

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 29, 2010 at 9:01am

Connecting with God while at work

by Tom Gallagher



(Pat Marrin)

Mission Management

Companies like Google and Facebook offer their employees a variety of compelling services that enhance the work experience. Employees at Google get "first-class dining facilities, gyms, laundry rooms, massage rooms, haircuts, car washes, dry cleaning, commuting buses -- just about anything a hardworking employee might want," says Eric Schmidt, Google's CEO. "Let's face it: Programmers want to program. They don't want to do their laundry. So we make it easy for them to do both."

But is it possible to foster an employee's spiritual life during work hours? And is this a good thing? Or is it better for employees to compartmentalize their spiritual life to weekend services and to keep that part of their person out of the workplace?

One organization embraces the idea of spirituality in the workplace and has implemented steps to put it into practice.

Ascension Health System is the largest Catholic health system in the United States, with 72 hospitals in 20 states, over \$14 billion in operating revenue, 113,000 employees (called "associates"), almost \$900 million in care for the poor and community benefit in 2009, and a \$6 billion endowment.

At Ascension Health, spirituality is central to its mission statement, which states, "Our Catholic health ministry is dedicated to spiritually centered, holistic care which sustains and improves the health of individuals and communities." Holistic care starts with integrated, holistic caregivers, the associates. So nourishing one's spirituality is intrinsic to the workplace experience.

"Spirituality is key part of our organizational culture at Ascension Health," said Laura Richter, director of workplace spirituality and director of mission integration at the system's corporate headquarters in St. Louis.

"We've done a lot of work to hardwire processes into the workplace that foster spirituality, as well as ways to measure its effectiveness," said Richter.

In 2004, Ascension Health received the International Spirit at Work Award, which honors secular and faith-based companies that have explicit spiritual practices, policies or programs.

So how does spirituality in the workplace manifest itself at Ascension Health?

When Jack Logue, a longtime hospital executive, retired in 2002, he wanted to pursue an education in spirituality. So he enrolled in a two-year program in formative spirituality at the Epiphany Center in Pittsburgh, followed by a three-year program at the San Pedro Center in the Orlando, Fla., diocese.

Eventually, Logue started St. Vincent's Spirituality Center in Jacksonville, Fla., as part of St. Vincent's Healthcare, an Ascension Health affiliate.

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Situated next to the medical center, the spirituality center consists of a diocesan-approved eucharistic chapel, a conference room, a meeting room, a sitting room/library, a veranda (overlooking the river), a room for spiritual direction, and two offices. It is open five days a week from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mass is offered once a week for the intentions of the employees. The center also benefits from the on-site help of a priest and nun who are available once a month.

"It's our view that patients get better care if the employees have a better relationship with God," said Logue. The religious makeup of the employees reflects the local community, heavily Protestant, specifically Baptist, with Catholics making up approximately 20 percent of the staff. While authentically Catholic, the spirituality center serves the entire hospital staff.

If employees cannot get to the spirituality center, Logue takes programming to the hospital staff and departments on topics like de-stressing, meditation and contemplation. Lunch is often an opportune time for staff to find peacefulness, quietude and rest at the center.

"It turns out that the spirituality center is now a recruiting tool for prospective doctors too," said Logue.

Over in Mobile, Ala., Providence Hospital believes that spiritually centered leaders make good leaders, says Lynn Tate, a 33-year staff member and now vice president for mission at this Ascension Health

System affiliate.

‘Everyone has a spirit and we want people to bring their whole person, including their spirit, to work,’ said Tate. ‘We tell new employees at orientation to bring their whole spirit to work.’

Employees have bought into it, too.

In the Food and Nutrition Department, employees received permission to convert a small cafeteria area into a ‘reflective dining area’ that accommodates six to eight people. It is a place where employees can find a quiet, calming, peaceful environment to eat lunch. The employees bring CDs and music for the room, which looks out over a lake.

In other parts of the hospital, the décor was utilitarian, not life-giving. So meditation and break rooms were created with uplifting wall art, comfortable furniture and an environment that allows employees to renew themselves during the workday.

Further west at the 31-facility Seton Family of Hospitals in Austin, Texas, spirituality is integrated into this pluralistic workplace, says James Davis, senior vice president of mission. Davis estimates that roughly a third of its 10,000 employees are Hispanic, a third Anglo and a third African-American or Asian, representing the culture of central Texas. Most are non-Catholic.

A hallmark of Seton is its 15-year-old Seton Cove Spirituality Center in downtown Austin. The center offers people of all faiths opportunities to foster their journey toward wholeness.

In addition, associates at Seton are measured annually in 360-degree evaluations on how their behaviors have impacted others based on the mission of the system.

Seton surveys its associates on spirituality in the workplace to better guide future policies and programming. ‘Year over year, the feedback shows a positive upward trend,’ said Davis.

‘I feel blessed and inspired to be a part of an organization grounded in the Catholic social teaching and ethics,’ said Davis. ‘It’s also the thing to do from a business perspective.’

[Tom Gallagher writes for *NCR*’s regular mission management column. His e-mail address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Related Web sites

Ascension Health System
www.ascensionhealth.org

Seton Cove Spirituality Center
www.setoncove.net

International Center for Spirit at Work
www.spiritatwork.org

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