

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog 
READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

-  EMAIL
-  PRINT
-  SHARE

Article: [Social Entrepreneurship](#)

Work and prayer

Trappist monks become entrepreneurs. Brothers at a monastery in Missouri run a business enterprise while also dedicating their lives to God.

by [Melanie Ave](#)

July 7, 2009

A bell rings at 3:30 a.m., summoning the Trappist monks to begin their day. They gather, dressed in long white robes, to pray in a brick chapel nestled in the Ozark Mountains.

Behind the chapel, in a stand-alone, 5,000-square-foot bakery, the day's work awaits. In between their seven prayer sessions, the Assumption Abbey monks bake and ship 25,000 rum-soaked fruitcakes each year.

As they pray, the fruitcake batter is ready to be mixed and baked. Cakes baked the day before sit on racks, ready to be decorated, packaged and stored.

The 10 monks are called to a life of prayer in one of the country's most secluded monasteries. But they could not live out their calling without work.

It's a tension the Assumption Abbey monks face daily. Like many who work in Christian organizations, they must bring in income while staying focused on their spiritual mission. The contrast is clear and stark here, where the monks live by the work of their hands. For nearly 60 years, keeping enough money coming in has been a struggle that has required creativity and discernment.

One example: They recently hired a business manager who analyzes customer demographics to market their product. Yet they've refused opportunities that would have offered too much business. Such decisions make their business venture more vulnerable, but it is their choice.

Prayer takes precedence over baking.

[More On This Topic](#)

[Multimedia](#)

[Slideshow: Work and prayer »](#)

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?
Follow our content on
your choice of a variety of
formats, including [e-newsletters](#),
[RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#)
and [iTunes](#).



GO

“The question is: What kind of work should monks do to find enough money to keep body and soul together?” said Notre Dame theology professor Lawrence Cunningham, who edited the writings of one of the most famous Trappist monks, Thomas Merton. “What they don’t want to do is make a living working 10-, 12-hour days.”

Questions to consider:

- How does the phrase, “they could not live out their calling without work” help you think about the intersection of your daily work and spiritual life?
- What are the creative gifts that have surfaced within your organization amidst the struggle of keeping enough money coming in?
- What kind of “friend-raising” could your religious organization think about in this economic climate?

Aprons and albs

By 6 a.m., the monks walk a dirt path to the bakery. Inside, a note by the light switch reads, “Please observe the monastic silence in the bakery at all times.”

They slip aprons over their albs inside the commercial-style kitchen, which has one large oven, a walk-in freezer and a storage room. A crucifix hangs high on one wall.

One recent morning, the assigned chief baker for the day, Brother Lazarus, a former highway patrolman, filled 125 pans with batter from a large mixer. A long blue apron covered his clothing and a hair net surrounded his long black beard.

When he finished, lay employee Michael Hampton smoothed the tops of the pans, which were brimming with the chunky, fruit-laced batter.

On the other side of the kitchen, Father Juston, a short friendly man with a knack for growing roses, brushed a syrupy glaze atop cooled cakes after infusing them with rum. By afternoon, a handful of monks had decorated each cake with four red and green cherries and four pecan pieces. A hermit monk, who lives by himself on the abbey’s property, inspects each pecan piece for imperfections.

The monks work slowly, with precision and focus. Although they don’t take a formal vow, they are mostly silent. They bake between four and five hours a day, five days a week, every month of the year except January, to prepare for the busy Christmas season.

They work in shifts around prayer, usually in groups of three or four. Each monk in the bakery has a task each day, whether it be mixing batter or marinating fruit in wine. They pack finished cakes in white tin cans and then in plain white cardboard boxes with a simple line drawing of a monk. Finally, before they are shipped, the monks pray over pallets of packaged cakes.

They earn more than \$700,000 a year, largely from fruitcake sales. They also make money selling

timber and from donations from guest house visitors. The monks' goal is to break even, giving 10 percent to charity and saving to renovate their aging guest house and chapel.

"We're not in this business to make money," said Brother Francis, the monastery's vocation director. "We do fruitcake work to support ourselves, which allows us to live the life of a monk."

Monks as entrepreneurs

The sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict, which guides their life, encourages manual labor. It proclaims idleness as an enemy to the soul. That hasn't been a problem for the Assumption Abbey monks -- circumstances have repeatedly pushed them to be entrepreneurs.

The monastery was established in 1950 in Ava, Mo., by a group from the New Melleray Abbey in Iowa, on about 3,400 donated acres in southwestern Missouri. It is one of about 17 communities in North America of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, or Trappists. The abbey is a simple brick and block structure, surrounded by trees. Although conducive to spiritual pursuits, the isolated, rugged terrain has made it difficult to make a living.

"This land is hills and hollers and rocks and very little pasture," said Father Cyprian, the monastery's acting superior and abbot emeritus. "Our options were very limited."

They tried the traditional monastic enterprise of farming, but the land wasn't cooperative. They made handmade concrete blocks until a recession hit and a competitor with an automated technique essentially put them out of business.

For a year, the monks tried to come up with an alternative. Monasteries around the world are known for the goods they produce, which include everything from cheese to caskets to beer; one in Wisconsin sells ink and toner cartridges.

The monks at Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, which had been selling bourbon-laced fruitcakes for years, encouraged the Missouri monks also to go into the market.

Chef Jean-Pierre Auge, who once worked for the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, helped come up with a recipe that includes wine-soaked fruit and raisins. Each cake bakes at three different temperatures over two hours and is aged at least 60 days. The result is a rich, dark, moist fruitcake that smells of rum.

For 22 years, the monks have sold the cakes to individuals, grocery stores and companies.

Fruitcake works well with their schedule, since the baking process is relatively simple and routine. The mixing and baking allows the monks to clear their minds and focus on prayer. But even this simple routine poses challenges, especially during these tough economic times.

They were forced by rising production costs to raise the price from \$28 to \$29.50. And the business experienced a sharp decline three years ago after Williams-Sonoma Inc., its biggest client, decided to sell the cakes by catalogue and on the internet, not in stores. This came after the monastery's best sales year ever, when they sold 32,000 cakes.

They are now selling the cakes themselves online from their website, www.trappistmonks.com. Last year, they sold out, but they won't know about this year's sales until October, when holiday sales start mounting.

'The Holy Spirit directs all actions'

Like any businessmen, the monks have been trying to make up for the lost revenue. In March, they hired Michael Melton, a former plant manager, as their cellarer, similar to a business manager.

Melton, who is Catholic, says God brought him to the abbey to help the monks.

"The abbot makes all decisions and I only act on his directive," Melton said. "While I attempt to make all processes better, it is the Holy Spirit that directs all actions needed."

One project on his to-do list is developing a long-term budget for the monastery. He is projecting

revenues five to 10 years out while considering the aging population. (The youngest monk is 46; the oldest 87. The only monk who doesn't participate in the fruitcake business is in a local nursing home.)

Melton is also spearheading the marketing effort with a goal of increasing sales by about 5,000 cakes a year.

"It's really at this point a word-of-mouth operation," said Melton. "We've just now started reaching out."

Melton studied six years of sales data and compared it to states with large Catholic populations – an obvious target. His analysis showed, for example, that there were few fruitcakes being sold in Rhode Island, despite its population of more than 600,000 Catholics.

"I thought, 'Hmm. That's interesting,'" Melton recalled thinking after looking at the numbers. "Why don't these people know about us?"

So he sent some sample cakes to the bishop there and asked if he could help spread the word. Delaware and Maine are the next target states, along with a possible direct-mail campaign. He's pondering sending a postcard to the 1 million or so Catholics in the St. Louis area.

William Enright, director of the Indianapolis-based Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, said marketing to fellow Catholics makes sense.

"Their higher mission is dependent on their fundraising," he said. "If they don't raise the funds, they can't carry out their mission."

"They're focusing on their religious constituencies as a base for their marketing," he said.

That could be a smart move, especially given the limping economy.

"Religious giving for people of faith is their top priority," Enright said. "It's where they give the largest percent of their charitable dollars. In a time of recession that giving is not likely to be the first reduced. It might be the last to be reduced."

For a religious organization, marketing can offer other benefits as well. Brother Geoffrey Fecht, development director with St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., said fundraising for monks is sometimes viewed as "friend raising." By asking people to donate or purchase goods, they are being invited to participate in the lives of the monks and help them help others, he said.

"Encouraging others to buy fruitcakes, as is the case at Assumption Abbey ... allows these monks to do their ministry -- hospitality, prayer, outreach, or whatever it is that they do in service of the Lord and the church," Fecht said. "Letting others participate allows these others an avenue to help, to be charitable themselves."

As the brothers look to the future, they are looking at more innovations, possibly including a new product. A Springfield, Mo.-based chocolate company is helping them develop recipes for a chocolate fruitcake bar.

"It's kind of an experimental idea," Father Cyprian said. "In one way, it's good just having the fruitcake industry for self-support. It keeps things real simple.

"But it's also a little risky to keep you eggs in one business. If we could find a second industry or product ... it would make more sense."

Growing, but not too much

But even as they seek to grow their business, the monks have to consider something that most businesses never do: They want to make sure they don't sell too many fruitcakes.

"We can't do anything to upset the order of the way the brothers work," Melton said. "We have to be careful of that."

Father Cyprian tells the story how, about 15 years ago, he got a call from the military, asking if the monks could supply fruitcake to the armed forces.

“There was no way,” he said. “We were just a small little outfit.”

If the monks received a request for thousands of fruitcakes, even now, they’d have to carefully decide, pray and discern whether they would want to pursue such growth, Melton said.

They could bake more cakes. But that’s not the issue.

“We don’t want to do that,” Brother Francis said. “We’re here to serve God and our brothers and sisters. Our little contribution is fruitcake.”