

Centre for Spirituality at Work

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Workers' interest in spirituality and work across Canada

In office towers across Canada, workers openly exploring spirituality: Richard Foot, CanWest News Service

On Tuesday mornings, inside a corporate boardroom at BCE Place in the heart of Toronto's financial district, David Ekmekjian and two dozen other Bay Street businessmen gather to talk - not about portfolios or profits, but about God.

Amid a panorama of glittering skyscrapers, where millions of dollars in hard currency is traded each day, a group of smart, confident people come to pray to a mysterious spirit they cannot touch or see.

"We don't just meet in that boardroom to talk about money," says Ekmekjian, an investment dealer with Blackmont Capital, the Bay Street firm that hosts the meeting.

"We study the Bible and pray for those that are less fortunate than ourselves, for the sick and the afflicted. We also pray for spiritual guidance and wisdom. And somehow, everybody comes out of there fulfilled and happy. It's incredible."

Most unusual about the prayer group is that many of its members, including Ekmekjian, rarely set foot inside a church. Although their faith is deep, few attend traditional Sunday services or belong to a mainstream denomination.

"In our boardroom meetings, some go to church, but many don't," says Ekmekjian, an Egyptian-born Armenian who immigrated to Canada in the 1950s. "I prefer to practise my faith on my own terms, because I find it infinitely more fulfilling."

Ekmekjian and many of his Christian colleagues are part of an emerging cohort of Canadians who lead spiritual lives without any adherence to an organized, institutional religion.

At the country's main Christian denominations, attendance is shrinking and many old church buildings that once boasted thriving congregations are now being closed for lack

of interest.

Yet many Canadians aren't simply turning away from God, they're exploring their faith in unusual ways and unlikely places. One of those new spiritual frontiers is the office.

"There is a real awakening, where people are being drawn to God in the workplace," says Bruce Smith, who leads the King-Bay chaplaincy, a spiritual gathering place for office workers in downtown Toronto.

King-Bay has been running for several decades, but in recent years it has been joined by similar downtown chaplaincies from Vancouver to Montreal to Halifax, and by a burgeoning array of consultancies and centres catering to spiritual needs in the workplace. All of it is fuelled, says Smith, by "the growing desire of people who are not interested in organized religion, but are interested in a relationship with God."

The rise of the "office church" cuts across business lines into government and also the worlds of education and health care.

In Toronto the King-Bay chaplaincy welcomes more than 200 business people, civil servants, retail clerks and health care workers through its doors in a typical week.

Sherry Connolly, a King-Bay alumni, once earned a six-figure salary as a senior manager at the Royal Bank's head office in Toronto. She gave that up to open the Centre for Spirituality at Work, which offers programs and seminars to office workers hungry for metaphysical meaning in their lives.

Connolly says the Anglican Church of the Redeemer, a large downtown church, is transformed on weekdays into a noon-time sanctuary for office workers, not all of them Christian, who use the church as a quiet place to sit and pray or think during the lunch hour.

"I've started a noon-hour meditation on Thursdays at Redeemer," says Connolly. "Most of the people who come aren't even congregation members of the church."

In some cases, companies themselves are encouraging employees to get in touch with their spiritual sides.

At Toronto's Caldwell Financial Ltd., a securities and investment firm, chairman Tom Caldwell is organizing an in-house "Alpha" course - an introduction to Christianity - for any employees or colleagues who want to come, with lunch included.

While Caldwell is a regular member of a Roman Catholic parish, he says many of those

who'll attend his company's Alpha meetings won't be regular church-goers.

"There are tons of Bible studies in offices all over Toronto," he says.

"For many office workers, they're like an oasis of sanity in a fast-moving and hard-driving world."

In Vancouver, Telus Corp. has rooms on its office premises set aside where workers can pray and meditate.

In Edmonton, the Capital Care Group recently put some of its nursing home employees through a "spirit at work" program that while not explicitly religious in nature, taught the same kind of values - kindness and consideration for fellow human beings - that religions espouse.

In Halifax, management consultant Martin Rutte recently established the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace at the Sobey School of Business at Saint Mary's University. Since 2004 the centre has been hosting conferences and seminars on spiritual matters at work.

"There's a renaissance of spirituality in business, in the public sector, and in health care," says Rutte, a Toronto-based Jew who decided to start talking about spirituality in business after experiencing his own religious epiphany about two decades ago.

At first, says Rutte, his colleagues warned him not to bring spiritual matters into the office. Talking about golf was OK, but God was off limits.

"Everybody in those days in Toronto said, 'Don't talk about this, you're crazy, you'll lose your reputation.'"

Today, says Rutte, although some North American workplaces remain wary of spiritual matters, the stigma is washing away. One reason is that Baby Boomers have turned to religion as they have grown older.

Rutte also says a decade of lost innocence in the workplace - thanks to rounds of corporate layoffs as a result of technology advances, outsourcing and cost-cutting - has shattered employees' faith in job security and "driven many people into the arms of spirituality."

Rutte now lectures on the subject at workplaces around the continent.

"I can't tell you how many times in talks I've given, where working people have come up

to me and said, 'I thought I was the only person in the world having these thoughts.' Over and over I've heard it.

"That hunger for spiritual meaning - to know that your life makes a difference - is part of the human condition," he says, "but we've not thought it possible until recently to have that talked about and nourished in the workplace."

At Blackmont Capital, David Ekmekjian is convinced that his office prayer group does far more than nourish only the souls around the boardroom table. He says his group prayed for many weeks for a little girl, known to the group, who was born with a hole in her heart.

"About a year ago the hole began to close up, and cardiologists at the Hospital for Sick Children said they'd never seen anything like it before," says Ekmekjian. "Strangely enough, our prayers got answered."

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