

Mixing work, religion

Prayer sessions praised
and questioned here

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Is the spirituality of workers an asset or a liability for business, and should it be legislated?

Federal employees are welcome to carry a Bible to work, wear religious apparel, invite co-workers to worship, or use conference rooms for prayer and Bible study, according to guidelines set during the Clinton administration.

But the uneasy tension between business and religion will not be resolved by edicts from on high, say several Madison business owners and religious leaders concerned about the precedent this ruling may set.

And while Madison businesses are innovating to encourage employee wellness—body, mind and soul—some have gotten burned. Most say Madison is a place where the religious tread with caution.

“God is the head of our business,” said Jack Gabrielse, president of InterCon Construction, 1201 S. Stoughton Road, whose manager meetings always begin with a word of prayer. “Our 200 employees know that.”

Such proclamations make some nonbelievers shiver. But should they? Gabrielse is well groomed in civic propriety. “My family is committed to the Lord,” he said. “But we won’t push



our faith on anybody.”

What they will do, he says, is treat struggling workers with compassion and charge customers fairly in an industry known for harshness and sometimes overcharging.

Gabrielse and his family are from Crossroads Christian Reformed Church, 3815 Dutch Mill Rd. “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much” is about as inflammatory as they get, he said.

Nonetheless, the salt of the earth are suspect if they’re even a little to salty, according to attorney Sue Cotton of Cotton Law Office, who is a member of Christ Presbyterian Church.

“There is often an assumption that religious conviction is equivalent to fanaticism.

“People are uncertain about whether that person’s real intention is to proselytize,” she said.

“There is also a fear factor involved when people discover that someone studies the Bible.”

Cotton recently contributed research on the women figures of a workers’ study Bible, compiling the work of a variety of scholars. She meets occasionally with a group of about 10 women lawyers in Madison to discuss workplace issues, and said the *Word in Life Study Bible* published by Thomas Nelson Publishers can provide a manual for

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people seeking practical help in the workplace.

In fact, her work on the *Study Bible* inspired her to enter law school, she said, as it motivated her to find constructive ways to be a part of the community.

“I’m not ashamed of my faith, but I know that I’m more cautious at work because I don’t want to be misunderstood.”

People of faith may be less reticent at Michael, Best and Freidrich, according to attorney Kimberly Cash Tate. “There are several Christians within our firm—which has 200 employees between Madison and Milwaukee—who connect by conference call between cities or in person at 7:30 every morning to begin the day with prayer.”

Tate, a member of St. Paul’s AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, joins an association of Christian women lawyers in Madison who encourage one another in the shared feat of juggling career and family. They meet in a restaurant or home.

So does their primarily male counterpart in Madison, a group led by firm partner Tom Godar.

“Often there is a vigorous discussion of an article and how a person of faith might respond to a public policy or concern,” said a member from outside Godar’s firm.

“There may be many responses to a question.”

The Christian Legal Society, Nurses Christian Fellowship, and Christian Business Men’s Committee all have chapters in Madison. But these all meet off the job site, a variation on a national trend.

A November 29 *New York Times* article estimates that religious study classes are now held around the nation before work and during lunch hours in 1,200 workplace gatherings to study the Torah, 200 to study the Koran and 10,000 to study the Bible.

Steve Morrison, executive director of the Jewish Community Council, says he has gotten a few calls in response to that article from people wondering whether there were such study groups in Madison.

“I’ve got a feeling that it’s the kind of thing that will be a subject of discussion. There is always the concern that participation could become coercive or that a religious test could be given for employment.

“It’s a fine line. It will be one that will be a challenge (to draw), because those who are part of religions and those who aren’t part of religions all have to be comfortable and welcomed and all part of the (same) system.”

The key, he thinks, is that individuals sponsor this activity voluntarily.

“I don’t know that companies want to sponsor this. Certainly government ought not to and I don’t think will. I hope the separation of church and state will always be the lead principle,

but I think another shared principle will be respect for individuals, and they’re closely linked.”

That lead principle was reiterated in the federal guidelines, which forbid “activity that would lead a ‘reasonable observer’ to conclude the government is endorsing religion.” The guidelines require generosity toward the “followers of all religions as well as the followers of none.”

Such guidelines may reassure businesses previously afraid to lose a government contract over the remotest association with a religious group.

But the person of faith in Madison, positioned between the standards of harassment and free expression, may only find an acceptable way to integrate faith and work through trial and error.

One evangelical, nondenominational Madison business owner experimented this year by holding a prayer meeting open to any and all of his 20 employees. “It was not received well,” he said, requesting anonymity.

“I pray for my employees and my company all the time. But that’s the extent of it at this time . . . There are a lot of people who feel there’s no room for religion or faith at work. Whenever you do anything, you’re upsetting people.”



I don’t think businesses ought to supplant houses of worship or religious institutions, but just as some companies make time available for employees to exercise, because that’s good for morale and productivity, I think it may be good to give some time for study, and that can be the study of the texts of religion. That’s perfectly proper.

— Steve Morrison, Executive Director
Jewish Community Council

Dr. Stuart Knechtle of University Hospital, on the other hand, has received critical support and prayers in an 8-year-old Psalter study group, he says. Knechtle attends Blackhawk Evangelical Free Church, 110 N. Whitney Way.

Knechtle’s daughter and a baby sitter died in a tragic Fitchburg car accident last summer. The surgeons, immunologist, anesthesiologist, secretaries and others who read a psalm together each Wednesday morning in the Meditation Room at the hospital have been important company through difficult days.

One advantage to the group’s format is that the book of Psalms is a text shared by people of different faiths. “We’ve had Jewish visitors in the past,” Knechtle said, “and others who are exploring the faith.”