

Local business owners embrace Golden Rule

If you ask Jeff Padnos the basis of his business practice, he'll boil it down pretty quickly: Treat others the way you would like to be treated.

It's a sound philosophy, judging from the success of Louis Padnos Iron & Metal, the Holland-based recycling business of which Padnos is president. The company employs about 400 workers and has gotten national coverage as a family-owned firm since 1905.

It's also solid theology, a teaching that sweeps across time and many faiths. Padnos, a Jew, quotes the Jewish sage Hillel: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." But he also nods to the Christian version espoused by Jesus: "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

"I could easily wear a WWJD bracelet and act accordingly," Padnos told an interfaith gathering at Grand Valley State University recently. "If everyone did



CHARLES HONEY

COLUMNIST

that, the world would be a better place."

For him, following the ethics of his faith is good business, Padnos told close to 50 guests at an April 10 roundtable on religion and business. In laying out his company's commitment to treating its employees and the environment well, Padnos put forth a vision more companies should follow.

"Doing business right can be like applied religion," said Padnos, grandson of company founder Louis Padnos, a Russian immigrant. "Business is a noble way to apply religion."

Really? Success in business can go hand-in-hand with ethical religious principles? In an age of Wall Street avarice and a Grand Canyon-size gulf between the richest

Americans and everyone else, it's tempting to write off the whole "ethical business" idea as hopelessly naive.

But Padnos and two other area businessmen offered convincing testimonies that serving as an example of one's faith should come first when it comes to business. In fact, Padnos' Christian and Muslim co-panelists hit common ethical notes with remarkable consistency, adding refreshing voices to Grand Rapids' Year of Interfaith Understanding.

Fred Keller, founder and owner of Cascade Engineering, said he keeps in his pocket a quote from John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church to which Keller belongs: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can."

Keller said he aims to do so at Cascade, which has been recognized for its anti-racism

programs, welfare-to-career training and commitment to sustainability. His company's goal, he said, "is for every person to know they are valued."

He also has learned to be faithful through hardship in his private life, having lost his first wife to breast cancer when she was 42. Her death deepened his sense of God's presence and the need to live with urgency and purpose, he said.

"Is religion all about how we save ourselves, or is it all about how we make this a better world?" he challenged the group.

His firm has teamed up with Padnos to do its part, installing 15,000 square feet of solar panels atop Padnos' Wyoming scrap metal facility. Their cooperation stems from their fathers' business dealings with each other many years ago.

Dr. Mohammad Saleh added the perspective of a Muslim physician who tries to reflect God's love in

how he treats each patient. Chairman of the Islamic Mosque and Religious Institute, Saleh said he tries to live as if God is watching his every move.

"When I deal with people, I say, 'My God is watching me every moment,'" Saleh said.

With so much agreement among the panelists, one audience member asked why so much attention is paid to religion's divisiveness. Keller ventured that the loudest voices from the fringes usually prevail, adding his faith needs more "radical moderates." Saleh agreed.

"The silent majority needs to speak up and start a dialogue with other religions," he said of his fellow Muslims.

In their modest way, these three did just that. And in its radically moderate way, so is West Michigan.

Email Mlive Media Group columnist Charles Honey at honeycharlesm@gmail.com or visit his blog at soulmailing.com.