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New Saint Mary's University centre focuses on spirituality

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Staff Reporter

Spirituality in the workplace isn't a topic many business schools would consider funding as an elective course, let alone an undergraduate and research program.

However, Saint Mary's University will open its new Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace, becoming the first academic-based centre for work and spirituality in Canada.

The issue is gaining momentum around the world, partly due to baby boomers, managers and employees now in their 40s and 50s, who are grappling with life questions about beliefs, spiritual guidance and mortality, Martin Rutte, chairman of the centre's international board, said Wednesday.

"This is something I have been interested in since the late 90s, when successful companies began laying off people, because of technology, outsources and shipping jobs offshore. There was this kind of shift in the unwritten rule where 'I was working hard and the company was successful but I was still getting laid off, ' " he said.

"Many workers felt betrayed. Many employees began to ask the question, 'If I can't feel secure in the workplace, then where does my security come from.' "

Mr. Rutte, who is Jewish and originally from Hamilton, Ont., has researched the subject as co-author of The New York Times business bestseller, *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*, and as president of Livelthood Inc., located in Santa Fe, N.M., where he now lives.

Discussions about family life, gender, homosexuality and substance abuse also were taboo in the workplace, but no longer have "the charge" they formerly carried, Mr. Rutte said.

"They were part of that non-permissible conversation. Spirituality remains one of those topics."

But the baby boom generation is changing that attitude by the large numbers of middle-aged workers seeking answers to their spiritual questions.

"A study done by a woman in the publishing industry found that one of the biggest, if not the biggest, explosion of book-buying behavior is in the arena of religion and spirituality. The assumption is book-buying behavior is a reflection of the psyche of society," Mr. Rutte said.

He believes promoting open discussions about faith at work helps people to balance their personal and professional lives.

"A more spiritual workplace gives people a sense of community, joy, and authenticity. They are more innovative and are more energized," he said.

Research in this field is growing, he added, with nearly 200 books published on the subject in recent years. But he emphasized that any participation must be voluntary and non-threatening. Fanatics from any religion need not apply.

"There can be no proselytizing, no trying in any way to force something on people. We want people to want to engage in this topic out of a free and natural choice, out of a desire to be more spiritual at work."

The centre will develop courses and programs as well as publish, conduct research and hold conferences about the importance of spirituality in the workplace, executive director Cathy Driscoll said.

Actions that recognize the spiritual dimension of people in the workplace can be beneficial, said Brian Lee Crowley, president of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.

"Not just in business, either. It applies to all fields - law, health and government. It is good to encourage things that inspire better behavior . . . the ability to live up to ethical standards." But he also said it is important to maintain a balance, not to "lose sight of the reason you are in business in the first place."

The opening today features speakers from around the world, including the director of the ethics and spirituality in the workplace program at Yale University; the head of the Institute for Spirituality and Organizational Leadership at Santa Clara University in California; and the former chairman of Aetna International Inc.