

No place like home

In an effort to strengthen family ties, some Americans opt to stay put for work

BY JOCELYN GREEN

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Once upon a time home was considered the haven from the outside world, a respite from work, school and other activities. Anymore, however, that distinction is becoming obsolete as Americans bring the outside in.

Through telecommuting, home-based businesses, home churches and homeschooling, more and more of us are opting to stay home. Toward the end of the 20th century, futurist Faith Popcorn predicted this "cocooning" and called it one of the most significant trends of this era.

Last year, 49 percent of the nation's businesses were operated from home and 81 percent of human resource managers surveyed by outsourcing services firm Yoh have some form of telecommuting procedure.

A number of factors are driving the trend, including flexibility for employees, technologies such as wireless broadband and portable computers capable of remote access and, of course, gas prices. Last year, 22 million Americans worked from home at least once a week, according to the International Telework Association and Council.

Neil Gussman lives in Lancaster, Pa., and telecommutes three days

a week for his job at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia, 75 miles away. While the arrangement is a godsend for Gussman and his family, he also adamantly opposes the isolation from others that working from home can foster.

"My wife and I strongly believe that the benefit of my telecommuting is allowing us more time in our church community and the greater community," Gussman says. "We dislike the trend when it allows people to act as if they live out on a prairie in the middle of a community. Telecommuting, while I love it, can add to the opportunity to withdraw from the greater community and retreat into Christian-only groups."

With children ages 5 and 2, Nebraska resident Jill Hart is part of the burgeoning demographic she serves by running the largest Christian-based work-at-home Web site for moms, www.CWAHM.com.

Hart says she has noticed a surge in the past four years in parents who want to work from home.

"We want to raise our children ourselves, but need to contribute financially to make that happen," Hart says. "Many moms today are from a generation that grew up with moms

Lesley Spencer Pyle works from home, where she can be with her children, ages 10 and 12.



who worked. We want to know our kids, to be there for them day in and day out. And yet, working from home allows us the freedom to have something of our own, something to accomplish and something to be proud of."

Lesley Spencer Pyle, founder and president of the Home-Based Working Moms association (www.hbwm.com), offers a caution. The enthusiasm to launch a home-based business in order to be closer to family can end up exacting a price from the family.

"A common mistake married couples make is putting their marriages on autopilot when they start a home business," Pyle says. "We wrongly believe our marriages are strong, secure and don't need regular attention."

Pyle says she made such a mistake after she gave birth to her first child and started working from home. The home-based business takes more time to operate correctly than many would-be entrepreneurs realize and it can unwittingly become an all-consuming focus, she says.

"No matter the stage, marriages need nurturing, affection and attention," Pyle says. "I now turn

off my business when my children and spouse get home. It's vital to nurture your marriage relationship continually. It is important not to let children or business take precedence over spending time daily with your spouse."

Meanwhile, not leaving the living room for worship has become a recent trend in religion. George Barna calls the home church movement a growing revolution, estimating that 1 million Americans have permanently left conventional congregations to pursue Christian community in small groups, worshipping in homes or businesses. As many as 70 million Americans have "experimented" with a house church, and Barna predicts those numbers will only increase over time.

Todd Hudnall, pastor of Radiant Church, an Assemblies of God congregation in Colorado Springs, Colo., sees both positive and negative implications from the house church phenomenon. The biggest potential stumbling block is a lack of doctrinal accountability, Hudnall believes, but notes it as a sign of the larger trend toward cocooning.

"This cocooning phenomenon has implications for the Great Commission," Hudnall says. "Jesus

told His followers we were to be salt and light. But salt left in a saltshaker and light contained under a bucket will have no impact in the lives of others."

Hudnall says the greatest influence Christians can have on non-Christians is through personal relationships.

"As people cut themselves off from outside relationships, evangelism becomes much more problematic," Hudnall says. "The reality of more people confining their lives to their homes means the church has to be even more aggressive and creative in presenting the gospel through the mediums people access from their homes."

Homeschooling likewise continues to gain followers in the United States. Approximately 2 million students from kindergarten through 12th grade officially register with their states as homeschooled. But Homeschool.com estimates there are closer to 4 million students being educated at home.

While his own children attend public schools, Dave Goetz, author of *Death by Suburb*, affirms the great value of homeschooling: "As Christians, we have a huge responsibility to take our charge to develop our children, to guide our children to faith," he says.

And yet, when combining the opportunities to work, educate and conduct church at home, Goetz points to the danger of isolation.

"Just because people are focusing on the home doesn't mean they are focusing on the right things," Goetz says. "It could be a form of narcissism, a way of escaping the world. Part of training kids to have a healthy view of the world is to have them engage in the world. That doesn't mean you should not send kids to Christian schools. But there's a problem if the home is used to escape from and avoid the very world God wants us to disciple." **tpe**

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