the Conference Board, a New York-based organization that advises companies on a variety of topics. "The human resources folks run from making any policy statement on it. What we're not getting is a corporate Great Awakening."

Miller said he thinks the faith-at-work movement is in its early stages, like the civil rights, feminist and gay and lesbian rights movements were years ago. When they first affected the corporate world, companies initially resisted, uncertain how to deal with the emotional and divisive topics.

Maybe it's just a matter of getting to know religious people as people, rather than as potential problems. Nasim Khan, who has worked for four years as a quality control officer for an aircraft survival equipment company in Miami, said fellow workers were originally edgy about his practice of praying during afternoon break.

"They wondered about me after 9-11, especially because I wear a beard," said Khan, a Pembroke Pines resident. "I explained that prayer is a must, and not just in a mosque, but every day. Then they became friendly."

Most of them have even learned Arabic expressions like salaam aleikum, meaning "peace be upon you," and inshallah, "if God is willing," he said. "They wanted to learn my language out of good feelings and respect.

"Religion at work doesn't harm a company," Khan said. "If you handle things properly, it works."

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