

September 9, 2006

Religion Journal; In Search of Common Ground? Get Thee to a Nunnery

By MAREK FUCHS

The combatants had all but poked their fingers into each other's eyes over the years, at town-hall meetings and in public discussions held by regulatory agencies.

The debate between Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which runs the Indian Point nuclear power plant on the Hudson River in Buchanan, N.Y., and the environmental group Riverkeeper seemed to be going nowhere. Stances were solidified, distrust was deep.

But when the call came to an Entergy spokesman to have yet another debate with his biggest nemesis -- this one at a convent in Putnam County -- how could he refuse?

"Without an obvious, automatic reason to say yes, I thought about it," said Jim Steets, the Entergy spokesman and the plant's most visible public face. "And even after I said yes, I thought about it. But the religious aspect to the setting and the participants led me to believe it was the right thing to do."

Mr. Steets added that although he had assumed opponents of the plant would far outnumber supporters, he was confident the religious setting would keep the debate tame.

The two sides met in late July at the Mariandale Retreat Center, founded by the Dominican Sisters. The event was organized by the Rev. Patricia Ackerman, an Episcopal priest from the Garrison Institute, a conference-and-retreat center at a nearby former monastery.

Elsewhere in the United States, monasteries, convents and religious camps have been opening their doors to business mediation and strategy retreats, providing a neutral ground more conducive to long-term thought and cooperation than the office or a hotel conference room.

Sally Simmel, the president of Narda, formerly the North American Retreat Directors Association, said the number of religious retreats catering in some form to businesses was in the "low hundreds."

Ms. Simmel said the reluctance to link business and religion began to lessen about five years ago. "The whole question of public conversation about religion became less of a no-no," she said, "which has opened things up in good and not-so-good ways."

"It makes some sense that it started around the time that Bush came into office," she said, "but the spread of technology at work has also led to a desire on business's part to find places of tranquillity."

Another factor is that many religious orders are losing membership and must look to the outside for support. Many communities have vast buildings on their grounds that lend themselves to contemplation -- of the biblical or business kind. Retreat camps have similar space advantages and are often in rural settings, making them good alternatives to hotel conference rooms.

At a time when business people are plugged into electronic devices much of the day, holding meetings in throwback settings may be conducive to better listening.

Rebecca S. Chopp, president of Colgate University and a former religion professor who has led business retreats in religious settings, said the long arc of religious thought could add to business perspectives, which tend to be shorter term.

"It's the wisdom of the centuries," Dr. Chopp said.

"The value structure is completely different," she said, adding that in a religious setting, "people are not prized for what they produce."

Instead, Dr. Chopp said, "the fundamental aspect of much of religion is the notion of paying full attention," of giving one's mind over.

That serves as an antidote to most traditional business settings.

Lynn Salata, a frequent retreat leader and former General Motors employee, said that the smaller and more entrepreneurial the company, the more apt its members were to attend some form of meeting at a religious retreat.

The Rev. James F. David and his wife, the Rev. Marie S. David, operate the Evensong by the Sea Ecumenical Retreat and Spirituality Center in Harwich Port, Mass., which caters to smaller, often nonprofit groups. The center has 10 rooms that can accommodate two people each.

Affiliated with the Ecumenical Catholic Church, the center, which opened in 2002, was intended to encourage participants to get into "the rhythm of prayer," Ms. David said, whether or not they were actively religious. Part of that means distancing themselves from the markers of their usual life. Meals are cooked and served on the grounds as part of a strategy to provide a quiet, worry-free environment in which participants might be more willing to listen to one another.

Lisa Rainwater, who runs the Indian Point campaign for Riverkeeper, said something was gained from meeting in a religious setting.

In the serene atmosphere -- with a chime sounding after each speaker to indicate the need for 30 seconds of silence -- she found herself thinking more about what Mr. Steets said than she otherwise would have.

And though Ms. Rainwater did not change her opposition to the plant, she said she left with a better appreciation of Mr. Steets.

"I always wondered if he was really sincere," she said, "And listening to him talk -- and hearing his passion, I did know that he is really doing what he believes."

Mr. Steets said that, in the end, the discussion did not differ too much from more secular ones. But considering the setting and participants, he said, he would be open to more talk.