



## CEOs of faith

**From chambers of commerce to a CEO council, there's no shortage of organizations for Tampa Bay area business leaders. But few have pursued their goals more quietly or more effectively than Christian-based C12, a national for-profit company founded in 1992 in the Tampa Bay area.**

By SCOTT BARANCIK, Times Staff Writer

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Bart Azzarelli Jr. is president of a Thonotosassa construction company. But his business card lists his title as "AFC." It means Ambassador for Christ.

Like other members of C12, a support group for born-again Christian CEOs, Azzarelli tries to operate his business as Jesus would. It means doing some things they don't teach at Harvard Business School, such as praying for his competitors, riffling through the New Testament for management tips and setting up his voice mail to wish callers a "Jesus-filled day."

It also means using his 128-employee company, Dallas 1 Construction & Development Inc., as a ministry. At lunchtime cookouts, Azzarelli and a hired chaplain serve up a meal of steak and salvation for his work crews and urge them to commit to the Lord. He says the company has had 41 "salvations" of employees this year.

"That is one of my long-range goals," Azzarelli says, "to have everyone in the company know Christ as their Lord and Savior."

From the area's chambers of commerce to the CEO Council of Tampa Bay, there's no shortage of organizations for Tampa Bay area business leaders. But few have pursued their goals more quietly or more effectively in recent years than C12, or Christian Twelve, a national for-profit company founded in 1992 in the bay area by former Apollo Beach resident Lester "Buck" Jacobs.

In a format patterned after Jesus and his 12 disciples, C12 members meet in groups of 12 to 15 for one full weekday a month to share business advice, discuss salvation strategies, air family problems. And pray. About 40 local chief executives belong to one of three C12 groups in the bay area. They range from restaurateur and former Tampa

Bay Buccaneers lineman Tom McHale to Kforce Inc. CEO Dave Dunkel, whose publicly traded staffing company in Tampa had revenues of \$514-million last year.

The local groups are among 22 C12 organizations across 11 states and Washington, D.C.

Dues range from \$450 to \$850 a month based on company size. At present, there are no female or minority CEOs in the bay area C12 groups, though local chairman Scott Hitchcock said they are welcome.

Jacobs, the founder, calls C12 an antidote to the self-indulgent binges that lately have landed more than a few CEOs in scandals, if not prison. C12 directly challenges the conventional wisdom that religion and the workplace don't mix, that for the sake of diversity and profit, the pieties of worship are best kept separate from the ruthless dictates of capitalism.

"It dovetails," Hitchcock said. "If you run the business with excellence and quality, then hopefully you will succeed. And part of succeeding is you'll employ more people and have more customers with which you can share the joy of Christ."

That blending of religion and commerce was on display at the November meeting of the C12 group whose members include Azzarelli.

During a segment in which members seek support through prayer, one participant asked that everyone pray for a difficult client of his whose checks had bounced. Another sought the strength to resist firing sales staff who were annoying him.

Later, Azzarelli sought advice on how to finance a \$500,000 equipment upgrade, adding his concern that the Bible frowns on borrowing money.

Morsels of advice shot out from all corners of the room: Always get a long-term loan to pay for long-lived assets. Lease, don't buy. Skip the upgrade if it bothers you to borrow. And finally, get on your knees and pray to God for a miracle.

Around the table, a dozen heads nodded in agreement

After reflecting on that advice for a couple of weeks, Azzarelli arrived at a decision. First, he said, he will get on his knees and pray.

If that doesn't work, he said, he'll take out a long-term loan.

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CEOs are used to being in charge. Put 15 of them inside a small, windowless room at the Tampa Palms Golf & Country Club on a balmy Tuesday morning in November and barbs will fly.

Dressed in business-casual shirts with "C12" embroidered above the pocket, the men tease each other about bungled business moves, argue testily over the correct way to calculate a born-again Christian's "eternal" age and express shock at how one member handled his corporate income taxes.

But C12 preaches humility and kindness. And perhaps because some have been in this group for as long as 11 years, members are unusually willing to open up. A confidentiality clause they sign doesn't hurt. (A reporter was allowed to attend the November meeting only after agreeing not to quote them by name. Azzarelli subsequently agreed to let his name be used.)

One member scolds himself aloud for focusing too much on his own needs and not enough on those of his employees, customers and family. Another talks about the loneliness of being boss, even with God's guidance. "I'm just that scared little boy that's in a big boy's outfit," he says.

A third covers his eyes and sobs after revealing he fired his daughter, an employee, for poor performance. Half a dozen other members rush to his side, put their hands on him and bow their heads in prayer.

One CEO will need more than sympathy to raise his spirits. With his best customer scaling back, he says,

his company will run out of cash in six months unless it lands new clients.

He's not optimistic. During a one-hour exchange, his C12 peers suggest radical changes to the company's business plan, such as abandoning his new product line or allying with suppliers. The CEO is defensive, even testy. For a proud person whose livelihood and ministry are at risk, it's a lot to take in.

C12 members say one of the most difficult parts of running a Christian business is firing employees. Several at the meeting share stories of their struggle to balance compassion with the realities of the marketplace.

One says he fired a worker whom he had personally persuaded to accept Christ but who physically threatened other employees. Another is agonizing over the fate of a loyal, long-term employee who is doing subpar work.

Even more painful, Hitchcock said later, is when economics force CEOs to lay off good employees. Some try to avoid it by renegotiating terms with their suppliers or improving their bill collections.

Sometimes, there's no alternative. And Hitchcock says that's okay, biblically speaking.

"If the company goes broke because you don't fire anybody," he said, "is that smart business and good stewardship?"

C12 offers no promises of success. It teaches that even businesses run according to the Bible can fail. To succeed financially, a CEO must be a good manager, have a saleable product or service and enjoy a cooperative economy.

Hitchcock, a former Dale Carnegie franchisee whose company struggled in the early 1990s, knows this from experience. "Being Christian doesn't mean we're immune to making stupid mistakes or suffering the consequences."

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Hiring is a contentious issue at C12.

"Some of the guys believe that as a Christian CEO, they should only hire Christians," Hitchcock says. Others, he says, hire nonbelievers, then preach the Gospel to them.

Hitchcock's advice blends the two approaches. He can see hiring "nonbelievers" in low-level positions, but he argues that senior staff should always share

the boss' "faith-based values." Executives who aren't committed Christians may object if the CEO decides to introduce Bible study at work, inscribe verses of scripture on company checks or invoices, or hire a workplace chaplain, as many C12 members do.

How can C12 members weed out non-Christian applicants? Hitchcock says it is illegal to ask a job candidate's faith. Instead, he suggests CEOs reveal their religion and describe their company's Christian mission. Candidates usually will respond by revealing their faith, or bow out if they're uncomfortable with the idea of a Christian workplace.

David Linesch, a Palm Harbor labor lawyer, called Hitchcock's job interview strategy "blatantly against the law." Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits workplace discrimination, as do state and local statutes.

"It's the same thing as saying, 'I'm white and I'm more comfortable with whites and I want only whites to work here,'" said Linesch, who is Catholic.

Craig Sher, CEO of the Sembler Co. of St. Petersburg, had not heard of C12. "I respect anybody's right to do whatever they want to do," said Sher, who is Jewish.

But Sher, whose company developed the BayWalk entertainment complex in downtown St. Petersburg, said a business can be run ethically without an "official religious bias."

"We certainly don't require our employees to be Jewish," he said. "On the contrary, we love diversity,

and we encourage our employees to get involved in whatever faith, or no faith, they want."

C12 members make no apologies for their faith-based businesses.

Azzarelli, the construction company CEO, said his only regret at life's end will be that he didn't save more people. "If we're here when the Lord returns, my heart's going to go out to the people that heard the Gospel but chose not to accept," he said.

Dunkel, the Kforce CEO, is more discreet. The words "Jesus," "Christian" and "God" do not appear on the publicly traded company's Web site or in its regulatory filings.

"I do not own the company," he said. "Therefore I cannot speak universally for the shareholders, the board of directors or all the officers. I can only, as the CEO, practice biblical principles in the role that I'm in. I cannot promulgate my beliefs to the organization and the shareholders."

But that hasn't stopped Dunkel from billing the company for his C12 membership or the Christian chaplain who visits the company weekly. Nor has it stopped him from inscribing his business card with a Biblical quote from Matthew 5:16, talking to interested employees about Jesus or hosting "Bible barbecues" for company staff in the employee training room at his expense.

"I believe that God really controls the whole economy," Dunkel said, "and that He will honor those that seek to honor Him by practicing His principles."

## Who belongs to C12

Here are members of the C12 group described in this article, one of three such groups in the Tampa Bay area. Some of the CEOs agreed to provide a philosophical answer to the question, "What do you do for a living?"

Roy Jaeger, Associated Computer Systems, Brandon. "I'm the chief steward among servants, consultants that the Lord uses to solve business process problems that can be resolved with the aid of technology."

Jim Bird, Coloroc Materials, Tampa. "Coloroc Materials is a company that supplies the world's finest quality masonry products based on Christ's servant standards."

Jake Beckel, Custom Care Pharmacy, Tampa. "I'm a Christian drug dealer."

Dave Dunkel, Kforce, Tampa. "Hunt heads for Jesus."

Bart Azzarelli, Dallas 1 Construction & Development, Thonotosassa. "I'm an ambassador for Christ, and I have a construction company that funds it."

Richard Hayes, Digital Lightbridge, Tampa. "I lead a strategic marketing firm based on Christian integrity."

Tom Wolf, Entrepreneurs Source, Tampa. "I work with people who are considering the career option of self-employment, and I coach and consult to help them find the business which is the best fit."

Jay Fechtel, the Fechtel Co., Tampa. "While not perfect, we strive to serve God by serving clients through a great design and building experience."

Mark Dillon, Tampa Bay Steel, Tampa. "I run a steel distribution company in such a way that others would see something different about us. As a result of that difference, I would love to tell them how God makes the difference."

Brent Williams, Taylor & Williams, Tampa. "I help others financially accomplish God's call on their life."

Wing Hughes, Forrester-Smith, Tampa.

Roy Hellwege, Bank of Florida/Tampa Bay, Tampa.

Brad Green, Lightning RV Supply, Thonotosassa.

Tom McHale, Mac's Sports Pub, Tampa.

Marty Morris, Morris-Thorne Technologies, Tampa.



## Business failure epiphany leads to C12

By SCOTT BARANCIK, Times Staff Writer  
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It's a classic tale of Rich Businessman Ennui.

A young kid inherits the family factory, conquers the world of commerce with cutthroat tactics, buys a fancy car and house, realizes he's empty inside, squanders his funds on a bad business venture, finds God and vows to make his life meaningful by helping others.

Lester "Buck" Jacobs, 65, thought business leaders could relate to his life story. And judging by the growth of C12, his support group for born-again Christian CEOs, many do.

Founded in Apollo Beach in 1992, C12 has 22 chapters in 11 states and the District of Columbia, including three chapters in Tampa. Many members also enroll their senior staff in one of C12's "Key Players" groups.

But Jacobs' path from epiphany to ministry was no straight line.

It began in November 1973. After losing nearly \$1-million on a startup called Jet Age Industries, Jacobs faced the possibility of bankruptcy and, he says, a gnawing sense of personal failure. When he saw a televised sermon by Hour of Power evangelist Robert Schuller, he committed himself to Jesus.

The next day - no coincidence, Jacobs believes - a childhood friend called to offer him a job as vice president of sales at an Illinois chemical company where "Jesus was the chairman of the board." Jacobs, raised in a nonreligious household, took the job. Within seven years, he says, revenues at the S.H. Mack Co. of St. Charles, Ill., grew tenfold. The company also thrived according to a more unorthodox business metric: number of souls saved. That dual success would prove a compelling recruitment tool years later at C12.

"Sometimes the things we did in response to God's direction didn't make much business sense," he says. Yet they apparently worked.

When his friend sold the chemical company, Jacobs decided to share his Christian business acumen with others. Through a mutual friend, he found a kindred spirit in the owner of the Apollo Beach Golf & Sea Club in Hillsborough County.

That led to a golf course ministry called the Golf and Sea Fellowship Inc. Offerings included free play on Saturday afternoons, weekend retreats and golf contests, packaged with prayer and Christian lessons.

Next came a multiyear stint with a not-for-profit called the Fellowship of Companies for Christ International, where Jacobs became Florida coordinator. In December 1992, he went solo with his own for-profit concept, C12.

Jacobs, who moved to Cornelia, Ga., this year, no longer runs C12 meetings. He continues to produce monthly lesson plans for his 18 regional licensees, for which he collects a hefty fee.

While the Fellowship survived on donations, C12 charges for membership. Jacobs says doing so ensures members come regularly and pushes C12 toward excellence.

"Our members, if they don't receive value, will leave," he says. "And they should."



## C12's guiding light

**The philosophical underpinnings of C12 are described in *A Light Shines Bright in Babylon*, a 57-page handbook written by founder Lester "Buck" Jacobs. In Jacobs' metaphor, "Babylon" is the business marketplace, and Christian companies are the "light" that shines on it. Excerpts from the book:**

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"Your company is not a church, but its purpose is the same."

"If you are called by God to run His company, your calling is as holy as any pastor, priest or missionary."

"Many have mistakenly thought that once an owner realizes that his business really belongs to God and dedicates it to Him, that it will automatically become very profitable. They are very often disappointed."

"God's business plan is the best plan."

"Sin is sin wherever you are . . . There is no special exception that allows Christians to do things in business that they could not do in church."

"The truth is that most companies see their customers not as people, but as objects to be manipulated for profit or personal gain."

"The stereotype of the driven CEO who works 80 to 100 hours a week, is a stranger to his family, a ghost in church, has no time for recreation or relaxation, is a satanic cultural reality. But it is not a Biblical model."

"Is wealth bad? No! . . . God may want you to have the profits to raise your lifestyle. But if He does, it will only be to use you to build His kingdom in a difference place or lifestyle. God wants His people in every strata of society."

"Our doctrine is simple: Jesus Christ is Lord, the whole Bible is wholly true, God has an eternal plan for each believer's life, and that plan includes their business."



## **about C12**

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**Founded:** Apollo Beach, 1992

**Short for:** Christian 12.

**Scope:** 22 groups (seven in Florida; three in North Carolina; two each in California, Georgia and Indiana; and one in Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Oregon, Virginia and Washington, D.C.)

**How it's organized:** Regional chairpeople

**Tampa Bay area chairman:** Scott Hitchcock

**Membership requirements:** Must be a born-again Christian, as well as CEO, president or owner of a business with at least five employees

**What it costs:** A sliding scale of \$450 to \$850 a month, based on corporate revenues

**Benefits:** A full-day meeting each month with assigned C12 group, including lunch; monthly essays by founder Lester "Buck" Jacobs on business and ministry strategies; once-a-month private counseling session with local chairperson, such as Hitchcock in the Tampa Bay area.

**Other C12 offerings:** "Key Players" groups, designed for senior staffers rather than CEOs; an online MBA program for Christian CEOs through Regent University of Virginia Beach, Va.

**Web site:** [www.c12group.com](http://www.c12group.com)