

The New York Times

At Bosses' Invitation, Chaplains Come Into Workplace and Onto Payroll

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Published: December 4, 2006

GLEN ALLEN, Va. — At the Tyson poultry plant here, Fred L. Mason Jr. hangs live chickens by their feet before they move down a belt toward slaughter. A few months ago, Mr. Mason told his boss that he had a drug problem.

People urged him to see the plant's chaplain, but he was skeptical. "What could he do? Offer me prayer?" Mr. Mason said. "I was getting that at church. I was getting that from family, when all the while I was going out of my mind."

Nonetheless, Mr. Mason, 35 and a cocaine user for 20 years, went to the small office of the Rev. Ken Willis, the plant's chaplain. Over the next few months, Mr. Willis helped him enroll in a drug rehabilitation program, find a counselor and Narcotics Anonymous meetings to attend.

Mr. Mason said he has not used drugs since Aug. 21, and he credits the chaplaincy program. "It's saved my life," he said.

From car parts makers to fast food chains to financial service companies, corporations across the country are bringing chaplains into the workplace. At most companies, the chaplaincy resembles the military model, which calls for chaplains to serve the religiously diverse community before them, not to evangelize.

"Someone who has never thought about this might assume they pray with people, but the majority of the job is listening to people, helping them with very human problems, not one big intensive religious discussion," said David Miller, executive director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and the author of the book "God at Work."

The spread of corporate chaplaincy programs, especially out of the Bible Belt to the North, is part of a growing trend among businesses to embrace religion rather than reject it, Mr. Miller said. Executives now look for ways to build a company that adheres to certain Christian values. Some businesses offer Muslim employees a place and the time to pray during work.

Workplace chaplaincies are generally less costly to operate than the more familiar employee assistance program model of counseling and making referrals. Most chaplaincies also go beyond such programs to bring something of the local pastor to the workplace: the person who is on call around the clock to rush to the hospital when an employee has been in a car accident, or to find housing for families burned out of their houses, or to visit a worker's relative in jail, even to officiate at weddings and funerals.

“You’re at work 8 to 10 hours a day, so that is where you spend a lot of your productive time,” said Tim Embry, owner of American LubeFast, a chain of oil change companies in the Southeast. “Work is where people are at and where they need to be cared for.”

Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice, an advocacy group for low-wage workers, said she had no qualms with what chaplains do, but she questioned the issues they did not take up.

“The thing that is challenging when working in meatpacking and poultry is that you’re talking about places that have major violations in labor law,” Ms. Bobo said. “The chaplains do absolutely nothing to challenge those laws and stand with workers — and they can’t because they work for the employers. I do think they could do more to put themselves in an ombudsman role.”

Chaplaincy programs are voluntary and confidential, experts said, and free to employees. There are no statistics about the scope of such programs, but Mr. Miller estimated that 600 to 700 companies in the United States have chaplaincies, twice as many as five years ago.

Gil Stricklin, founder and head chaplain of the nonprofit Marketplace Chaplains USA in Dallas, said his firm was signing up one new company every three days, compared with one company every four months when it started 22 years ago. Fortune 500 companies never responded to him a few years ago, he said; now he is negotiating with one that has 175,000 employees.

Often, chaplains are hired because of the beliefs of a company’s chief executive.

“We profess to be Christians and we think, ideally, that should make some difference in not just how we live but how we do business,” said J. M. Herr, chief executive of Herr Foods of Nottingham, Pa., a maker of chips and pretzels.

Companies that introduce chaplaincies run the risk of looking as if they back a particular faith or religion, which might make many employees uncomfortable. Companies that come across as “faith friendly,” rather than religion based, manage most easily to dispel that discomfort, Mr. Miller said.

Companies tailor the chaplaincy program to their culture. Cardone Industries, a Philadelphia company that refurbishes auto parts for resale, draws its chaplains, almost all lay people, from its employees. Other corporations, like American LubeFast and Herr Foods, contract with an outside company like Marketplace Chaplains to provide chaplains. Some, like Tyson Foods, which started its program in 1999, have their own chaplains, 127 of them at about 250 of the company’s more than 300 plants in North America, said Allen Tyson, the company’s head chaplain, who is not related to the founders of the company.

For the most part, corporate chaplains are ordained ministers, often hired locally. Some are retired, others have churches to pastor, and most of them work part time.

While most chaplains are Christian, some programs have imams and rabbis, especially in the health care industry. Programs with only Christian chaplains urge them to build ties with religious leaders in the towns where they work. For instance, at the Tyson pork plant in Storm Lake, Iowa, which has many Vietnamese and Laotian employees, the chaplain has a relationship with monks at a local Buddhist monastery, Mr. Tyson said.

Dressed in a white hairnet and white coat with “Chaplain Ken” embroidered in red over the right breast, Mr. Willis, 56, walks Tyson’s 550-worker Glen Allen plant almost every day, greeting workers on the line. He finds people on break. He visits the overnight shift. Every week, he drives to a hatchery and grain complex 90 minutes away and meets people who catch live chickens all day to send to the plant.

Though he leads a small local church, Mr. Willis is on call for Tyson all the time. In his 18 months here, he has spoken at funerals, visited employees in the hospital, arranged housing, food and diapers for families flooded out of their homes, helped people devise simple budgets and open bank accounts. When he discovered that several employees did not have enough money to pay their utilities and have a Thanksgiving dinner, he collected money to assemble Thanksgiving meals for them, which he delivered.

Employees come to him because they feel uncomfortable seeing a counselor or social worker. Some have no church of their own. Others may feel too embarrassed about their problems to go to their own pastors. Or it may simply be because he is there, right by the entrance, and willing to help.

“That’s my understanding of the pastoral role,” Mr. Willis said, after taking a phone call from an employee in the hospital asking him to bring her paycheck. “I treat everyone the same, and my hope is that they will see in me the love of God.”

While Tyson tracks the number of contacts chaplains have with employees, discussions between chaplains and employees are confidential, unless the worker is an imminent danger to himself or others.

“I’m not here to convince people Tyson is a great place to work,” Mr. Willis said. “I’ve told one or two team members that maybe it would be better for them if they didn’t work here anymore,” he said, because they had the qualifications for better-paying jobs.

Turnover is down sharply at Glen Allen, which, like about half of Tyson plants, is unionized. But it is unclear how much of the decline can be attributed to the chaplaincy program, managers there said. At Glen Allen, the chaplaincy seems to summon strong feelings, but they center on Mr. Willis. Bunny Hunter talked about how the chaplain helped her cope with her father’s death, helped her, in fact, forgive him for dying.

One morning, Mary Jones sat by Mr. Willis's desk and cried softly. She had lost her car and was on the verge of losing her house, her job and her grip on a life that had taken so long to build. Mr. Willis helped her secure her house and then found people to replace her leaky roof for free.

"No one never done anything like this for me before," she said, "what he helped me to do."