

## **Faith and the Workplace**

David W. Miller (from the 2002 ServiceMaster Annual Report)

The roll of yellow barricade tape was lying on the floor in the corner of the church. I thought maybe one of the police or fireman left it there by mistake. After all, it was 4:00AM, and things were still pretty chaotic. I was completing another Saturday nightshift at Ground Zero, where I was privileged to serve as a chaplain to the rescue and recovery workers. Though I am a Christian, I worked with people of all faith traditions, with those who had no faith, and with those who had lost their faith. Tired but curious, I bent down to look at the roll of yellow barricade tape, and saw that instead of the usual writing, "Police — Do Not Cross" it read, "GOD AT WORK."

What a powerful reminder that right in the thick of things we can find God at Work. Too often, we compartmentalize faith and work, thinking that God has no relevance in the very place where we spend the majority of our waking hours. Indeed, we create a lot of artificial barriers in life, such as race, gender, nationality and religion. Some barriers can isolate the very essence of who we are from what we do.

Our organization, The Avodah Institute, seeks to help business people cross one of these artificial barriers. Our mission statement is to help leaders integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work. Integration is the key word. While recognizing that faith and work are different concepts, we also believe that they are related and should be integrated. Indeed, the word Avodah is a biblical word, offering uncommon wisdom for modern times. Avodah means both work and worship; it recognizes the integrated nature of what we do and how we do it. Our work can be a form of worship; a way of honoring God and serving society. Indeed, the workplace can be "faith-friendly." In fact, The ServiceMaster Company was founded on faith-friendly values which are alive in the lives of the employees who serve customers every day.

Now, we're not suggesting you turn the workplace into a church, synagogue or temple. Nor do we want the church to become a business. They are two separate organizations with two different purposes in society. Nor are we making a case for a particular religion or spiritual worldview to be a company's required belief.

What we are suggesting is that God did not intend for faith to be locked away in weekend worship or stuck inside stained-glass windows, but to be lived in all of daily life; in our families, our communities, and yes, even in our places of work. Employees shouldn't leave their soul in the parking lot every day. Indeed, people are searching for meaning and purpose in their work, significance in their success

and dignity in their daily labors. As such, people increasingly turn to their religious and spiritual traditions for answers. Faith is a rich and powerful resource for ethical guidance and spiritual nurture at work.

To me, being faith-friendly means creating an inclusive environment that recognizes the spiritual side of humanity, respects all individuals as created uniquely in the image of God, provides an ultimate source for ethical guidance, gives meaning and purpose to our work by reminding us of the common good, and honors the diversity of approaches we have in understanding God.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that striving to be a faith-friendly company is beneficial for employees, management and shareholders. Notably, these findings are both biblically grounded and supported by cutting-edge economic and business research. Of course, like all great leadership insights, making your company faith-friendly has its challenges, given the complexity of corporate life, cultural differences and the diversity of humankind.

In light of these challenges, I offer here a few brief suggestions for building a faith-friendly workplace:

- First, leaders have to lead. They need to cross the barrier and raise the issue of faith at work. This gives employees permission to engage the topic safely.
- Second, finding the right language is important. People will need to learn how to talk about religious and spiritual questions in the workplace in ways that are authentic to who they are and what they believe, but are also respectful of others who hold different views.
- Third, businesses need a conceptual framework to help think through and discuss what it means to integrate faith and work. Toward that end, we've developed some tools to help people and companies identify and respect different manifestations of integrating faith and work.

As I saw at Ground Zero, there is no barrier that God cannot cross, no evil that God cannot conquer, no prejudice God cannot overcome, no pain that God cannot heal, and indeed, no workplace that God cannot transform. You may not have yellow arri-cade tape at your office or place of work to remind you, but God is at Work. With God's help, you too can cross what seem to be uncrossable barriers to make your workplace faith-friendly.