

**GOD ON THE JOB? As more of us spend longer hours at the office, many don't want to leave our souls in the parking lot. But can business and spirituality peacefully coexist?**

***Ladies' Home Journal, September 2005.***

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**Spirituality in America: God on the Job?**

**By David Gibson**

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***As more of us spend longer hours at the office, many don't want to leave our souls in the parking lot. But can business and spirituality peacefully coexist?***

When a tornado swept through Monett, Missouri, Lynn Freeman's home was wrecked. "It was a disaster, and it seemed like everything I worked so hard for was gone," said Freeman, 47, who had worked at the local Tyson Foods plant for 23 years. The damage would take six months to repair and she was having a difficult time dealing with her insurance company. Freeman, a Catholic, said she started losing faith. Her pain became clear to her coworkers, and soon to the Reverend Christopher H. Carver, one of the many chaplains that Tyson employs at its branches.

One day at work, Carver, who's not only a Tyson chaplain but also a pastor at the nearby Church of the Nazarene, asked Freeman about her troubles. Freeman unburdened herself, and Carver offered to help deal with the insurance companies and contractors. His aid eventually paved the way for Freeman to get her house -- and her faith -- back. "He gave me a spiritual makeover," she says, with gratitude in her voice. "He helped me see that everything would turn out all right -- and he helped me become a believer once again."

Such a scenario may be a surprise to many of us who are, on the contrary, discouraged from even breathing the word religion in workplace conversations. And yet, a whole other faith-based work movement is afoot in cubicles across the country. Tyson chief executive officer John Tyson is one of the pioneers. He started transforming his Springdale, Arkansas-based firm, the world's largest meat company, into a faith-friendly corporate giant five years ago. It now has 112 chaplains representing several religions and provides prayer rooms for all of its 114,000 employees; many locations also offer prayer groups or Bible studies. But it's up to the employees to determine what services they want. There's no proselytizing by chaplains or other workers. "Having faith in the workplace is fantastic," Freeman says. "It makes me feel good about my job."

No longer content to relegate their faith to the weekends, more Americans are trying to express their religious beliefs from Monday to Friday as well. "For many people, the office has become their community, their family, and they want their faith to be part of it," says David W. Miller, PhD, MDiv, who runs the Center for Faith & Culture at Yale Divinity School, in New Haven, Connecticut, a think tank that helps people incorporate faith into their work. Says Miller, a former IBM executive, "People no longer want to leave their soul in the parking lot."

### **The Faith-at-Work Movement**

And Americans are toiling harder than ever, observes Judith A. Neal, PhD, a business professor at the University of New Haven, in Connecticut, who founded the Association for Spirit at Work, an information clearinghouse for those seeking to merge spirituality into the workplace. That means that the workplace -- be it the classroom, the assembly line, or the office watercooler -- has in essence become the hub of American life.

"We hunger for community," she says, "so if we spend all our time at our jobs, where are we going to find our human connections? In the workplace."

Because of this transformation, companies are learning to accommodate a wide range of practices. Christians, especially evangelical Christians -- a label about 40 percent of Americans give themselves -- dominate the faith-at-work movement, but it includes Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others. Today thousands of firms, including leading companies such as Intel and Ford, allow workers to hold prayer or religious study sessions in the workplace. The number of "faith-friendly workplaces" -- a term Miller uses to denote companies that work spiritual values into their mission statements -- has grown from about 25 to 1,350 in the last decade. Web sites such as [WorkplaceSpirituality.info](http://WorkplaceSpirituality.info) are proliferating, and books such as *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work* and *Liberating the Corporate Soul* are selling by the truckloads to encourage the acolytes who want to share their faith.

Some believe the faith-at-work movement can be good for business as well as good for human beings. "It seems these firms have better employee retention and lower turnover costs," Neal says. At the Riverview Community Bank, in Otsego, Minnesota, for example -- where mortgage bankers act as on-the-job evangelists, bowing heads in prayer and asking the Lord for the best business deals -- business is thriving. Since the bank opened in March 2003, deposits have soared from \$5.5 million to over \$100 million.

Many experts attribute the trend at least in part to an aging workforce (surveys have shown that faith becomes more important as people get older). And while it has been building for at least a decade, it appears to have gathered momentum in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. According to an August 2002 Gallup poll, 78 percent of respondents

said they thought expressions of religion at the office -- such as "invoking God or saying a prayer before a meeting" -- should be encouraged or tolerated by their bosses; only 21 percent disagreed.

Congress is also putting its muscle behind the movement.

In March Democratic Senator John Kerry and Republican Senator Rick Santorum reintroduced the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would protect workers from on-the-job discrimination related to religious beliefs and practices. "No worker should ever have to choose between keeping a job and keeping faith with their cherished religious beliefs," Kerry said, adding that the legislation would "protect the best of America's spiritual life even as we leave employers the flexibility they need to run their businesses." The bill has heavy bipartisan support and many expect it will eventually become law.

### **Are Businesses Ready for Religion?**

Whether businesses are truly ready for this new spiritual environment is another matter. Less than one-third of 550 human resources professionals surveyed recently by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, in New York City, said they had a written policy on religion in the workplace, despite that fact that roughly the same number said there are more religions represented in their workforce than there were five years ago. And while 77 percent of the respondents said their companies include religion in their standard harassment policy, only 16 percent said they offered training on religious accommodation.

The repercussions of this shift are enormous. The federal and state laws on what constitutes religious discrimination or harassment -- either by believers or against them -- are ambiguous enough to have resulted in a wave of legal action: The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 2,466 complaints of religious discrimination last year, an increase of 80 percent since 1992. "It's a steady climb, which is unusual, because other categories vary from year to year," says EEOC spokesman James Ryan.

Brenda Nichol, 46, a soft-spoken mother of three and member of the Purchase Line Church of the Brethren, in Clymer, Pennsylvania, never imagined she would become a spiritual martyr of sorts. Employed by a government-funded agency that supplies teacher's aides to local schools, where she had been working full-time for eight years, Nichol arrived one morning at the Penns Manor Area Elementary School, in Clymer, wearing as usual a rhinestone cross pendant her mother had given her. Nichol's supervisor confronted her with a rarely enforced policy -- dating back to a 1949 state law, he said -- that barred employees from wearing religious jewelry or any other symbol of faith. Nichol was told to hide her cross or face dismissal for insubordination, a black mark her boss said could possibly keep her from teaching again. "Honestly, when he said that it cut through me like a knife," Nichol says.

She asked for the weekend to think about what she would do. She spent that weekend in anguish and prayer, and with the support of her husband, Larry, a 48-year-old carpenter, and her family. The 1-1/4-inch-long cross, she decided, would stay around her neck. When she explained her reasons to her supervisor, he ordered her to leave that morning. But with help from the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group American Center for Law & Justice, which specializes in religious and constitutional freedoms, Nichol prevailed: A judge ruled the law unconstitutional, and by the opening of school that September, Nichol was back at Penns Manor, with all her back pay and more respect at work. "I wear the cross every day now," she says. "My fight was all about not denying Christ in any way."

### **Religious Discrimination or Harassment?**

Then there's the case of Diana DeWester, 67, a registered nurse who worked as a branch manager at Preferred Management, an Indianapolis home healthcare firm. Founded by Jackie Steuerwald, a devout Christian, the firm employs two full-time "corporate chaplains" who organize weekly, evangelical-style devotions for its almost 200 workers.

But according to DeWester, Steuerwald began pressuring managers to preach her faith to other workers and demanding that underperforming employees pray with their supervisors. "But my religious beliefs and Steuerwald's aren't the same," DeWester says. "I told her I didn't believe Christians have a corner on the God market." DeWester says her outspokenness made the workplace a toxic one for her and others with similar views, who lived in fear that coworkers would overhear them say something they construed as negative and report them. DeWester and six other employees, with help from the EEOC, filed a complaint in court; in 2002 a federal jury awarded them \$270,000 in damages. Steuerwald continues to defend her beliefs and company strategy, and says the problem was harassment -- which has ended -- not discrimination. DeWester, who left the company in 1996 and now works in real estate, says she would never go back to such an environment: "It was just a deal where there was religious propaganda all over the office, even in the bathroom."

David Miller of the Yale Divinity School believes that discrimination and harassment issues will lessen, sooner rather than later. "The same way companies have family-friendly policies and gender-friendly policies and race-friendly policies, it seems logical that one of the next developments for enlightened CEOs is to be faith-friendly," he says. "After all, it's not rocket science. There's a desire for people to live a meaningful, integrated life. They're tired of a compartmentalized existence where the different parts of their identity -- their soul, their spirit -- are cut out. We work crazy, long hours, and if we're really honest, most of us don't do it just for the paycheck. We hope to get something else out of it."

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