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Thou Shalt Not Call in Sick?

By JOHN LELAND

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ELLINGTON, Conn. - At the Ellington Wesleyan Church here, the sermon on a recent Sunday was about romantic love. But for the 14 members who met before the service for Sunday school, the lesson centered on less exalted relationships. The teacher, Drew Crandall, worked an overhead projector as he talked about office politics and workplace competition.

"We've all seen the sleazy crook, the Enron guy, the financial guy bending the rules," said Mr. Crandall, who runs a local marketing company. "In our zeal to win, we don't see how our competitiveness is contrary to Christian values."

The Sunday school program, called Wesleyans at Work, is part of what experts describe as a growing faith-at-work movement: an assortment of programs and groups, often unconnected to churches, that seek to increase the presence of religion in the workplace.

One 2003 directory lists more than 1,200 Christian groups devoted to workplace ministry in North America, which is about double the number of groups that existed five years ago. More than 200 formed in the last year.

"After a long period of people saying religion was a private matter, a lot of people are now trying to integrate these two parts of their lives," said David W. Miller, who runs the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale and helped compile the directory.

Some are office prayer or Bible study groups; other programs are presented at conferences attended by executives. Other groups form in local churches, mosques or synagogues to apply religious principles to the business world. Some emphasize

ethical conduct, others evangelism or proselytizing. Most do not involve formal services or clergy.

Russ Stone, a financial planner who helped start Wesleyans at Work, said that after recent corporate accounting scandals, his clients had become more open to mixing faith and business. "I've had people say, 'I'm having a hard time making a decision.' I'll say, 'Why don't we pray on it?'"

At the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Angie Tracey started a Christian fellowship in 2001. After getting approval from the agency's management and lawyers, Ms. Tracey sent an e-mail message to 8,000 co-workers. Within a day, she said, 200 had signed up.

"It's a tremendous benefit to management," she said. "We teach biblical principles like rendering yourself as a servant. That's very pro-management. And, 'Do your work as unto the Lord.' That's very good for employees. We've solved many disputes using prayer or applying passages from the Bible."

Several groups, such as Spirit at Work and Spirit in Business, avoid doctrine in order to bring together Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and others. Laura L. Nash, a senior research fellow at Harvard Business School who is an expert on workplace ministries, said their rise reflected the convergence of three trends. After recent corporate accounting scandals, Ms. Nash said, business and religious

leaders want to foster an ethical business climate. At the same time, workers who put in long hours want meaning in their jobs. And religious organizations want to extend their influence beyond weekly services.

"This is about self-improvement, good behavior, good conscience and networking," she said. "It's all very American."

It also coincides with a rise in complaints about religious

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*Doug Spada
His Church at Work*

discrimination in the workplace, according to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Charges of religious discrimination filed with the E.E.O.C. rose to 2,532 in 2003 from 1,564 in

1996. A spokeswoman for the commission said some of this increase stemmed from incidents of anti-Islamic bias after the Sept. 11 attacks, adding that it was not clear whether the rest reflected more discrimination or greater sensitivity.

Georgette F. Bennett, director of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, a secular organization in New York City that has studied religious bias in the workplace, said that as the nation's religious makeup has become more diverse, the opportunities to give offense have increased. At the same time, Dr. Bennett said, many people have become more vocal about their faith. "When people see the president wearing his religion on his sleeve, it's not surprising that that plays out in workplace," she said.

Under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, companies must make reasonable accommodation of their employees' religious practices as long as the practices do not interfere with their work. This can include evangelism if it does not involve severe and pervasive harassment or influence hiring and promotion.

"We don't assume that proselytizing is unwelcome," said Peggy Mastroianni, associate legal counsel for the employment commission.

On a recent Tuesday night in Manhattan, about 40 members of the fashion industry gathered for the weekly meeting of Paradox, a workplace ministry associated with the evangelical group Campus Crusade for Christ. Most said they came for fellowship and support, though the group also discusses ethical questions specific to their business.

"My three priorities are God, my fiancé and fashion," said Stacie Baker, a recruiter who spoke on the condition that the retailer she works for not be identified in an article about religion. "It's so nice to be able to come somewhere where people share the same beliefs."

Rich Johnson, an actor and publicist in the group, said Paradox helped him with the challenges of working in an industry not known for its piety. "Sometimes my friends that aren't Christian are happier than I am because they're not going through the same conflict," he said. "This is a great network to get to know people."

In recent years, diversity programs have created openings for religion at work, said Os Hillman, a former advertising executive who runs Marketplace Leaders, a company based in Georgia that promotes workplace ministry. The law says that companies that provide resources to racial or ethnic employee organizations cannot withhold similar support - use of meeting rooms or the e-mail system, financing for events - from religious groups.

But the ministries should not interfere with work, Mr. Hillman said. "The goal of any believer is to have the people they work with rise to a higher level of integrity," he said. "There can be an evangelistic aspect. On coffee breaks or before work is O.K. But we feel you're not being faithful to your employer if you use company time to share your faith."

In the past, many religious leaders avoided talking about the business world, said Edmund Gibbs, a professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

"Or they didn't know much about it," Professor Gibbs said. "In one church after I preached a sermon, a man asked me, 'How can I be a litigation attorney and a disciple of Jesus?' I said, 'I haven't a clue; let's get some of the lawyers together and discuss it.'"

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, a Christian group known for its mass rallies, has made workplace ministry one of its four focus areas for reaching non-Christians.

"We have found that most people come to Christ through a relationship, and most people today have most relationships at work," said Jack Munday, ministry manager of strategic ventures for the Graham association.

Doug Spada leads His Church at Work, a nonprofit organization based in La Mesa, Calif., that provides churches with a workplace presence and trains clergy members to develop workplace ministries. He said there is enormous possibilities for church growth and outreach in the workplace. Mr. Spada and his Church at Work has worked with Ellington Wesleyan, and he recently began working with Southeast Christian Church, a nondenominational congregation of 24,000 members in Louisville, Ky. More than 5,000 have joined the church's workplace ministry program, he said.

"We're equipping them to do ministry where God has called them," Mr. Spada said. "If every church member has the audience of about 25 people during the workweek, then that church is now influencing 100,000 unchurched people through the workplace."

At Ellington Wesleyan, the Rev. Norm Mesel said he hoped that the members of the group would encourage their co-workers to join the church. "But more than that," Mr. Mesel said, "we want to show the community that we care about them, that work doesn't have to be a place of frustration."



To learn more about how these churches impacted their community through the workplace visit us - we would love to serve you also. www.HisChurchatWork.org



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