



Empowering Churches for WorkLife Ministry
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Where Faith, Work Meet

From quiet prayers to open displays of devotion, more Christians are bringing their religion into the workplace.

Terry Fiedler, Star Tribune

It's 6:30 a.m. at the Fridley headquarters of Medtronic Inc., and a small cluster of employees is gathering in a spare conference room to praise their leader.



It's not CEO Art Collins.

Palms upraised and eyes closed, the workers sit in silent adoration around a conference table as religious music plays on a laptop computer. One member suddenly drops to his knees in rapt devotion.

Then the prayers begin. Bill Farrell, founder of the company's Christian Fellowship, and other leaders in the group say one for top Medtronic executives and another for employees to "avoid the gossip and dissension and the untruths of the workplace."

More than 540 Medtronic workers belong to the fellowship, making it one of the largest groups of its kind. Similar gatherings also are taking root at firms as diverse as Best Buy, Blue Cross and

St. Paul Travelers, putting the Twin Cities at the forefront of a movement spreading across the country -- the mingling of faith and career.

For some participants, it means little more than bringing golden-rule principles to the office. For others, it means bringing evangelism into settings where it may not be welcome.

"The Twin Cities is becoming a leader in the application of faith at work," said Os Hillman, president of the International Coalition of Workplace Ministries.



Farrell, a burly engineer with a soul-patch goatee, personifies the trend. A Medtronic employee since 1987, his career there has included work on pacemakers and other cardiac devices -- and an unexpected encounter. "I met Christ in the workplace," he said.

Prayer brings productivity?

Christian advocates typically present themselves in and outside office settings, through one-on-one training, mentoring, small-group instruction and inspirational speakers.

Earlier generations took similar steps -- the Christian Business Men's Committee established a Minneapolis chapter in 1939. What's different now is the scope of the movement and the fact that it has a marketing message aimed squarely at today's productivity-obsessed employers: Allow workers to express their Christian faith in the office and you'll get a more industrious workforce.

Well-known business leaders in the Twin Cities are involved in the movement, which involves a number of denominations but has evangelicals among its most visible proponents. Former Toro CEO Ken Melrose gives talks on the role God played in the company's turnaround, including speaking at "Lead Like Jesus" conferences led by management guru Ken Blanchard ("The One Minute Manager"). Otsego banker Chuck Ripka prays over customers, keeping a running tab of his converts the way McDonald's used to count the millions it served.

Dennis Doyle, CEO of Welsh Companies, the big commercial real estate firm, has been a quiet force in organizing the Twin Cities Workplace Ministries, a coalition dedicated to faith-based workplace efforts that is considered a model nationwide. But the impetus for breaking longstanding barriers between faith and the workplace is coming mostly from churches and individual workers.

About 3,000 people from four large Twin Cities churches -- Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Hosanna Lutheran in Lakeville, Wayzata Free Church in Plymouth and North Heights Lutheran in Arden Hills -- have joined a national program called **His Church at Work**, which seeks to "deploy believers to transform their work environment for Christ."

Hillman, based in Atlanta and the author of "The 9 to 5 Window: How Faith Can Transform the Workplace," believes more companies will open their doors to Christian groups over time. "There's a competitive advantage that corporations are seeing in being more open in this area," he said.

'Booming market'

By Hillman's tally, Christian workplace ministries have increased nationwide from about 50 in 1991 to more than 900 now.

Highly visible Christian employee groups are in place at organizations such as Intel, the Centers for Disease Control and Sears. Medtronic's group, started in 2003, makes up 2 percent of the company's workforce.

Jeff Hagen, founder of the Hill Cities ministry, said changes in the business community help explain the rise of faith groups in the workplace and the "booming market for spirituality." Americans are spending a growing percentage of their lives at work, he said, even as downsizing and outsourcing are making workplaces feel colder and more transitory than ever. In that context, a faith community in the office can provide a welcome counterweight for believers frustrated with the disconnect between Sunday services and the rest of their lives.

"Church can be a ghetto. Even Bible study can be a ghetto," Hagen said. "The workplace is the village we all live in. It's where people have meaningful relationships now." And commerce isn't as foreign to the gospels as some think, he added, saying, "Jesus had more to say about money than hell."

Tyrone Baker, 39, of Plymouth, began attending meetings of Christian business networking groups in the late '90s when he was selling office furniture. He's now sales manager for a consulting firm called Above the Line Leaders that uses Christian principles. The meetings, he said, help ensure that he isn't "putting God in a box" by confining his Christian life to church. They also have practical benefits. "It's a chance to connect and meet other believers and to generate business with those individuals, too," Baker said.

Harris Ratnayake, 59, of Blaine, a quality engineer in Medtronic's drug-pump business, said he enjoys discussions of faith at the weekly noon-hour Christian Fellowship Bible study. "It gives you an added impetus to do the right thing at work," he said. "Whether you like it or not, you know other people's eyes are on you and what you do. You don't want to be a hypocrite."

Shelly Nemerov, the 36-year-old vice president of operations at Riverview Bank in Otsego, said she wasn't sure what to make of the bank's overtly Christian atmosphere when she was hired. "At first, I was a little skeptical. I thought, 'This isn't going to be a fun place to work, if people are sitting around reading Bibles all day,' " she said. Previously a Christmas-and-Easter churchgoer, she has embraced Christianity and the community of co-workers she has come to know. "We pray for each other and help each other," she said.

Ignoring boundaries?

The new religious activism in the workplace brings the possibility of conflict, but there's no statistical evidence of widespread confrontations.

The number of religious-discrimination complaints filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission nearly doubled to 2,466 between 1992 and 2004, the most recent year for which statistics are available. But many of those complaints came from Muslims after 9/11, not from people angry about Christian proselytizing in offices.

The Minnesota Department of Human Rights said the number of complaints it is getting related to religion in the workplace has remained small and stable, though the department doesn't catalog cases by category.

The Minnesota office of the American Civil Liberties Union also reports no uptick in workplace religious conflict.

Some groups, however, are reporting anecdotal evidence of friction.

The Jewish Community Relations Council in Minneapolis said that it has fielded more complaints in the past year about Christian proselytizing, both by co-workers and employers. "I think it is becoming increasingly hard to be a religious minority, and it extends to the workplace," said Molly Altorfer, a spokeswoman for the council.

Stephen Cooper, a Twin Cities employment lawyer, said he has seen an increase in virtually every kind of litigation concerning religion at work in recent years. He is a former commissioner of the state Department of Human Rights. "There's also been an increase in the perception people have that they are right and everyone else is wrong," he said. "They are ignoring the boundaries that people were comfortable with and understood before."

Companies are trying to keep up with the new religious activism, with mixed success.

"Businesses are at the same place Americans are," said employment lawyer Tamara Olsen, a partner in Minneapolis law firm Gray Plant Mooty. "Some are completely exasperated. 'Why can't people leave their religion at home?' Other employers get why everyone can't leave their religion at home, but wonder, 'How do I get these employees to get along?'"

So, while Medtronic approved a company-funded Christian employee group at one point, General Motors decided not to allow any company-recognized religious groups, a decision affirmed in a recent federal court decision.

Showing the way by example

Some of the executives who have played a part in bringing faith into work acknowledge the need to define boundaries. Toro's Melrose, for example, said he's more interested in "servant leadership" than evangelism. "It's not necessarily a Christian concept," he said, adding that, "Jesus is cited as the greatest servant leader, the way he led his disciples and conducted himself as son of God, how he humbled himself to people, washing their feet."

Melrose credits God as key to the turnaround of Bloomington-based Toro in the '80s. A surprise choice to lead the company at a time of plant closings and layoffs, Melrose's background was in marketing, not finance. "I had to have God help me through this morass," he said.

Over the years, Melrose relied on a Christian prayer group within Toro, but he emphasized secular principles of teamwork to employees. "I'm not sure how well I walked the line," he said. "I tried to be careful not to offend anyone, but I was not shy about telling people where I was in my Christian walk if they wanted to know."

Welsh Companies CEO Dennis Doyle's philosophy is similar to Melrose's. He has been a key figure in organizing the Twin Cities Coalition of Workplace Ministries, one of the first such groups nationwide.

But Doyle emphasizes that Welsh Companies is not overtly Christian, and in his view it's more important that a believer "walk the walk." He and his wife, Megan, started the nonprofit Hope for the City six years ago. Last year, it helped distribute \$40 million in food and goods to the poor.

"I'm not strongly evangelistic at work," he said. "I believe there is a line you don't go over."

Twin Cities 'stronghold'

Doug Spada, founder of the group called **His Church at Work**, said he understands that companies and workers can have different understandings of where that line should be drawn. His nonprofit group offers online legal advice for dealing with challenges to workplace religious activities and other counseling.

Spada, a nuclear engineer who once served on Navy subs, used his home church, Journey Community near San Diego, to launch the program. About 100 churches are at some stage of implementing it. He's shooting for 10,000. Spada calls the Twin Cities "a real stronghold" since it has four participating churches. No other metro area has more than one.

Wooddale Church Pastor Geoff Bohleen, who is using the **His Church at Work** program, said he believes such ministries have far-reaching potential. Exemplary Christian employees "have more credibility than a pastor," Bohleen said. But he emphasized that members aren't told to find converts. "The strategy is to be caring," he said. "It isn't to go out and get some scalps."

Bill Farrell uses some **His Church at Work** materials in leading the Medtronic Christian Fellowship. Farrell, 47, who was raised Catholic and lives with his wife and two sons in Prior Lake, said his real acceptance of Christianity came after a work acquaintance invited him to a Bible study 11 years ago. "I was a huge skeptic," he said, "but the facts they presented were enough to satisfy my mind."

Farrell has become something of an evangelical entrepreneur. He has enlisted about 1,200 people from his Lakeville church into the **His Church at Work program**. "I'm not pushing an agenda on anybody," he said, then added, "To live out your faith, you have to be intentional."

ACTION POINT

For more information on **His Church at Work**, visit www.hischurchatwork.org or call (404) 935-5757

For information on WorkLife Ministry at Wooddale Church, visit www.wooddale.org

For information on WorkLife Ministry at Hosanna! Church in Lakeville, visit www.hosannalc.org

For information on WorkLife Ministry at North Heights Lutheran Church, visit www.nhlc.org

For information on WorkLife Ministry at Wayzata Free Church, visit www.wayzatafree.org