

Outstanding in the FIELD

TO WORK AND TO WORSHIP

BY KERI WILLARD-CRIST

Decades ago, David Miller (M.Div., 1998; Ph.D., 2003) was baptized into the business community with strict advice from an IBM instructor at a new employee training session: “Whatever else you learn here, just don’t forget, religion and business simply don’t mix.” For years this credo, recalled in the introduction to his book *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007), held true for Miller, at least on the surface. It wasn’t until coming to Princeton Seminary in 1995 that he gained the theological training that enabled him to articulate his response.

Now Miller has one question on his mind: “How do you integrate the claims of your faith with the demands of your work?” It’s a question arising from a successful career as a businessman and a Christian, honed while an M.Div. student and doctoral student in ethics at PTS, and then as the executive director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, and a question he continues to explore as the director of the Princeton University Faith and Work Initiative. It’s a question well worth asking for those interested in integrating their life with an overarching sense of what Miller describes as “moral meaning and purpose” that transitions fluidly between church on Sunday and the office on Monday. Miller uses the Hebrew word *avodah*, which means both “work” and “worship,” to guide his study and to bridge the “Sunday-Monday gap.”

Before leaving the corporate world to attend Princeton Seminary, Miller spent sixteen years in senior executive positions in international business and finance in the United States and abroad. His theological education and business background make Miller uniquely qualified to address the marketplace through a theological lens. He refers to his fluency in both business and theological language as his “bilingual” background.

Miller doesn’t distinguish between his call to seminary and his call to corporate leadership. “I understood myself as called to ministry before, as a partner in a bank,” says Miller, who nearly always discusses “calls” in the plural. His decision to come to PTS was the result of a “gradual drip feed” of clarity that occurred over the course of eighteen months, a process he describes as “a new call, not my first call.” Though this may sound strange to some, it illustrates Miller’s goal: to transform the way that Christians think of work.

Miller stresses the important role clergy have in helping their congregations bridge the faith and work divide. “I think even the most humbling of work, the most difficult of work, can serve God’s greater purposes,” says Miller. “We in the ordained clergy need to help [parishioners] interpret that, not to mollify them.” Miller points out that though seminaries train their graduates to minister to people in hospice care, they seldom teach church leaders how to minister to CEOs, businesspersons, or anyone struggling to integrate faith and work in the midst of a fragmented life. For a CEO, integration might mean something as simple as making a conference room available to employees for prayer or meditation, or creating a safe space for faith to be discussed. Miller refers to this as sending a “meta-message” as a corporate leader that “it’s okay to be religious.” For others, incorporating faith and work might mean mentioning weekend worship services during the workweek.

Miller’s concern is one that many in contemporary American culture aren’t accustomed to thinking about. But all that’s changing. The faith and work movement is growing, and Miller finds himself at the center of the field. At Princeton University Miller’s tasks are threefold. In addition to his position as founding director of the Faith and Work Initiative, he researches and writes on the way theological and ethical issues intersect with the workplace, contributions



Photo: Daniel Escher

that are helping to grow the field. He also teaches in the Religion Department, where one of his courses, Business Ethics and Modern Religious Thought, gives Miller the opportunity to “get students thinking at twenty years old about questions I never thought about until my late thirties.”

One of his aims is to teach young students, whatever their faith, to make it a priority to work in or run their business in a “God-pleasing” way. In this vein, Miller is clear that work as a calling isn’t just about what one does. He sees work as the “connecting point between worship and service, God and neighbor,” whether one is employed as a CEO, a teacher, a minister, or in a supermarket bagging groceries. Guided by the concept of *avodah*, Miller knows that spiritual calls aren’t limited to pastors. And despite his emphasis on the workplace, Miller is quick to point out that any discussion of call that ends with the workplace is truncated. Ultimately, “calls” are more than just occupations; how one engages work is just as important as the work itself. For Miller, both can be forms of worship.

Those interested in learning more about issues of faith and work are encouraged to explore Miller’s book, *God at Work*, email David Miller at dwm@princeton.edu, or visit the Faith and Work Initiative web site, <http://faithandwork.princeton.edu>. ❁