

Faith in the workplace Working with God

By Linda Thomas

Along with coffee and briefcases, more people are taking their religious beliefs with them to work.

The most recent national study on faith (Baylor University, Sept. 2006) found 90 percent of Americans have ties to a congregation, denomination, or faith group. Of those surveyed, 48 percent said they talked about their religion at work.

And while it would have been difficult to find a conference on spirituality in the workplace five years ago, more than 30 are scheduled throughout country this year.

Meet three local Catholics whose faith intersects with their professions:



Tomás Guillen (top left) , author of three books based on his investigative reporting, is an associate professor at Seattle University. He

believes journalists must be fair and objective, but they can also be compassionate.

Q13 FOX News meteorologist, M.J. McDermott (top right), says her Catholic faith influences the way she values and respects television viewers.

Attorney Michael Patterson (right) says successful businesses treat their people fairly and have a "faith-based belief in what is fundamentally right."



Tomás Guillen

“Faith has kept me alive all these years. I wouldn’t get far without it.”

Tomás Guillen cussed at God when he was a little boy growing up in Texas.

Life was tough. He endured beatings, gangs, racism, and “cruel, ugly people.”

Guillen’s grandmother raised him and beat him. “She worked us to death and beat me with sticks hard enough to rip my head open,” he said.

Although his childhood was dysfunctional, at best, Guillen credits his grandmother for two things – his strong work ethic and a foundation in the Catholic faith.

He eventually realized humans were to blame for pain and suffering, not God. Instead of getting angry at God, one day he remembered a Bible passage “ask, and ye shall receive,” and he began to pray.

Guillen prayed he would be able to learn to read and write English; Spanish was his first language. He prayed to become articulate so he wouldn't have to be a migrant farm worker all his life. He prayed he would get into college. After he earned scholarships to the University of Arizona, he continued to work hard and prayed that he would learn to write as well as the other journalism students could.

It would seem his prayers were more than answered.

The little boy from El Paso grew up to become an award-winning Seattle Times reporter and a New York Times best-selling author. He earned a master's degree from the University of Washington and is now an associate professor at Seattle University, teaching journalism classes.

"Considering all the obstacles I've been through, I'm sure God is directing me," he said. "I thank Him every day for what He's done."

Guillen has always been mindful that not everyone shares his beliefs. He doesn't push his faith; he lives it.

Over the years he approached stories in a "humanistic, loving" way. That was a challenge considering his Seattle Times beat was crime. Guillen was the first reporter to cover the Green River murders – which began in 1982 and ended with the 2003 conviction of Gary Ridgeway, who admitted to killing at least 48 women.

"At so many crime scenes you look into the eyes of victims' families and you see they're hurting," he said. "You want to get the story and be fair, but that doesn't mean you can't hold someone's hand for a few seconds and give them comfort."

He teaches his students at Seattle University to be critical thinkers and objective reporters. He also reminds them they can be compassionate.

M.J. McDermott

"Catholic values are a part of who I am. They show in the way I treat people with respect."

What's an out-of-work, 40-year-old mother of twin baby boys to do? After "soul searching," M.J. McDermott decided to get a degree from the University of Washington in atmospheric sciences and become a television meteorologist.

In some ways her career path has been one leap of faith after another.

She was an "Air Force brat" who grew up in several different cities and landed in the Washington D.C. area. She started as a physics major in college and finished with a degree in theater.

McDermott jumped into acting in New York. She had some success and even acted in a scene with Susan Lucci on the soap opera "All My Children." She moved to Seattle, continued to pursue acting, and won an Emmy Award for a children's show she hosted with a raccoon puppet named Roscoe.

After the birth of her sons – who are now approaching middle school age – McDermott chose to study meteorology, not knowing whether she'd get a job in the competitive local TV market afterwards.

"I hadn't done much television, so I thought 'I'm just going to enjoy the journey,'" she said.

The journey has taken her to Q13 FOX News, where she's the weather anchor for their "News This Morning" program.

"No one's ever told me this, but I believe my number one duty as a meteorologist is to keep people safe and to keep them comfortable," McDermott said. "I take that responsibility seriously."

Occasionally she'll refer to her faith. During one of the "day ahead" TV segments, which highlight events coming up, she mentioned a Catholic holy day.

"I'll just throw out there that it's All Saints Day or something like that and I've gotten e-mails from viewers who thank me for being the only one on TV who ever brings up Catholicism," she said.

More often, McDermott's faith is expressed in her work ethic. She promises to respond to each e-mail she receives – sometimes 200 a day. And she builds a sense of community by acknowledging viewers who call with weather tips, or putting photos they submit on TV.

“People tell me it's icy in Shelton, or foggy in Morton, or whatever the case,” McDermott said, “in my own little way I try to let people know they are valued.”

Michael Patterson

“People who compartmentalize work from faith are missing a grand opportunity to make a difference.”

When he was a teenager, Michael Patterson started thinking about how he could “make a difference” in the world.

He thought about becoming a priest and studied in the seminary, but realized that wasn't his calling. He then decided to apply his “faith and efforts to the legal arena.”

Patterson graduated magna cum laude from Gonzaga University, earned his J.D. degree (Juris Doctor, Latin for “teacher of law”) from Notre Dame, and received his master's degree from New York University. Now, with about 100 legal cases behind him, he is a senior shareholder and litigation attorney with the Seattle-based firm of Lee, Smart, Cook, Martin & Patterson.

Perhaps it's a coincidence, but Patterson noted that a number of employees at his firm are also Catholic.

“You can not operate a good business today and treat people fairly without having a faith based belief in what is fundamentally right,” he said.

Patterson's religion was challenged when he handled cases involving sexual abuse claims against the Archdiocese of Seattle.

“The cases concern a small minority of individuals who chose not to follow canon law, let alone ethical and moral laws,” he said. “I believe it's inappropriate to let individuals, who were out of line, taint an organization that is more than 2000 years old.”

If anything, he said the process of settling such cases has strengthened his faith.

He added, "When you walk out of church each Sunday, the reality is you're not walking out of the presence of God no matter where you go."