



# WORKING FOR BETTER

*A NEW APPROACH TO  
FAITH AT WORK*

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## A LOOK AT HOW THE WORLD IS CHANGING



JOANN WAS WORRIED that if people knew about her beliefs, the door would be closed to any future promotions.<sup>1</sup> When Denise interviewed her as part of an organizational assessment, Joann was a successful midlevel manager. She explained: “I would love to be myself at work. I’d love to be open with people and divulge my whole identity. But I have to be careful to watch what I say; I feel like I’m lying to everyone. I’m generally a very open and honest person, but I have to keep myself hidden here. I don’t feel like there’s an alternative.”

On the one hand, these reflections feel familiar. Many Christians have some concern that expressing their faith at work could limit their opportunities in the workplace. *But Joann was not a Christian.* She was an atheist who did not believe in God or a spiritual realm. Joann was concerned that it was these beliefs that would limit her ability to succeed beyond her current role if she were found out. The founders and current leadership of the company where she worked were all outspoken Christians. These leaders wanted to honor God in their company. They wanted to care for their employees and wanted for everyone in the company to be able to bring their whole

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this book we use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of those we interviewed.

selves—including their faith—to work. But they were unaware of the ways in which their approach to faith in the workplace might be stifling for those with religious identities that were very different from their own.

We have seen how Christian faith lived openly in a workplace can make employees feel cared for and more committed, reform the workplace in helpful ways, foster other kinds of diversity, and facilitate working with others for the common good of an organization. But we have also seen organizations and organizational leaders approach faith through a narrow lens, which leads to substantial blind spots, undermining rather than helping them accomplish their goals.

## A NEW APPROACH TO FAITH AT WORK

One of the historical trends that has been both a positive influence and a pressure factor at the intersection of religion and work is the explosion in recent decades of the faith-at-work movement. In the post-World War II boom, evangelical Christians, in particular, began pushing back against the view that ministry was restricted to a full-time calling to a church or Christian organization, and everybody else by default went into the secular workplace, rejoining their Christian fellowship at church on Sunday in order to recharge for their long stretches out in the world. In contrast, the new emphasis encouraged Christians to see their work *as* their ministry, *as* their calling.

Viewing themselves as mostly loners among nonbelievers, these Monday morning believers were encouraged to develop their own personal witness to the world in considering such questions as, What is my role as a Christian in a secular job? How and when should I share my faith? How do I witness without words? How should I treat and be treated by those who don't share my faith? How can I help lead others to faith in Christ? This individualized approach helped reinforce a minority identity, giving rise to concerns about infringements on religious freedoms and experiences of persecution for holding

religious beliefs or abstaining from workplace behavior that violated those beliefs.

Although this Christian perspective has tended to distinguish the commercial workplace as a secular setting, this is not really the case. There is a new focus in modern workplaces on bringing our whole selves to work; people of faith increasingly want to express their convictions while on the job. At all levels of business in the United States, employees no longer want to leave their faith behind when they go to work. Nearly three-quarters of Americans are affiliated with a religious tradition, and many feel their religious faith is an essential part of who they are—associated with the deepest values they hold, relationships they forge, actions they take, and decisions they make.<sup>2</sup> And many of those who are not part of religious organizations consider spirituality a meaningful part of their lives and relevant to their work.<sup>3</sup> They want to express this part of themselves in their work life, which dominates the majority of their time.

As workers increasingly bring their faith to work, it creates new challenges for leaders in handling religion in the workplace. Leaders are rightly concerned that employees talking about their faith at work might feel invasive or marginalizing to those who do not share the faith, giving rise to conflict. And while religious accommodations for legitimate expressions of faith are legally mandated, it is often unclear to organizational leaders, amid the many pressing needs of their workplaces, how best to accommodate such expressions.

Organizational leaders need tools for how to foster respectful expression rather than suppress religious identity. The well-being of all workers and the health of organizations is served by religious pluralism, not religious privatization. If organizational leaders want to increase diversity of all types in their workplaces, especially racial and gender

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<sup>2</sup>Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, September 6, 2017, [www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/](http://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/).

<sup>3</sup>Jaime Kucinkas, *The Mindful Elite: Mobilizing from the Inside Out* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

diversity, they must also understand how religious diversity is deeply linked to these categories.

The growing pluralism of US society also creates new challenges for Christians at work. Although Christianity is still the largest religious tradition in the United States, workplaces are becoming more religiously diverse, with a growing nonreligious population. In this current cultural climate, our faith demands that we fully live out our Christian commitments while also making space for others to express their own religious or nonreligious identities.

Christians have traditionally expressed their faith at work with a focus on the self: talking about their faith, sharing their beliefs, defending their moral stances, and focusing on their religious freedoms. But there is much less tolerance than there used to be for overt expressions of our faith. How to respect this space while expressing Christian faith appropriately is an increasingly tricky proposition. Christians need a new approach to faith at work that does not compromise their faith while still meeting the moment.

## **COMPLEXITIES RAISE NEW QUESTIONS**

Because the rapid pace of change in US society has exacerbated the tensions already inherent in this arena, we conducted a first-of-its-kind set of research projects to form a data-driven approach to identifying and proposing solutions for the challenge of fostering faith at work. For those who are data junkies, we include several more pages of information about the specifics of our study at the end of the book. Our insights and suggested practices are based on a collective twenty years of research on the faith-at-work movement and how Christians specifically seek to integrate faith and work.

Over the past few years, we have conducted the most comprehensive set of studies to date of faith at work, including (1) focus groups with pastors and congregants in several cities in the United States; (2) surveys of over fifteen thousand workers—before, during, and after the pandemic—who

are representative of the demographics of the US population, including those from a variety of faith traditions as well as nonreligious workers; and (3) in-depth follow-up interviews with 287 people, many of whom are committed Christians who care about faith at work. Since this is a book written primarily for Christians, the majority of the narratives presented in this book are from Christians we interviewed, unless we specify otherwise.

Although we come to this topic as scholars, we are also living faith-and-work integration ourselves. In addition to the data, we also provide personal stories from our own experiences since these topics are important for each of us as Christians. The recommendations we make in this book for the tensions we have identified reflect our hope that people of faith will do all they can to help make the world better for everyone, not just for Christians.

Our research has revealed how new demographic realities in American culture are requiring changes in the traditional models of the faith-at-work movement. For example, we put personal expressions of faith such as evangelizing alongside different pieces of the Christian tradition—those that emphasize the *imago Dei*, the idea that all people are created in the image of God. In our interviews with Christian workers, some talked about the importance of this concept for finding meaning and purpose. “If I am created by God, in God’s image, in His likeness, and I’m given a purpose, I have a reason for living. . . . I help other people not to make myself look better, or to feel better,” a man who works as a village planner told Elaine. A geneticist said he helped others “because [I want to] glorify the one who created me, in his image.” In this scientist’s view, “we all have that shared calling of being made in the image of God. That’s our calling. It’s to reflect him. It’s to represent him.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>These quotes are from respondents who were interviewed for Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us Beyond Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020).

These responses reflect a new model of faith at work garnered from a bedrock of Christian theology: *all people* are made in the image of God. The new possibilities arising from this emphasis suggest that in these divisive times of increasingly violent conflict on the global stage, US Christians at work should do more to focus on how others—all of us—are made in the image of God. Expressing Christian faith at work includes constantly looking for ways to recognize the dignity and worth of all people in the workplace and embracing what some think of as “the other”—those who are outside our own faith community. Rather than concentrating solely on the kind of employee we are, our own expressions of faith at work, and our personal responsibility and morality, we can examine the values of the workplace as a whole and work to advance justice, fairness, human flourishing, and the common good.

## FIVE KEY TENSIONS

The data we have spent years collecting explores not just Christian faith but also how workers from a variety of religious traditions are bringing their faith into the workplace, the impact this has, and why it is so important to manage and support religious diversity—and its diverse expressions—in the workplace. We explain how those from different racial groups, genders, ages, social classes, and occupations negotiate their faith in the workplace. We especially draw on the voices of women and people of color, who have often been left out of literature concerning faith at work, workplace success, and workplace spirituality.

When we put our research alongside the traditional understandings and approaches that have characterized the Christian faith-at-work movement, five key tensions emerged that show where the gaps are between assumptions and realities. We explore each of these tensions across a pair of chapters describing the pressures building and suggesting how they might be resolved. In every chapter we provide an understanding of current realities grounded in social-scientific data.

Each of our chapter pairings focuses on an older approach to faith at work and then shifts to a newer way of considering our engagement while retaining aspects of the traditional. We work hard as we explain these chapter pairings to amplify what we can learn from the traditional approach while setting forth a new way. We chose these particular chapter pairings in this particular order because this is where—as scholars and as Christian workers ourselves—we think there needs to be the most intervention in setting forth a new vision in order to see the greatest redemption in workplaces today.

In chapters two and three we show that while Christians' understanding of work and calling has changed over time to become more expansive, the message that all work can be done in service to God has not made the inroads we might have expected. We also provide a framework that broadens typical conceptualizations of calling. Chapters four and five examine experiences of religious discrimination and accommodation at work and explore the ways that Christians can move beyond primarily seeing themselves as a persecuted minority to helping prevent discrimination and becoming advocates and protectors of fair treatment for all and, in particular, for those who are outsiders. In chapters six and seven we discuss the ways we can move from focusing only on personal responsibility to leading the way in creating organizational systems that affect behaviors at work for the common good, and we suggest ways people can contribute to structures that are more likely to engender positive organizational outcomes. Chapters eight and nine discuss the different levels of support that working men and women receive from their church communities and how that can affect their workplace outcomes. We provide suggestions for ways both churches and workplace leaders can contribute to flourishing for all. In chapters ten and eleven, our last chapter pairing, we examine the many ways Christians express their faith in the workplace and how such expressions are viewed by those outside the faith. We argue for a principled

pluralism approach, which respects those of different beliefs and practices while holding firm to the foundational aspects of the Christian faith.

We end the book, in chapter twelve, with a discussion of how a biblical understanding of rest might infuse the way we approach our work. We intentionally do not include a chapter pairing in response to our chapter on rest. In some sense, the first eleven chapters of this book provide the substance of the pairing for the last chapter. Most of this book focuses on how our faith influences our work. But Christians should also be attentive to how our faith shapes our approach to rest. No matter our approach to faith at work, rest should thread through all we do. To rest from our work and *to cultivate rest possibilities for others at work* reveals our place in the created order. The success of the world ultimately does not depend on us.

## FROM DEFENDING RIGHTS TO RADICAL EMBRACE

Our recommended path for resolving these key tensions reflects a fresh model for faith at work that moves from an individualized, in-the-trenches approach to an other-focused, more community-oriented perspective of radical embrace.<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, we make the case that the exclusive claims of Christianity actually *demand* an embrace of others in the workplace, regardless of their faith commitments, belief systems, or worldviews. We call on Christians to bring their faith into the workplace by shifting from an emphasis on talking about our beliefs and defending our own rights to empathizing with those who are religiously different, with a particular emphasis on the *imago Dei*—the idea that every person we encounter is worthy of dignity and respect because every person is made in the image of God. We integrate this radical-embrace perspective

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<sup>5</sup>We have been influenced by the ideas of Miroslav Volf, particularly his book *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

throughout the book, showing how this core truth demands different practices and ways of expressing our faith in the workplace.

To be clear, we are not advocating a watered-down Christianity that sees itself as no different from any other religion, nor are we primarily concerned with evaluating the truth claims of other faith traditions. Rather, we are arguing for the equivalent value and dignity of each person and for an approach to Christianity in the workplace that recognizes and centers on such.

The cultural shifts we described at the beginning of this chapter are already underway. How we respond to these shifts will determine whether faith at work retreats into a self-protective corner or becomes a redemptive presence with ripple effects for the common good far beyond its immediate reach. Using compelling real-world stories, research insights, and practical applications, we hope to provide new information, ideas, and guidance for Christian workers, Christian workplace leaders, and pastors and church leaders who want to see all people flourish at work. We close each chapter with questions that can be used for personal reflection or group discussion. Our primary goal is to help those in the Christian faith community consider how to adapt their approach to a changing world in which older ways can get in the way and newer ways open the way.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

### *For everyone*

- What messages have you heard about integrating faith and work?
- What made you pick up this book? What do you want to get out of this book?
- What are your fears about integrating faith and work in your workplace or particular job?
- What are the challenges for integrating faith and work in your workplace?

*For faith communities*

- What is the approach of your church or faith-based organization to helping people integrate faith and work?
- What changes would you like your church or faith-based organization to make related to engaging faith at work? Why? What is at stake with these changes?

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