

TOWARD WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

St. Louis-Based Ascension Health Is Attending to the "Spirit in Work"

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This exploration of spirituality in the workplace begins with an appreciative view of all the creative, fruitful work done over the years in mission integration by leadership teams—notably mission leaders—and countless numbers of dedicated employees. It is with this appreciation that I offer preliminary thoughts on the dynamic interplay between mission and values integration, on one hand, and fostering workplace spirituality, on the other. I will share the efforts now under way at Ascension Health from a systemwide perspective, as well as an evolving vision and hope for the future. These efforts support, encourage, and share learning from local health ministry experience and development.

SETTING THE DIRECTION

In 2002, Ascension Health's vice presidents and directors of mission integration met to identify areas for development; they expressed a desire to foster workplace spirituality. Although a number of our *health ministries*—Ascension Health's term for its local organizations—had for some time been engaged in spiritual development with specifically prepared and dedicated staff and physical space designed as spirituality centers, others were exploring what could be done within the framework of existing practices and resources.

At this meeting, we agreed to invite other ministry leaders to join us in exploring workplace spirituality. We decided to convene what we called a "Spirituality Symposium," an opportunity to learn from one another, to do some "visioning," and to be open to the action of God's spirit. Throughout Ascension Health, we have come a way since that initial meeting, and we are continuing to learn through a process of reflection and discovery.

THE SPIRITUALITY SYMPOSIUM

To begin exploring the spiritual depth of our work, we organized our first Spirituality Symposium—which we called "Meeting the Sacred in the Ordinary"—in May 2003. Participants included members of the system's leadership team, a number of health ministry CEOs, operational vice presidents, human resource leaders, clinical leaders, spiritual care directors, and staff from spirituality centers. Mission leaders and others from the health ministries discussed workplace spirituality initiatives. Presentations and breakout sessions, which explored both concepts and program models, were designed for various audiences. All participants were asked to provide examples related to specific themes, such as creating ritual for specific occasions, engaging a group in planning a spiritual development opportunity according to their needs, and developing programs for leaders. Opportunities for personal spiritual reflection and sharing were interwoven. On the symposium's last day, participants planned the specific next step they would take in each of their organizations.

FRAMEWORK PAPER

In the course of the Spirituality Symposium, we introduced the Ascension Health "Framework for Workplace Spirituality," a brief paper that describes seven desired qualities for any spirituality program in the workplace. The paper, which was developed with broad input, can serve as a starting point for conversation and sharing of experiences, as well as for clarifying goals. The paper begins by stating that:

The goal of our fostering a spirituality of work is to provide an environment that deepens our sense of meaning through the

mission of Ascension Health. This affects the way work is done and service is provided. In a spiritually centered workplace, people have greater potential to become whole. They have a deeper connection with the meaning of what they do. From that experience come vital energy, real commitment, creativity, and a generosity of spirit in contributing to our mission. In fostering spirituality, the workplace grows as a true community of mutual care and service, and organizational practice is infused with depth and reflective process. In this context, there is potential for both individual and organizational transformation.

The paper goes on to list the seven desired qualities for a workplace spirituality initiative. Such initiatives should be: diverse, inclusive, relational, life-giving and soul-satisfying, rooted in reality and truth, discoverable in awareness, and effective in service. The paper concludes with this commitment: "We, as Ascension Health, seek to nurture spirituality in the workplace out of reverence for each person in the service of the healing ministry." (Copies of the paper can be obtained by contacting Laura Moore at moore@ascension-health.org.)

EMERGING INSIGHTS

Through our experience, we have come ever closer to clarifying spiritual concepts. We have learned, for example, that by engaging spirituality in the workplace, we are able to think in terms of relatedness and connection even as we identify what is distinctive. So, when we speak of mission and values integration in relation to workplace spirituality, we can readily see that both efforts strive for the fulfillment of our mission and the holistic well-being of patients, families, employees, and the community. At times, we are asked if these efforts differ, and, if they do, in what ways. This has proven to be a very useful inquiry. In identifying what is distinctive, we can more clearly design efforts that maximize the strengths of each approach.

We also have learned that, in thinking such things through, it is useful to view mission and values integration as especially directed to the organization's desired culture. We do this, in part, by identifying our values and desired behaviors and by inviting all who are part of the organization to "own" and consistently express these values and behaviors in fulfilling our mission. The starting point is the mission and values articulated by the system's sponsors and entrusted as a shared responsibility to all who are part of the organization. Accordingly, we seek to create

organizational structures, practices, and policies that support the desired culture. Ascension Health employees are invited to find personal resonance and meaning in being part of this mission-oriented effort. For this reason, we refer to our employees as "associates"—as, that is, partners in this endeavor. Clearly, these realities have implications both for the individual and the organization.

In deepening our understanding of spirituality, we have come to understand that a vital, spirituality-centered workplace invites the unique gifts of each employee's personhood and inner life to flourish in the work environment. Diverse initiatives seek to foster well-being of the whole person. To foster spirituality is to promote an environment that is relational and life-giving and supports meaningful work and effective, selfless service. In such an environment, spiritual well-being and committed service nourish each other. A spirituality of the workplace evokes a climate of openness to and discovery of the sacred—the energy of God's spirit already moving within our work and relationships. It is sensitive to and honors "what is." In organizational life and practice, we seek to act in accord with this creative energy, allowing our practice and processes to emerge from spiritual depth.

All of this has implications for the role of discernment in major decisions, for how we make changes, how we resolve conflict, and how we create structures. The Mission and Spirituality Committee of the Ascension Health Board of Trustees has said that it sees fostering of workplace spirituality as foundational to our system's "Call to Action," the expression of our priorities that calls us to provide "Healthcare that Works, Healthcare that Is Safe, and Healthcare that Leaves No One Behind." Clearly, the individual and organizational effects are interwoven.

ONLINE SYMPOSIUM COMMUNITY

Using Ascension Health's intranet (called the "Ascension Health Exchange"), we have created an online community to share resources and approaches to workplace spirituality. The site provides a list-serve, a community resource library, and links to other sites. As we develop

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local plans in the coming year, this online symposium will provide us with an opportunity to pose questions to one another and share ideas.

SCORECARD MEASURES

To foster experience and creativity at our local ministries, we have identified system "scorecard measures" related to workplace spirituality. In the first year, 2003-2004, all organizations were asked to convene a group charged with, first, sharing its members' own experience of workplace spirituality, and, second, with identifying ways to extend the opportunity for such conversation to other groups in the workplace. In 2004-2005, the ministries will develop a plan for fostering spirituality in the workplace, with particular focus on the spiritual foundations of the Call to Action. They will include intended outcomes and a means of measuring progress toward those outcomes—through associate feedback, for example.

LEADERSHIP FORMATION

Taking a strategic approach to fostering workplace spirituality as a system has had a dynamic impact on Ascension Health's leadership formation. Today, through a variety of efforts, we support leaders in deepening their own personal spirituality and equipping themselves to foster organizational spirituality across the organization. One such effort is our Formation for Catholic Healthcare Ministry Leadership program (see Ed Giganti, "Called to Lead at Ascension Health," *Health Progress*, January-February 2004, pp. 10-11, 56). This two-year program is designed to integrate theological education and personal spiritual formation. It has a strong focus both on understanding the Catholic tradition and on fostering the diverse gifts of each participant's own spiritual tradition.

Conducted partly through an online course, the program also includes eight retreats that provide opportunities to explore personal spirituality, build community relationships among leaders, and develop ways to encourage spiritual formation locally. "We have had a tremendously vital experience with the first group of participants this year," says Bill Brinkmann, Ascension Health's director of leadership formation. "They have helped us shape the program. We are looking forward to conversations with leaders interested in entering the next group, which will convene in January 2005."

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

In fostering workplace spirituality, it is essential to begin with experience. When Ascension Health's senior leadership team came together several years ago, its members agreed to enter a

process of spiritual development as a team. By devoting at least an hour of each regular meeting to this process, the team has sought individual and group development. In these sessions, we have reflected on, for example, the call to leadership—encouraging team members' gifts and articulating development needs—and how images of God shape one's sense of leadership. In addition, we have explored various spiritual disciplines and support for team and individual growth.

"One reflection that caught our imagination at the outset was that of 'giving God access' to us as a team," says Anthony R. Tersigni, Ascension Health's president and CEO. "It meant choosing to place ourselves in availability to God's acting through us and among us. We have such a strong agenda regarding access to care that this was a very powerful metaphor for us."

Team members have had occasion to describe the spiritual development process in various gatherings and have used some of the reflective exercises with other leadership groups. An integral experience has also been the team's use of the organization's ethical discernment process in making major decisions, taking particular care to include times of prayerful reflection.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Ascension Health thus finds itself in an exciting and hopeful time as we watch these efforts unfold. We are planning a second Spirituality Symposium for the spring of 2005. We have benefited tremendously from sharing with leaders in other Catholic health care systems and from conversations we have had with leaders at CHA.

The directors of spirituality centers at various Ascension Health organizations soon will meet to draw up a coordinated calendar of offerings, with a special focus on retreat and development opportunities for leaders across the system. We are trying to take a planned, strategic approach to fostering a workplace that is spiritually nourishing for all associates and to discovering how organizational practices flow from and deepen spiritual sensitivity. Our work is concerned with awareness of the sacred, of the Divine Spirit always interacting with our spirits, leading us to wholeness for the sake of the mission of healing. □

Ascension Health has been named a recipient of the International 2004 Spirit at Work Award. The award is presented at an annual conference (to be held this year in Zurich, Switzerland) involving representatives of business, education, and service organizations around the world.