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Business owners rely on faith to lead, shape their firms

Christian-based Nashville franchise brings together business executives, owners for networking, coaching

Nashville Business Journal - by [Eric Snyder](#) Nashville Business Journal

Kevin Mack and his wife Shauna had some questions when they bought Murfreesboro-based **Alco Products**, a sign and graphics company, in October 2007.

The C12 Group, a Christian-based business roundtable for CEOs and business owners, is providing some answers.

"We had been looking to do something together, and as Christians, we wanted to do something in a way that it honored Christ," said Mack, former mayor of Mt. Juliet. "We did not know what that looked like."

In many ways, how businesses and CEOs practice their faith at work is subjective; what may work or be appropriate at one company may not fit at another. But one lesson stressed across the board by C12, which opened a Nashville chapter in March, is that someone doesn't change their beliefs when they enter the workplace.

"You can't be one person on the weekend, and another person Monday through Friday," said Troy Blackmon, owner and chairman of the Nashville C12 Group, which partly bills itself as a board of directors for small- to mid-sized companies. The 'C,' by the way, refers to Christ, and '12' to his 12 disciples.

Blackmon, who moved to Nashville in August, most recently worked in Chattanooga where he was running a few technology companies for a private investor. He considered joining Vistage, a well-known CEO roundtable where membership can run \$1,300 a month. However, he said he walked away from a meeting underwhelmed.

"When you don't share a common world vision with your peers, the advice and counsel you get can really be all over the place," Blackmon said.

He eventually discovered the C12 Group, founded in Tampa 18 years ago and now based in Greensboro, N.C. He inquired about joining as a member, but found there were no chapters in Tennessee. When C12 asked if he'd be interested in starting a Tennessee chapter, he initially wasn't. Eventually, though, Blackmon said God led him to reconsider.

The Middle Tennessee chapter now has three owner groups, comprising a total of 23 people, and a "key players" group consisting of seven members from C12 firms' upper-management teams.

Participating companies aren't in the business of hawking religion; rather, they include sign companies like Alco or print management companies like Laser One. Said Blackmon, "Religion is not the product."

There are a few things that C12 is not.

The first is nonprofit. Blackmon owns the Middle Tennessee chapter as a franchise. Membership dues for business owners are based on company revenue, but range from \$575 to \$975 per month. According to the Greensboro office, there are 75 groups — all franchises — in 55 U.S. metro areas.

Nor is it a Bible study group.

"If you want a Bible study, there are plenty of them out there. We are about running great companies for a greater purpose," said Blackmon.

Steve Hayes, a senior partner and founder of the **Human Capital Group**, said he was a doubter. Not in the existential "what does it all mean?" sense, but in the "should my money go to C12?" sense.

"I just didn't think the substance was going to be great," Hayes said. Regardless, he attended one of the group's monthly meetings, essentially an all-day affair, lasting seven hours.

"Within two hours, I knew that's where I needed to be," he said. In addition to monthly meetings, held at various country clubs, members also sit down one-on-one for an hour to 90 minutes with Blackmon.

Blackmon said today's troubled economy gives companies a chance to prove they operate with Christ-like principles.

For example, when the bank calls wondering about sales projections, do you tell them the truth or what they want to hear? Mack, of Alco, said it's changed how he looks at debt collection or legal conflicts, reminding him of the virtue of patience.



James Yates | Nashville Business Journal

Micah Barnes, left, Kevin Mack and Scott Stapp work at Alco Products, a sign maker in Murfreesboro. Mack said he leads his business with Christian-based principles.

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In some cases, running a Christ-like business is more explicit than “doing the right thing.” At Alco, Mack said they will pray during business meetings, even when meeting with others.

“People appreciate the fact that we’re willing to share our faith, even if they don’t agree with it,” he said.

Said Hayes, “A business leader has the opportunity to affect a lot of lives.”

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