Religion and Faith at Work

When Does Inclusion Become Exclusionary?

By Frank McCloskey

This article is about the implications of an already dominant workplace group (Christians) asking for more Christian religious expression beyond Title VII. It is my contention that despite the good intentions of Christians advocating for implementation of “faith-at-work” initiatives, the desire to increase workplace Christian expression will likely turn into higher levels of exclusion for non-Christians and non-religious employees (i.e., individuals whose behavior is not based in any religious system of thought, but still guided by a strong sense of values and ethics).

The backdrop for any United States publicly-traded company considering formal Christian faith initiatives is that we conduct business in the most religiously diverse country in the world. It is also a time when our society’s continuing culture war and attacks on church and state separation and the divisiveness resulting from past presidential and state elections on “moral values” are at an all-time high. The convergence of these demographics and societal trends do enter the workplace through employee attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Any corporation unaware of or ignoring this reality potentially magnifies workplace concerns and legal risk.

The focus audience for this article is all levels of management who have the responsibility for achieving business results in publicly-held, for-profit companies operating within the United States. The personal perspectives presented are to challenge and push the current thinking of corporate diversity and human resource officers.

It is my opinion that executive management, diversity and human resource officers are not prepared to address the tensions, complexities, potential divisiveness, and legal risks associated with an evolving concept of diversity and inclusion that is being energized by many Christians in the workforce who are advocating for implementation of Christian faith-at-work initiatives. A new frontier of inclusion is today being presented as “bringing one’s whole-self to work” and along with it the infusion of personal religious and faith beliefs into company work practices, value statements and organizational culture. The perceived pay-off in adopting these formalized religion and faith-at-work initiatives is higher levels of employee engagement and performance.

I do not believe the required critical thinking and public discourse have taken place with executive management, diversity and human resource officers to objectively evaluate sound business drivers for advancing (or not) formalized religion and faith-at-work initiatives. Current discussions do not consider the potential negative impact of Christian faith-at-work advocates asking for more Christian religious expression beyond what is already afforded by Title VII. There is an immediate need to identify “success” for this expanded notion of workplace inclusion. Whatever ultimate outcomes are achieved, the eventual end in mind must be established from management’s perspective. More than likely diversity and human resource officers have not yet facilitated executive management through a process to clearly define success and identify potential negative consequences.

Moreover, it is entirely management’s obligation to decide whether or not to proceed with formalized religion and faith-at-work initiatives and not the responsibility of company employees or possibly external Christian marketplace and ministry organizations with self-serving agendas. The responsibility to protect the company’s reputation and brand and mitigate legal risks cannot be delegated.

Setting Context

The following provides context and boundaries for this article.

1. This article is my personal view and
based on my experiences and discussions with individuals and groups of varied faith traditions including those whose behavior is not based in a religious system of thought, but still guided by a strong sense of values and ethics. The views expressed do not reflect the opinions of the company, organizations or religious institutions with which I am associated. In fact, I am a member of a dominant Christian group.

2. This article is not a legal commentary on compliance standards of Title VII, which prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals in hiring, firing and other terms of employment based on religion. Rather, the focus here is on the implications of an already dominant workplace group (Christians) asking for more religious expression beyond Title VII.

3. Without question there must be zero tolerance for any behavior or action rising to a legal standard of religious-based discrimination or harassment. I believe, however, the resulting retaliation for someone not going along with this expanded concept of inclusion will likely be behaviors of discrimination and harassment that do not rise to legal standards.

4. The focus herein is on publicly-held, for-profit corporations headquartered or operating primarily within the United States. The focus audience is management and diversity and human resource officers.

5. The challenges identified impact corporations in all regions of the country.

6. This is a workplace, management issue and not a theological discussion or debate.

End-in-Mind Not Clearly Defined

There is an immediate need to get clarity on what the desired outcomes are regarding religion and faith-at-work. Numerous employee engagement surveys indicate United States workers are feeling less inspired and fulfilled than ever. For example, a recent Gallup survey reported that employee satisfaction levels have fallen from 52% in 2009 to an all-time low of 47% in 2010.

The Gallup survey is based on 30 years of accumulated quantitative and qualitative research. The survey measures employee satisfaction, loyalty, pride, and intent to stay with a company. This is done by measuring issues found to be actionable at the supervisor or manager level that affect an employee’s perception of the work situation such as role clarity, resources, fit between abilities and requirements, receiving feedback, and feeling appreciated.

The Gallup survey concludes the drop in employee satisfaction is the result of employee perceptions that the quality of people-related management practices in their business units are declining.

This drop in workforce satisfaction that is attributable to gaps in management competencies will eventually erode business performance and profitability. As a result, this is an important leadership challenge to confront.

As mentioned earlier, the perceived benefits of greater Christian workplace expression are higher levels of engagement, performance and profitability. These are worthy of consideration. I strongly believe, however, now reinforced by the Gallup survey findings, it is not the lack of Christian faith-at-work initiatives that is the source of lowered workforce engagement and performance. I contend the perceived benefits and positive outcomes being credited to more Christian workplace expression are better achieved by improving and evolving management competencies in ways not previously developed or redefined.

Specifically, this means improving a manager’s ability to apply the following skills:

- Establish a work environment where differences are treated with respect and inclusion.
- Provide meaningful job performance and career feedback.
- Recognize and reward employees for quality work and demonstrated behavior to build partnership and collaboration with differences.
- Reduce any fear of retaliation for employees who might disagree with his or her manager or not readily conform to the manager’s preferred management style.
- Demonstrate an “adaptive management” style when leading employees in their day-to-day work activities.

It is important to reinforce the need for a manager and supervisor to reduce any fear of retaliation for employees who might disagree with his or her manager or not readily conform to the manager’s preferred management style. Based on current Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s (EEOC) Statistics for FY2009, retaliation charges amounted to 36% of all charges filed with the EEOC. This is equal to the percentages of race discrimination (36%) and higher than sex discrimination (30%) charges filed with the EEOC. Claims of retaliation rose 23%, while non-retaliation claims rose 12% during the same time period. Finally, retaliation claims have tripled since 1992 when the EEOC began tracking data.

This is a management leadership challenge that will not be resolved with higher levels of Christian faith workplace expression. A recent Supreme Court decision substan-
Babel

How does this statement make you feel? “In the name of diversity and inclusion, my company wants to formalize and institutionalize a system of religious attitudes, beliefs and practices that are held with ardor and faith.”

Let’s try another. “My company wants to formalize work practices and policies in the belief, trust and loyalty to a God and the traditional doctrines of religion.”

The italicized words in these two statements are part of Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary definition of “religion” and “faith,” respectively. Your reaction to both sentences might have been different and more accepting if I only used the single words “religion” and “faith” and not their full definitions.

When it comes to communicating thoughts, concepts and ideas about faith-at-work, we are not all having the same conversation because words such as “religion,” “faith,” “faith-friendly,” and “spirituality” all have different meanings for people due to their unique life experiences and faith beliefs. There currently is no “common book.” By this I mean that despite thousands of years of theological inquiry and debate, no single and standard lexicon providing ready and universal understandings for these terms and concepts exists. It is unlikely that one will appear on the horizon anytime soon.

There is nothing wrong with different definitions and uses of these terms for conversations in our everyday lives. However, when trying to establish workplace protocols on extremely difficult issues never before addressed, widely different definitions, understandings and uses of religious terms are confusing and problematic. Words are often used, heard and interpreted differently. Additionally, how someone uses these words can signal a bias or blind spot by the speaker. Together, all of this creates unrecognized chaos when discussing challenging issues involving religion and faith-at-work.

When using Webster’s Dictionary’s basic definitions, this topic quickly moves from benign or easy to edgy, complicated, confusing, and divisive.

Unrecognized “babel” exists. You say tomato, I say potato.

Flip-Flop

Red flags should immediately go up when the already dominant group, more than reasonably accommodated by Title VII and long established human resources and workplace practices and policies, requests more Christian religious expression.

This is analogous to men asking for more male expression in workplaces currently dominated by men. It just doesn’t make sense.

In my experience with diversity awareness training, the teaching objective is aimed at getting the dominant group (e.g. whites, men, heterosexuals, the able-bodied, etc.) to better understand their systemic advantage over non-dominant groups. The challenge is to get the “privileged” group (meaning those in the majority population who likely never have to think about their skin color, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, faith belief, etc.) to realize what life is like from another group’s less privileged perspective. With this awareness and understanding, it becomes possible for someone in the majority group to take greater responsibility for creating fairness and inclusion with those in the non-majority group.

As far as religion and faith-at-work is concerned, this is the only dimension of diversity where a “flip-flop” has occurred. Greater responsibility is now being forced on non-Christian and non-religious employees to push back and declare to workplace Christians advocating for more Christian expression that their self-focused concept of inclusion may not necessarily be a good thing. How risky is it for someone to disagree? What retaliation is possible when an idea to implement a DRI “best practice” involving Christian faith-at-work expression is challenged by non-Christian and non-religious employees?

Based on EEOC statistics for FY2009, the number of workers claiming job discrimination based on religion surged to new highs. Of the 93,277 workplace discrimination charges filed, representing the second highest level ever, religion-based claims totaled 3,386. Even though this figure represents approximately 4% of all charges, religious discrimination claims have increased 100% over the past 15 years.

The EEOC has stated this increase is directly reflective of the increased diversity and demographic shifts in the workplace. It is also impacted by employees who are more aware of their rights and are taking advantage of changes at the EEOC to make it easier to file a discrimination charge.

Adding to all of this is the growing number of Christian activist organizations, such as the Alliance Defense Fund, Christian Law Association and The American Center for Law and Justice, who believe the Christian right of religious expression and liberty is being unduly compromised. An important focus for each of these organizations is to better inform, update and provide insights on religious freedom of expression to Christians in the workplace.

Due to the expected tensions and dynamics described, I believe we will likely see an increase in discrimination allegations by Christian faith-at-work advocates because their requests for more expression are denied.

I also believe many non-Christian, non-religious, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees are concerned about an expansion of Christian workplace expression. I say this acknowledging that LGBT employees may also be religious and Christian.

Think about it. This is a significant portion of the United States workforce that up to now has been mostly silent. Let’s specifically look at the non-religious population.

The Pew Research Center’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, released in February 2008, and the American Religious Identification Survey by Trinity College, released in March 2009, show that 15-16% of the United States population over 18 years of age (39 million) identify as non-religious: secular (6.3%), agnostic (2.4%), atheist (1.6%), and religious unaffiliated (5.8%). This collective population outranks all other United States religious denominations except Catholics (25.1%).

This group of 39 million is approximately the same number of African Americans living in our country today. In other words, the non-religious segment is a sizeable employee population who must be considered and accounted for in this discussion.

There is one other employee group that I feel will also be concerned about any expansion of Christian expression in the workplace.

Christian employees.

I realize I do not have empirical data or research to supplement my hypothesis, but I do believe most Christian employees will be uncomfortable and skeptical about formal Christian faith-at-work initiatives. This would be the case for a variety of reasons including not having a faith requirement to share personal testimony or to proselytize, having an individual opinion that work and religion should remain separated or possibly being offended by other Christians forcing their belief and faith onto others, as examples.

The Christian faith, its practices and personal opinions of individual members are not monolithic.

It is ironic that at a time when corpora-
tions continue to invest significant financial resources into initiatives that are intended to build respect and trust with underrepresented or marginalized employee groups, this new Christian-driven diversity and inclusion focus is beginning to gain attention and popularity. The attempt to implement Christian faith-at-work programs is occurring in companies who operate in the most religiously diverse country in the world.

The United States is the most religiously diverse country in the world as a result of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prevents our government from having authority in religion and guarantees the free exercise of religion. Our nation’s religious pluralism has also been shaped by its historical immigration patterns. A significant percentage of the United States’ foreign-born population, which currently stands at 13%, comes from regions of the world that are not Christian.

The impact of all of this is that the demographic makeup of the United States workforce is becoming more religiously diverse. This workforce trend cannot be reversed.

I maintain that Christian faith-at-work efforts will eventually end up becoming disruptive. It seems we are now heading to unnecessary workplace tensions between employee segments which are counter to current and on-going inclusion strategies.

A Christian voice and perspective should not be the driving force to advance faith-at-work initiatives. Even with good intentions, well meaning advocates for Christian workplace initiatives can easily have unintended negative impacts on others. This is a natural outcome of any dominant workplace group unable to see the blind spots resulting from systemic advantage and privilege.

With respect to efforts by Christians to expand Christian workplace expression, the Christian faith is too multi-faceted for any one segment of it to speak on behalf of all American Christians. Statistics from the Encyclopedia of American Religions indicate there are more than 1,500 Christian denominations, including both Catholic and Protestant congregations, worshiping Jesus in some ritual and service every Sunday. I believe if someone wanted to write a book on what the 1,500 Christian denominations have in common, it would be a very quick read.

This Christian “diversity” is part of my reasoning to state earlier that Christian employees will also be concerned about Christian faith-at-work initiatives.

Someone might ask whether employees advocating for workplace Christian expression could learn from and be motivated to use their systemic advantage to further and promote understanding among all religious groups. Yes, this is possible, but I believe that outcome will not likely happen. Here’s why.

Inter-faith efforts to address and reduce our country’s homelessness and poverty levels have made positive contributions, though not perfect or yet having lasting change. This particular example is more of an exception than the rule because for the most part, the majority of inter-faith alliances in the United States today have not had a wide impact and effect on our societal norms. What will change to evoke something dramatically different and positive in the workplace? Also, following more than 40 years of intense focus, significant workplace trust gaps still remain between whites and blacks, men and women, and heterosexuals, gays and lesbians. Why would anyone seriously believe things would be different for employees advocating more Christian workplace expression with non-Christian and non-religious employees?

I believe very little “cross pollination” and outreach will occur by workplace Christians initiating Christian faith efforts on behalf of non-Christians and non-religious employees to increase equal consideration and fairness. This outcome has not yet been cited by Christians in the workplace requesting more expression.

Affinity (Employee Resource) Groups

It is generally agreed that the purpose of affinity groups is to build higher levels of employee inclusion that result in a positive business outcome for the company. This is often accomplished by affinity groups enlisting the support of management to stretch and evolve the current comfort zone of management and organizational culture in order to be inclusive of talented employee segments that traditionally have had a difficult time being accepted and recognized by their company. The intent is for management and employees to collaborate and eventually eliminate previously invisible and “undiscussible” management and organizational culture barriers that resulted in employee mistrust and disengagement.

Affinity groups are not allowed to oppose other groups or exclude any employee from membership. It is also standard practice not to allow political affinity groups. Finally, most companies do not allow religious affinity groups to form.

In today’s on-going public debates about values, political and religious agendas often get joined at the hip. Challenging and controversial social issues have ignited aggressive and highly-organized Christian political activism within our country. As a result, a candidate’s personal religious and faith beliefs have become a front-and-center litmus test during several past presidential and local elections, Supreme Court nominations, and federal and state legislative policy battles. High emotion, passion, fear, and intense rhetoric have resulted.

Given the complex mix of rights to privacy, individual freedoms, corporate goals, policies, and public positions, I believe that Christian affinity groups should be treated the same as political groups and not be allowed to form. Here is why I say this.

It is likely and safe to assume that societal issues do enter the workplace through employee attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. This reality trumps the good intentions of employees and any communicated business case to form Christian affinity groups. In a recent article entitled Toppling A Taboo: Businesses Go Faith-Friendly, Georgette Bennett, president of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, describes “a recurring ‘diversity backlash’ in the form of Christian employee affinity groups opposing domestic-partner benefits, refusing to sign diversity statements that include homosexuality, and asking management not to recognize LGBT affinity groups.”

Well then, what about Christian affinity groups already in place?

Yes, some companies have already evaluated business cases and approved Christian affinity groups. This is not to second guess these highly-respected organizations and their efforts. However, if there is only a slight hint or possibility that any of the following is occurring, it is reason enough to revoke the charter of current Christian affinity groups and deny any future requests to form:

• Directly or indirectly attacking or countering the formation or existence of LGBT affinity groups.
• Intentionally trying to transform the current standards of corporate values and ethics to mean Christian values and ethics.
• Creating structure inside the company to facilitate proselytizing and conversion.
• Creating opportunity for an external organization to advance an agenda and ideology to “Christianize” the workplace.

Christian Workplace Ministries

“God has begun an evangelism movement in the workplace that has potential to transform our society as we know it.”
Franklin Graham
President & CEO
Religion and Faith at Work

Samaritan’s Purse
“We reviewed 52 movements in the body of Christ. We narrowed it down to 28, then 12, then 4 to invest our resources in the coming years. The workplace is one of those because this is an area where we see God working.”
Chad Hammond
Director, New Venture

Over the past decade, there have been a growing number of loosely-aligned organizations that believe they must encourage ministers and business leaders to work together and impact the workplace where church members spend 60-70% of their time. As a result, we must practically consider the likelihood that there are external organizations with stated agendas to reclaim the workplace and world for Jesus Christ that are using diversity and inclusion initiatives as a trocar or platform to strategically advance their cause.

The transparent mission and strategy used by several Christian “marketplace” organizations is to have a minority 3-5% of employees, managers and executives use their personal positions of leadership and influence to incrementally form a “tipping point” that is intended to change organizational values and culture to Christian. Their belief is that this “Trojan Horse” approach and strategy is much more effective than trying to convert unwilling masses through preaching and proselytizing. In other words, a well-trained minority group positioned in the right places and situations is stronger than an unknowing or silent majority. Rather than turning others off by preaching and evangelizing, the strategy is to speak the language of leadership and business, and use one’s personal position of influence as a platform for ministry.

In addition to the examples identified as “diversity backlash” in the previous discussion on affinity groups, here are other indications of how using one’s personal position of influence as a platform for workplace ministry might appear:

• Invite a Pastor or Christian motivational speaker to company meetings.
• Try and establish written Biblical values as a priority for the company’s mission statement.
• Use company resources to sponsor external Christian organizations and events.
• Host a Christ-centered program during the Christmas and Easter time period in a company facility.
• Provide Christian magazines and literature in reception and restroom areas.
• Include Christian symbols and testimony on company e-mails and auto-signatures.
• Provide employees the opportunity to do ministry on company time in the community.
• Provide programs on the topic of Christian world-view.

• Provide Christian-focused leadership books to managers and employees.
• Sponsor leadership events emphasizing Christian values of leadership.
• Provide the opportunity at company functions for someone to share their personal testimony of faith.
• Offer Christian prayer at company functions.
• Establish a workplace prayer and devotion-all list using company resources and email.
• Request the company to hire a corporate chaplain.
• Display Christian artwork, pictures and scriptures as office decorations.
• Purchase tickets for local Christian events and give as gifts to employees, suppliers and customers.

Conclusions

1. The backdrop for any United States publicly-held company considering formal Christian faith initiatives is one that is extremely complex. We do business in both a religiously pluralistic and secular world.

• The changing demographics of the workplace, workforce, customer base and community clearly reflect the reality of this ever-changing landscape. Concurrently, our society’s continuing culture war and attacks on church and state separation, and the difficult value issues arising out of past presidential and state elections (gay rights, abortion, faith-based government initiatives, Supreme Court nominations, etc.) have created intense emotion, tension, fear, and divisiveness. This is occurring within the most religiously diverse country in the world.

These issues do enter the workplace through employee attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Any corporation ignoring this reality potentially magnifies workplace employee concerns and legal risk.

2. This is the only area of diversity where the already dominant group is requesting more expression under the banner of inclusion. The unintended impact on non-Christian and non-religious employees will likely be increased workplace exclusion through subtle behaviors not meeting legal standards.

3. Management must be crystal clear on what their desired outcomes for this topic should be. My recommended management outcome is:

“It is the responsibility of a manager to be aware, knowledgeable and respectful of a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs of employees without indicating that one group is favored over another.”

4. The continued decline in workforce engagement is an important management challenge to confront. Higher levels of employee engagement, performance and profitability are better achieved, however, by improving management skills that previously developed or rewarded and not by implementing Christian faith-at-work initiatives. Management skills and higher levels of accountability must be put into place to provide meaningful job performance and career feedback, to recognize and reward employees for quality work and behavior and to reduce the fear of retaliation for employees who disagree with their manager or do not readily conform to their manager’s personal leadership style. It is also a manager’s responsibility to establish a work environment where differences are treated with respect and inclusion.

The deficiencies of these specific management skills are the root cause of employee disengagement. It is not the result of Christian employees not having enough workplace expression of their religious beliefs.

5. There is no need to be defensive or apologetic for saying “No.” Management must protect corporate values of fairness, respect and inclusion for non-Christian, non-religious, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees when evaluating requests to expand Christian workplace expression. This is regardless of employees who have good intentions in their desire to advance higher degrees of Christian expression in the workplace.

6. Christian privilege creates the same blind spots and mistrust other forms of privilege have, such as being white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied.

7. Corporate leadership, diversity and human resource officers must be aware of how critically important the workplace is to “marketplace” Christian organizations whose stated mission and agenda is to Christianize America.

8. Corporate leadership, diversity and human resource officers must partner with professional organizations such as the Conference Board, the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM), and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding to establish a commonly shared vocabulary and basic understanding of “religion,” “faith,” “faith-friendly,” and “spirituality” when these terms are used in business context and work environments.

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