WITH ALL THE TWISTS AND TURNS that led to his vocation, Chuck Proudfit might never have gotten there without the quest for more efficient toilet paper.

He was fresh out of college working for Procter & Gamble at the time. The company had scooped up the gifted entrepreneur after he graduated from Harvard. Proudfit had already launched a laser-printing business when he was a sophomore, selling it to Harvard upon graduation. Now he was on the fast track in the Cincinnati headquarters of Procter & Gamble. And one of his first jobs was to oversee a project whose objective was to fit fewer sheets on a toilet paper roll.

And then, he says, he had “a meltdown.” Surely, he thought, there was more to life.

He pursued that “more” while he advanced in the business world over the next decade. That journey included running a large division of the Gallo wine empire on the West Coast, then returning to Ohio as a high-level manager for LensCrafters. All the while, he was reading voraciously about the major religions, searching for the truth.

He finally discovered it, he says, in Christ. But that wasn’t enough. Proudfit says he was eager to “apply my new faith to every area of my life, including my work.” But when he looked around in his church for guidance, he was stymied.

“The local church doesn’t deal much with everyday realities for the working people in the pews,” he laments. So, “more out of exasperation than inspiration,” Proudfit founded the Cincinnati-based marketplace ministry At Work on Purpose (awop).

That awop formed independently of the church is common, says Princeton University scholar David W. Miller. Author of God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement, Miller notes that most marketplace ministries “have formed outside the authority, involvement, or impetus of the church.” What is uncommon is awop’s holistic approach to integrating faith and work among its 5,000-plus members in the Cincinnati metro area. It’s moving past a narrow focus on workplace evangelism to include ethics, social responsibility, and citywide engagement—a model that more marketplace ministries are replicating across the nation.

MORE THAN CUBICLE EVANGELISM

According to Miller, most marketplace ministries since the 1980s have focused on personal integration. And most model one of four ways of integrating faith and work, what he calls the four Es:

• Evangelism, training members in sharing their faith with
co-workers, launching Bible studies, or bringing in Christian chaplains for the company.

- **Ethics**, providing encouragement and accountability to businesspeople to help them maintain biblical standards of behavior. A few go beyond this to addressing broader ethical issues at the “mezzo” or corporate level and the “macro” or societal level.
- **Enrichment**, including “healing, prayer, meditation, consciousness, transformation, and self-actualization.”
- **Experience**, in which groups tackle questions of vocation, calling, meaning, and purpose, and help members explore both the intrinsic and extrinsic value of work.

But one weakness of today’s faith and work movement, says Miller, is that not enough ministries provide a robust, comprehensive integration that incorporates all four Es.

**awop** is trying to. It is ahead of many marketplace ministries in its size and focus on everything from evangelism to advancing positive reforms in industrial sectors to mobilizing marketplace leaders for citywide transformation. According to researcher Jason Benedict, strategist at Regent University’s Center for Entrepreneurship in Virginia Beach, Virginia, **awop** “provides one of the nation’s most comprehensive approaches to marketplace ministry.” Portland, Little Rock, and Jacksonville have similar initiatives, Benedict reports, but these “don’t seem to be as large or as well organized as Cincinnati.”

Launching in 2003, **awop**’s first mission was to help Christians throughout metro Cincinnati bridge the faith and work divide, offering Bible study and prayer groups for likeminded businesspeople. But Proudfit wanted **awop** to bridge other divides as well. “This is a city filled with divisions,” he says. “We have the Catholic-Protestant divide and the African American–Caucasian divide.” He and his team have worked hard to recruit diverse participants. Currently **awop**’s membership is a “slice of Cincinnati at large,” drawing white, black, and Hispanic participants from evangelical, Catholic, and mainline backgrounds.

**awop** also hosts monthly executive roundtables, helping owners and upper-management leaders initiate positive change in their workplaces. **awop** member Terry Grear, owner of Grear & Company accounting firm, says **awop** has given him a comprehensive view of employee care. His business offers flextime and sponsors family events. “My son played high-school tennis for four years—and that’s during tax season. I never missed a match,” says Grear. “My employees are encouraged to do exactly the same thing, and rarely
do they miss their family events.” Twice in recent years, his company has been named the Cincinnati Business Courier’s “Best Place to Work” in the small firms category. AWOP also inspired Grear to host the UK-based Alpha course at his firm. Rarely is the popular “exploring Christianity” course conducted in a workplace.

Proudfit also hopes participants bring about positive reforms in their particular industry, not just their workplace. He points to AWOP members Will and Ez Housh as examples.

Will Housh is the CEO of Monroe Mechanical, a family-owned heating and air conditioning firm operating in Cincinnati for three generations. Housh says AWOP “has reinforced our philosophy of stewardship and encouraged us to go even further, not just financial stewardship but also environmental stewardship.” Will’s father, Ez, has provided leadership and company resources to birth the Greensource Design Center. The four-story, 1875 row house sits within walking distance of several downtown architectural and engineering firms. Housh’s team completely renovated the structure, retaining historic design elements while incorporating over 50 innovative “green” technologies. Greensource, says Will, now serves as a showcase for industry professionals wanting to learn how to build more sustainably: “It’s basically a living, breathing trade show.”

AWOP currently has members in each of Cincinnati’s 52 neighborhoods, which has allowed for new, practical outreach to the city’s poor and unemployed. For example, in 2009, AWOP partnered with Job Search Focus Group, a veteran Cincinnati nonprofit, to add 22 additional support groups for the unemployed.

AWOP member Bob Pautke was at the center of the effort. “When the 2008 recession hit,” Pautke says, “I found myself getting all these phone calls from churches saying, ‘We have members who are being laid off, downsized.’ Our vision was to establish enough networking and support groups so that every unemployed person could find one within a 15-minute drive from home.” AWOP also helped implement the Career Achievement Network, a website linking the unemployed with jobs.

Today AWOP’s leaders actively encourage geographically based teams to bring together marketplace leaders, who in turn develop their own ideas for bringing health to their communities. “To me,” Proudfit says, “this is right out of what the apostles did in Acts 4. They would find out what the needs were and distribute resources.”

To date, AWOP has been most active in Colerain, a low-income community on Cincinnati’s west side. Pastor Paula Bussard and her husband lead New Hope Ministries there. “Colerain Township was one of the areas hardest hit by the recession,” Bussard reports. “We have the highest number of foreclosures.”

A few years ago, a local zoning official approached Bussard. “She told us that many homes had fallen out of compliance with local ordinances—grass being too high, front porches in disrepair,” says Bussard. “City inspectors were writing more and more citations, and home owners were calling her office daily in hysterics, worried about being fined or jailed.” Bussard turned to AWOP, where she had friends from many different churches. She asked them to join her small congregation in serving Colerain neighbors by completing home repairs. Soon, business owners in the AWOP network were sending employees out on “community service days” to offer professional services, such as tax preparation, pro bono.
WELL-ROUNDED WORKERS

AWOP’s holistic focus may represent the positive future of the marketplace ministry movement. Since 2008, Eric Welch of Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) has been helping to facilitate an informal network of 20 large marketplace ministries (those with a presence in at least 10 U.S. cities), including Fellowship of Companies for Christ International, C12, Convene, the Christian Business Men’s Connection, Corporate Chaplains of America, Cru, and Pinnacle Forum, among others.

In the spirit of Miller’s four Es, Welch has created a list of seven types of faith-work integration practiced by these ministries. These include evangelism, ethics, and calling, but go beyond to the recognition “that the work itself matters, and is part of God’s mission in the world when done with God and for God.” Network members are also focusing increasingly on how their ministries can help Christians contribute to the well being of their companies and cities. “These groups are more well rounded, more holistic, than many people realize,” says Welch. “They affirm and encourage the gospel’s impact on individuals, relationships, work, institutions, and communities. They have a strong desire to work with local churches.”

One aim of the network is to nurture collaboration among the different organizations in the cities where they are located. And no city has more marketplace ministries than Orange County, California, says Ron Henry, who facilitates a coalition of 18 workplace ministries there. Over five years, he’s gathered the ministries to support each other and transform their company cultures and the greater Orange County region, one of immense wealth and cultural influence through the entertainment and technology industries.

“The new marketplace ministries that God has been raising up have a distinctly kingdom mindset,” says Henry, president of Sterling Group. “With the position of influence comes great responsibility, of being ‘a priest of your business.’ They understand that business is a vehicle to touch lives.”

Lee Truax and the Christian Business Men’s Connection (cbmc), a member of Welch’s marketplace network, understand this. With member chapters in several states and countries, cbmc has been “very much hand to the plow” for most of its 83-year history, says Truax, gathering businessmen for discipleship and networking. More recently, though, cbmc chapters have stressed excellence, a theology of generosity, and collaboration with like-minded groups—not just business as a means to evangelism, but as a worthy end in itself.

“In some ways you don’t have a right to say if you’re a follower of Jesus if you’re a lousy businessman,” says Truax, CEO of cbmc for three years. “Christian businessmen should be equal to the most excellent businessmen, doing work with high ethical standards. That should speak first” over overt evangelism in the marketplace.

Back in Cincinnati, Proudfit says that although AWOP has gotten some 5,000 people involved, they have barely scratched the surface. Cincinnati’s unemployment rate is higher than Ohio’s overall, and hits double digits in several distressed neighborhoods. Relations between the races have improved somewhat since the riots of 2001, but “progress is slow,” according to a recent report from Better Together Cincinnati, a community organization established after the riots. “Social Areas of Cincinnati,” a report by the University of Cincinnati, laments that the high-school dropout rate approaches 40 to 50 percent, with some 32 neighborhoods posting rates of over 50 percent. Proudfit sees “opportunities everywhere” for believers to direct their vocational talents for city transformation. “The resources are there. They just have to be redeployed.”

BRINGING WORK BACK TO CHURCH

In the meantime, a new initiative is helping pastors better understand faith-work integration and encourage their church members’ entrepreneurial gifts.

Since 2008, Stephen Grabill of the Acton Institute and Scott Rae of Biola University’s Talbot School of Theology have helped launch a multiyear initiative that help seminars train pastors to understand and promote a holistic view of work and vocation. The Oikonomia Network is a “learning community” that “equips future pastors to cultivate biblical wisdom in how believers do their work and participate in the economy.”

The network includes Grabill, Rae, and seminary professors and administrators from over two dozen evangelical institutions, including Talbot, Azusa Pacific, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Reformed Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Seminary, and Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, among others. Oikonomia introduces curricular reforms, trains seminary professors on work and economics, and encourages new initiatives to help seminarians and local pastors improve their teaching and preaching on vocation.

At Talbot, for example, students take a required course on vocation, and they are required to interview marketplace professionals at their workplaces. Rae says, “Our goal is to equip pastors to affirm work as an arena of service to God that isn’t ‘second-tier’ and to begin developing a strong theology of work.”

When clergy fail to affirm the value of marketplace vocations, Rae laments, laypeople end up “feeling like they are doing something ‘less than’ for God’s kingdom in their workplaces, as compared to preachers and missionaries. We have unwittingly recreated a hierarchy of callings/vocations.”

Oikonomia Network, say Grabill, helps members see the connections between faith, work, and economics, and how they are core to mature Christian discipleship. “When the church and the seminaries are genuinely ‘on mission’—the missio Dei—they help future pastors and faithful Christians grasp their role in God’s economy of all things,” he says. “These institutions train people to live out a robust integration that orients their life in the world, for the world.”

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