

The faith-at-work movement finds a home

Building a Silicon Valley of the soul in Northwest Arkansas



Chris Gardner / AP file

Promise Keepers, the charismatic men's ministry, has sought to align itself with the faith-at-work movement as it recovers from financial crisis. It will hold one of its first mass rallies outside a major metropolitan city when it arrives in Fayetteville, Ark., in June.

By Alex Johnson

Reporter

msnbc.com

updated 1:32 p.m. PT, Mon., March. 21, 2005

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. - It will take a long time to settle on an explanation of exactly what happened in Tennessee, but whatever it was, it wasn't really all that unusual.

Thirty Muslim employees either were fired or walked out on their jobs last month at Dell Inc.'s logistics facility in Nashville. The workers, most of them recent immigrants from Somalia, said supervisors gave them an invidious choice: work or pray. Not both.

Dell called the dispute a misunderstanding, but Nashville's Human Relations Commission is investigating, and 21 of the workers have hired the Council on American-Islamic Relations as legal counsel.

Formal allegations of religious discrimination in the workplace have almost doubled in a decade. In fiscal 1992, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received 1,388 such complaints under Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. In fiscal 2004, it received 2,466 complaints.

In Arkansas, a critical mass

Next door in Arkansas, a button-down crusade by business leaders, consultants, ministers and scholars is trying to reverse that trend. In this industrial and farming region around Fayetteville, a movement to welcome faith into the workplace has taken flight in the heady atmosphere of Southern evangelicalism and corporate megamoney.

A thriving cottage industry has evolved to help embed Christian principles into corporate structures. Life at Work, the much-admired journal of spirituality and leadership, was published here before its recent acquisition. The journal's founders continue to write,

teach and run a high-powered business consulting group from here, called Cornerstone, coaching senior corporate executives in how to run more ethical businesses by integrating faith into the workweek.

On the outskirts of town, WorkMatters, a nondenominational ministry, helps companies absorb Christian principles into their work. A few miles down the road, in Siloam Springs, the Soderquist Center at John Brown University, a private Christian institution, teaches “the transforming power of ethical leadership.”

In the nearby suburbs, one of the nation’s most prominent evangelical figures, the Rev. Ronnie W. Floyd, hosts a weekly lunch for business leaders that regularly pulls in heavy hitters like Wayne Huizenga, former CEO of Blockbuster Entertainment; John H. Tyson, CEO of Tyson Foods, the world’s largest meat producer; and the late Reggie White, the pro football superstar and minister.

“It is fascinating to look at the fact that the world’s largest company — Wal-Mart, of course — is based there in Northwest Arkansas, and Tyson Foods, a Fortune 100 company that’s booming and growing, is based there, and J.B. Hunt and other companies,” said David W. Miller, executive director of Yale University’s Center for Faith and Culture.

“There are certain geographies that gain a critical mass, and exciting things happen in the business community, [like] Silicon Valley. ... Northwest Arkansas seems to have become a booming, creative, interesting place for businesses, which means they attract people from all over the country.

“Combine that with a wonderful heartland America sort of feel, where people are not embarrassed by who they are or what they believe, and that creates an environment where it would be a fertile soil for the faith-at-work movement to take root and blossom.”

Accepting the Great Commission

Ronnie Floyd is a man at home in both the church and the boardroom. A former chairman of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, he manages two neighboring churches with more than 14,000 members, a pre-K-through-12 school, a sports ministry, a publishing and multimedia division and a television, satellite and streaming-video outreach with a worldwide audience estimated in the millions.

“It’s one thing to have a rabid right-winger” talking about God, Floyd said, gesturing good-naturedly at himself during an interview at his sprawling First Baptist Church in Springdale. It’s quite another when the Great Commission of the Gospel of Matthew — “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations” — is an inspiration for the head of a corporation with access to a worldwide network of contractors, suppliers and retailers.

Floyd pointed to Wal-Mart, in nearby Bentonville; Tyson, the world's largest meat company; and J.B. Hunt, a transportation giant, and noted that all three were built by a "founder or founding team that had close connections to faith and Christianity."

The concentration of faith and money here has drawn the attention of Promise Keepers, the charismatic men's ministry, which has aligned itself with the faith-at-work movement since re-emerging from financial difficulties. It says it expects to draw tens of thousands of men to its conference in June at the football stadium at the University of Arkansas downtown, one of the first it has ever held outside a major metropolitan area.

The last taboo falls

The faith-at-work movement has emerged for a lot of reasons, but basically it was because when you go to work, you take your faith and values with you. In an NBC News poll released this weekend, 58 percent of respondents said their religious beliefs played some role in the decisions they made at work, and 65 percent said those beliefs influenced how they interacted with co-workers.

"Twenty or 30 years ago, there was a sense, particularly in the Northeast, that there were certain topics that just weren't suitable for the workplace: politics, sex and religion. Now we see that people are able to talk about sex very freely, and politics everybody talks about now," said Miller, of Yale. "It seems like it's almost a logical extension [for] faith. ...

"Many people started to say, 'Wait a minute — that's a central or constituent part of who I am, and for me to be in denial about that just doesn't make sense.' For me to leave my soul in the parking lot when I walk in the office isn't a healthy thing to do."

Over breakfast at a bakery near his office, Stephen R. Graves, co-founder of Life at Work and a partner in Cornerstone Consulting Group, draws boxes, circles and lines on a legal pad and identifies four "frameworks" of modern life: family, government, church and work. Lines connect all the frameworks, tracking their interrelatedness. Only church and work are unconnected.

"I'm convinced most men and women of faith, they're looking to be untied," said Graves, who, with his partner, Thomas G. Addington, is a co-author of influential Christian-themed business books with John C. Maxwell, an intellectual guru of the movement. "They've got one hand tied behind their back trying to integrate their faith, and they want to be untied. They just don't know how to do it."

One way many companies try to do it is to make chaplains available in the workplace as part of their benefits packages. Most companies that go that route hire outside firms to provide chaplain services, but here in Northwest Arkansas, Tyson Foods hires its own chaplains.

Most of the company's chaplains are evangelicals, but John Tyson said he was committed to broadening the diversity of the chaplain staff beyond evangelicalism and even beyond

Christianity. Chief chaplain Alan Tyson — no relation — supervises seven Catholics and a few other non-evangelicals among his 109 chaplains and recently hired his first Muslim prayer leader. If the need arose, he would look for a rabbi, he said.

Bringing the church to business

What separates today's emerging faith-at-work philosophy from earlier church-centered programs — long based in Catholic dioceses, mainline Protestant denominations in the Northeast and the progressive religious political movement — is its firm grounding in the business world. Of course you should be right with God, the thinking goes, but it's also good business.

Although the movement as it is expressed in Northwest Arkansas has grown out of mainline Protestant thinking, much of it evangelical, it is mostly nondenominational — non-sectarian, even, in its broader application. After all, it's unrealistic to expect to impose Christian philosophies on a workforce of numerous faiths spread over an enormous country.

The idea, instead, is to spread *ethical* business practices throughout an organization by modeling Christian principles of fairness, firmness, openness, inclusiveness and responsiveness. If colleagues and subordinates admire the way you do things and open the door to a discussion of Jesus and salvation, that's terrific, leaders of the movement say, but most of them insist it's not their overriding objective.

Graves' company, for example, runs parallel leaderships programs, one Christian-themed and one secular. But the goals are the same.

"I run into a lot of people who are not churched at all," he said. "But you know what? Once you start talking about the concepts of integrity and ethics and morality and care and excellence and skills and serving — a leader likes those terms. Every executive I know likes those terms."

David Roth, who runs WorkMatters, acknowledges that his ministry is "very explicitly Christian," but he stresses that "the first business of business is business." He believes ethics and responsibility can filter down from corporate leaders, whom he tells to "walk out your faith."

Still, there is a great hunger in corporate America, especially after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the "ethics crash" of Enron Corp. and WorldCom, for a firmer moral compass. "I don't believe in evangelizing the workplace," Roth said, but "when you walk it from a behavioral perspective, now the doors start to open to *invited* evangelizing."

"My market is unlimited," he said.

Shining a light in dark corners

A handful of major companies highlight the religious underpinnings of their corporate values: ServiceMaster Co., parent of such cleaning brands as TruGreen ChemLawn and

Terminix, proclaims that its first business objective is “to honor God in all we do”; Tyson includes a similar statement in its core values; CFA Properties has never allowed its Chick-Fil-A restaurants to open on Sunday.

But even though many other of the biggest brand names in the country are clients of Cornerstone or similar consultancies, you will find no such explicit reference to God or religion in their literature.

That is precisely what troubles Lewis Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute, a now-independent outgrowth of the American Civil Liberties Union. With companies like Tyson, ServiceMaster and the hamburger chain In-N-Out, which prints Bible passages on its sandwich wrappers, you know what you’re dealing with. But what goes on behind the scenes at companies whose leaders choose to remain quiet in public?

“There’s nothing wrong with proselytizing. We all have things we feel strongly about. We have every right to try to convince other people to agree with us, to join us,” Maltby said in a telephone interview. “But it has to be a voluntary process. It’s not a voluntary conversion when the proselytizing comes from your boss.”

However, there are no clear-cut protections for workers who may resent overt evangelizing at work. “The law in this area is not very good,” said Maltby, who is a lawyer. “The law doesn’t generally recognize the subtle coercion that goes on in this area. ...

“If your boss held a prayer breakfast and you were fired for refusing to go, you’ve got a case under Title VII. If your boss holds a prayer breakfast and you go because you’re afraid to stay away, you probably don’t have a case.”

Leaders of the faith-at-work movement in Northwest Arkansas say their approach is different because they understand business. Roth said that while he and others are eager to “open the box” of faith in the workplace, “you have to introduce some realism. When you open that box, you have to open it for everyone.”

Even Ronnie Floyd, who is no shrinking violet when it comes to evangelizing, acknowledges that faith should not overshadow sound business practices.

But “it is fair to open doors” to faith on the job, he said. Just as people’s beliefs color how they vote and what they buy and whom they befriend, “you can’t separate faith in the workplace.”