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COLLEAGUES:

Faith Goes to Work

Twenty-five years ago, an active Christian layman and successful salesman named Bill Diehl questioned whether his congregation had the least interest in how or whether he practiced his faith from day to day. If occasional conversations in downtown's City Market are any indication, many Indianapolis congregants still wonder the same thing. How does one develop and deepen the connection between faith and work?

Diehl's book, Christianity and Real Life, spawned a new generation

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CLERGY NOTES

LUNCH AND FOOD
FOR THE SPIRIT

Each week, several residents from around Indianapolis have lunch at the Indianapolis Press Club and listen to John Price—local lawyer and gubernatorial candidate—discuss a biblical text.

Though Price has political aspirations, the meeting is not a recently initiated political or public relations tool: he has been leading it for 25 years. Rather, it is Price's attempt as a Christian layman to minister to fellow believers and to reach unbelievers. Several local congregations sponsor similar programs of Bible study or discussion downtown on workdays, typically during the lunch hour.

Christ Church Cathedral, for example, hosts "Job Talk" on Wednesdays at noon. Roberts Park United Methodist has "Twenty Minutes for God" at 12:10 p.m. Wednesdays. Congregation Beth-El Zedeck sponsors the monthly "Downtown Lunch and Study Group" at noon at Christ Church Cathedral.

Job Talk was started in the spring of 1998 after a round of layoffs by corporations near Christ Church. The church's leadership saw an opportunity to give people who had been laid off, or were struggling with work-related

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LUNCH

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problems, a place to find spiritual and emotional encouragement.

"So many people out there are in pain, are in mental anguish, are unhappy in their jobs," says Connie Whitman, Christ Church's executive assistant to the dean. "The stress they're bearing throws everything else out of kilter, and eventually it takes a toll on their health."

Lunch is provided, followed by half an hour of candid, confidential discussion about whatever the participants want to share.

Twenty Minutes for God at Roberts Park is probably the oldest of such programs, dating back three decades. It began as an effort to reach business people who work downtown, but it has broadened to include homeless people and people who drive in from outside the downtown area.

The service often attracts visitors, but has a stable group of regulars. "Most of the people belong to other congregations," says Rev. Cyndi Alte, pastor of Roberts Park, "so this is like a second church for them." Twenty Minutes for God typically attracts 15 or 20 people to a service that includes singing and a brief devotional.

Beth El Zedeck's Lunch and Study Group meets monthly at Christ Church Cathedral, except during the summer months. Lunch is followed by discussion of a text from the Hebrew Bible.

"We talked for a long time about how we could reach out to people who work downtown and don't have a chance to go to adult education programs," says Rabbi Sandy Sasso. The program has been running for three years and attracts 20 to 25 people each month.

"We approach the text from a scholarly, critical, academic point of view, asking, 'What does it say about Judaism and about our own lives?' It's not a preaching class; we're not evangelizing, though we're certainly interested in attracting people who are not connected with the Jewish community and might find this as a door to this tradition."

Marketing is one of the main problems that such programs encounter. Christ Church has advertised Job Talk sporadically—in fax newsletters and on bulletin boards in lunch rooms—but has not been satisfied with the results. "The biggest stumbling block," Whitman says, "is that people just don't know about it."

The participants often come from diverse backgrounds, and bridging their differences can be a problem. Last year, for example, Rev. David Owen of North United Methodist Church conducted a six-week, daytime Bible study in a local law firm. Attendance averaged about 12 people. "We had some very conservative people on one side, some very liberal people on the other," Owen says. "That was somewhat difficult. The polarities were both very vocal. I didn't feel that we handled these differences as graciously as one might have hoped."

The setting was also a problem. The participants were co-workers in the law firm, and their professional relationships influenced the dynamics of the group. "That added to the tension," Owen says. "If it had been a more neutral site, it might not have seemed so awkward."

Price's outreach, which is an independent endeavor and not a ministry of his church, has met in numerous locations, typically restaurants, during its long existence. It began with about a dozen people, and in its heyday attracted more than 100. Though attendance is down to about 20 these days, Price says that he doesn't measure his effectiveness in numbers.

"Success would have to be stated in purely biblical terms, which is that the gospel is being proclaimed," he says. What has motivated him to continue the group for so long, he says, is the feedback he receives. Often, participants tell him that something he said in a previous meeting helped them solve or cope with a problem. "Usually, it's something that I hadn't even thought about before saying it," he says. "You sort of feel used by God to convey a message."

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN JEAN

Susan Jean leads Christ Church Cathedral's Job Talk forum, which meets each Wednesday at noon. Job Talk has attracted as many as 15 people regularly; it now has a stable group of about six. Jean, who has a master's degree in pastoral counseling from Christian Theological Seminary, works on contract for Christ Church. In the following interview, she discusses general procedures of the forum, her role in it, and the role it plays in the lives of those who attend.

CN: Are there limitations on the topics that participants can discuss?

Jean: The issues we discuss can be job related, but they don't have to be. We try to just invite people to be as they are, to be real in the safety of confidentiality. Every time people come, I state clearly that the details of a person's life must stay within the room. That's the strictest condition that we have. But we hope they'll take out of the room some lessons learned.

CN: What is your role in the forum?

Jean: I'm low-profile. I begin with the rule of confidentiality, if there are new people present, and then I invite people to begin by just checking in and telling how their week is going. And then we open it for discussion, and it just takes off. The rest of the hour flies by. We don't pressure people to talk. Yet my experience is that everybody does.

CN: Is it difficult to bridge theological differences among participants?

Jean: People are coming from all faiths, or from no organized church at all. I try not to impose, just invite. At the end I ask if it's okay to end with the Lord's Prayer. That's never been refused.

CN: Would you suggest certain requirements for the leader of such a program?

Jean: The leader should have a degree. There are people in all stages of health who come here. At times, a person is in a real crisis and needs something more—immediately. There's a lot of responsibility involved. I don't believe it's an accident, whether there are two here or 18 people. People are here for a reason on a particular day.

CN: Do you think that Job Talk is making a difference in people's lives?

Jean: I just received a wonderful affirmation from someone who's been coming for over a year and who's been through so very much. She affirmed today that this is a place where she knows she's heard, and she hasn't had that kind of experience in the recent past. I think that's the service that this church offers to the community—to people who are church-going each Sunday, and to people who are not. This might be one of their more sacred hours of the week, when they can come here and know that they will be validated.

CN: Does the setting itself—the fact that Job Talk is held in a church—make it different from a similar program at a secular site?

Jean: My sense is that the church setting does make a difference. When people walk in the door, they know that this is not just some building. It's a church. Given that, there's an unspoken affirmation that God's presence is here, and the spark of God's divinity within themselves is celebrated here. That enables people to talk more freely and know that whatever false self or masks they choose to wear in the outside world—they don't have to wear them here. They can be in touch with God's presence within them and know that this is a safe place.

COLLEAGUES

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of literature exploring how religious beliefs shape practices in the workplace. But many people find the popular books on the subject too abstract or simplistic in dealing with these complexities. Others report that reading about the subject actually makes them feel isolated rather than connected with others.

So how do local congregations support their members in the marketplace?

Some have chosen to create a visible presence for study and fellowship near their congregants' workplace. The forms of these gatherings vary—support groups, scripture study, worship, education—but they all seek to connect the Sabbath faith with market practices. While the following examples focus on the Mile Square, they may be applicable to any commercial area.

How does your congregation reach out to those in the marketplace? I'd like to know. Let's keep in touch.

Kevin

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North United Methodist Church
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