What Happens When the Boss Invites You to Bible Study?

Secular companies have invited employees to bring their “whole selves” to work. That increasingly includes their religion.

By Jennifer Miller

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When Christy Childers moved from Austin to San Francisco in 2017 to start a marketing job at Facebook, she felt anxious about sharing her evangelical faith with her new colleagues. In Ms. Childers’s religious community, Silicon Valley has a reputation for being overtly secular and less than accepting of Christian beliefs. She now calls that view “unfounded.” Within a week, colleagues had invited her to a lunchtime Bible study and a happy hour attended by scores of Christians across the tech industry.

“I thought, ‘I can be out about being a Christian. I can do that here,’” Ms. Childers said.

During her three years as a brand manager, Ms. Childers’s evangelical identity became central to her work. She honed her managerial skills by leading the Christians at Facebook (now Christians at Meta) employee resource group. Weekly prayer meetings with colleagues led to what she called “real-time miracles,” like engineers suddenly fixing bugs they’d struggled with for months and solutions to P.R. crises. Company leaders also consulted her about the attitudes of conservative Facebook users.

In 2019, Ms. Childers founded Pray for Tech, a nonprofit that supports Christian prayer communities inside tech companies. The next year, she left Facebook to run the organization full time. She has since worked with Christian groups at 40 companies, where she’s observed a growing interest in supporting workers’ core identities, including their faith.

This corporate effort to create a sense of belonging at work grew after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, when many companies rushed to improve their diversity, equity and inclusion, or D.E.I., efforts. Employees from underrepresented groups were encouraged to bring their “authentic” or “whole” selves to work, and companies increased support for identity-based employee groups organized around gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Increasingly, faith is a part of this list. Human resources professionals, diversity consultants and scholars all say it’s become more common for employees to share their religious identities at work and to request the same corporate recognition and support given to other identity groups. Most major tech companies now have official faith-based affinity groups.

Fueling the effort are multiple Christian organizations including Pray for Tech; anti-discrimination nonprofits, like the Anti-Defamation League; and nonpartisan, multifaith nonprofits like Interfaith America and the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation.

“It feels like the train is moving and as imperfect as the D.E.I. vehicle is, hop on or hop off and get religion into the larger ecosystem,” said Simran Jeet Singh, executive director of the Religion & Society Program at the Aspen Institute. “It’s almost like, here’s a way for people of faith to say, think about us too.”

Twenty years ago, few secular companies recognized faith-based employee groups and those that did exist — whether officially sanctioned or not — were typically for Christians. Today, nearly 70 secular corporations officially fund them, according to the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, and scores more allow them to exist. Many groups are new since 2017, some have thousands of members and represent Christians, Muslims and Jews, along with Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’is and even atheists.

Scholars call this a cultural shift. The secular office has long been “a neutral space, where there is separating out of religion,” said Helen Chung, an assistant professor of industrial-organizational psychology at Seattle Pacific University who studies faith-based employee resource groups. This is partly “a carry-over from the separation of church and state,” Ms. Chung said, and partly a way to keep the peace. “What are the two things you’re not supposed to talk about?” said Brian Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. “Religion and politics.”
Inviting employees to bring their whole selves to the workplace means companies should be prepared to host some difficult conversations. “That doesn’t mean companies have to weigh in on Israel-Palestine,” Mr. Singh said. But, he said, workers of faith “have real issues that they’ll be bringing to the table, and you have to be ready to address them.”

“We shouldn’t be hiding”

Members of Faithforce, Salesforce’s 5,000-member multifaith resource group, listen to a talk about the history of the Baha’i temple. Jamie Kelter Davis for The New York Times

Americans may be turning away from organized religion, but a fifth still view their work as a spiritual calling, according to a nationally representative survey from Rice University.

“Historically, religious institutions have provided people a context, a container to mark transitions in their lives and do some meaning making,” Ms. Chung said. “But some of that has lessened, and I think because of that, we look to recreate some structures for ourselves in the workplace.”

Employees who have joined workplace faith groups or otherwise integrated religion into their professional lives, often do so for emotional support. Ms. Childers’s organization, Pray for Tech, facilitates virtual inter-company prayer sessions, like one last March, where employees from Meta, Microsoft and Yahoo prayed for strength in the face of layoffs.

At PayPal, workers can submit requests to a “prayer portal,” asking that colleagues pray for them. “A lot of times it’s around a health diagnosis. Or a prayer for leadership and wisdom during difficult economic times,” said Becky Pomerleau, the company’s senior director of audit, who helped found both the company’s interfaith and Christian affinity groups in 2019.
Sukie Singh Gandhi, a technical consulting manager at Salesforce, said engaging with her Sikh faith at work helps her feel seen and respected as a religious minority. Ms. Gandhi is global vice president of Faithforce, a 5,000-member affinity group at her company, and part of the “Sikhs at Salesforce” Slack channel — positions she’s used to help out her Sikh colleagues.

Some Sikhs, for example, are required to carry a kirpan, a small ceremonial dagger that represents justice and courage. Yet they worry colleagues or security will misconstrue the kirpan as a weapon. After her colleagues raised these concerns on the Slack channel last year, Ms. Gandhi helped convene meetings with executives, security officials and employees to discuss the issue.

As a result of these talks, Sikhs who want to carry a kirpan at work now receive special notation on their employee badges.

Ms. Gandhi found this experience empowering. “That is who I am,” she said. “We shouldn’t be hiding.”

In fact, many religious employees say they were closeted about their faith before “coming out” to colleagues. Michael Roberts, a Salesforce engineer, said it took him three years to come out as an evangelical Christian. Once he did, he became a founding member of Faithforce.

A few years later, at age 30, Mr. Roberts came out as gay. After learning that he was in a same-sex relationship, his longtime church rejected him. But his Faithforce colleagues had the opposite response. “They were amazing champions,” Mr. Roberts said. “That was a significant source of strength for me in that hard transition.”
Difficult conversations

Companies with faith-based affinity groups are quick to emphasize how deeply their employees respect one another. But as religious workers become more vocal inside secular workplaces, “one potential downside is that what’s safe and creates a more inclusive environment for one group might have an opposite or negative impact for another group,” said Katina Sawyer, associate professor of management and organizations at the University of Arizona, who studies workplace inclusion. “That’s not something organizations have necessarily thought about in great detail.”

The Civil Rights Act prohibits employers from discriminating against workers based on their religion, race, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. But recent Supreme Court decisions seem to have privileged religious freedoms, like exempting health plans at companies with religious objections from providing contraception under the Affordable Care Act or allowing a religious social services nonprofit to turn away same-sex foster parents.

In June, a unanimous Supreme Court decision made it easier for people to seek religious accommodations at work. Typically, such accommodations involve holiday time off or wearing religious dress. But Steven Green, director of the Center for Religion, Law and Democracy at Willamette University, thinks the ruling could open the door for other demands — like the ability to proselytize, which is a core tenet of some faiths. “Some religious public interest groups are creating a narrative that you must be able to bring your entire self into the workplace,” he said, “and that means your ability to evangelize, which has been inhibited.”

During a recent Pride month, members of some faith-based employee groups at a large tech company grew frustrated over their employer’s overt L.G.B.T.Q. advocacy. Some considered organizing a walkout. An adviser to the Christian affinity group, who requested anonymity to preserve his professional relationships, counseled the frustrated employees to consider how such an event would affect their L.G.B.T.Q. colleagues. The walkout never happened.

Mr. Grim, of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, recalled hearing about another incident in which an employee sent a mass email inviting staff to a Bible study. Mr. Grim says that the appropriate employer response should depend on the situation: If a supervisor sent the email, it could be considered coercive if it is viewed as mandatory or somehow consequential to an employee's place in the company. But if a rank-and-file employee is permitted to send a mass email invitation to a baby shower or Pride parade, then Bible study should be fair game.

Not every company is prepared to grapple with these questions. It’s possibly why only 43 Fortune 500 companies officially recognize faith-based affinity groups, according to an assessment by Mr. Grim’s organization.

“We’re often approached by diversity professionals who are really versed in race, gender, sexuality, and they’re like, “Oh, I don’t get religion, and I’m not comfortable with it,” said Megan Johnson, senior director for strategic initiatives at the nonpartisan, nonprofit Interfaith America. “Especially when these groups might come up against that person’s own value set.”

In 2021, Rebecca Leeman was an organizational consultant at PwC in Manhattan, when a man wearing a skullcap was assaulted near the company’s Midtown offices. He had been on his way to a pro-Israel demonstration. Ms. Leeman said the company sent a mass email condemning the assault and even mentioned it during an all-hands meeting, but never used the word “anti-Semitism.”

“Because of the connections to Israel and politics, I think they were intentionally vague,” Ms. Leeman said. She felt the company needed to understand the very specific fear she’d been feeling about her Jewish identity in recent years.

She co-wrote a letter to Tim Ryan, then the company’s U.S. chair, requesting that PwC recognize a formal Jewish affinity group. The company responded swiftly. Within a few months, they’d authorized an interfaith organization with a Jewish group under its umbrella.

‘Feel-good stuff’ vs. shared identity

Companies like an interfaith approach to religion in the workplace, because it allows them to focus on education and sidestep potential conflict. Last December, PayPal hosted its first interfaith fair, complete with turban tying and henna painting. This winter, PwC will host a lunch and learn about workers’ different holiday traditions. Each spring, a handful of companies hold Ramadan “fast-a-thons” in which non-Muslims fast for one day alongside their Muslim colleagues.
At Dell, there is a single multifaith group with six religions represented but no faith-specific communities — at least none the company officially recognizes. “Those become divisive and exclusive,” said Vanice Hayes, Dell’s chief culture, diversity and inclusion officer. “We are all about making sure people don’t feel siloed.”

Mr. Singh of the Aspen Institute agrees that an interfaith approach can help avoid polarization, but he worries the “feel-good stuff” can “fall really flat, because it’s too superficial.” He added that workers from minority faiths often want a space “to find their people on the basis of some shared identity and heritage.” That’s especially important, he said, with hate crimes on the rise.

In late 2022, the Anti-Defamation League started a Jewish Employee Resource Group Network to address growing inquiries from Jewish employees and D.E.I. officers. “Excluding Jews or bundling them in a much bigger group reinforces that signal that Jews are not vulnerable, aren’t a minority group,” said Adam Neufeld, senior vice president and chief impact officer of the A.D.L. “We think they are.”

Access to a like-minded community also provides the safety some workers need to step outside of it. Steve Teng, whose Austin nonprofit Pivot helps Christians start Christ-centered communities at work, said some people have been taught to think that entering interfaith spaces means they’re abandoning their own theology. “I tell them, don’t be scared,” he said. “When you receive ideas, you also get to share them. That’s dignifying people of every kind.”