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# Praying With the Office Chaplain

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



Marisol Corrales, an operations manager for a Dallas housecleaning service, doesn't attend church regularly or see herself as a religious person, she says. But she calls regularly on a workplace chaplain provided by her employer whenever she is worried about her family or stressed over problems on the job.

### Ministering to a Different Crowd



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Steve Hebert for The Wall Street Journal

Melissa Brannan is a chaplain for Tyson Foods.

#### [More photos and interactive graphics](#)

spiritual advisers typically visit offices or factories weekly, greeting employees, hanging out in the break room, handing out business cards and meeting one-on-one with workers. But they're also on-call 24/7, so chaplains rush to hospitals, restaurants or homes on request, providing comfort and support free of charge to employees.

They perform weddings or funerals for people who have no one else to do so. And they pray with employees over problems from medical or marital crises to job loss, addiction and financial woes, holding the information in confidence. The Rev. Warren Wetherbee, a corporate chaplain in LaCrosse, Wis., says he sometimes helps employees make a budget if asked, or sits with them while they decide to cut up their credit cards.

The chaplain services reflect a growing openness about spirituality in the workplace and an increasing desire among workers to express their faith at work. Some 74% of Americans say faith is becoming more important in their lives, based on a 2008 survey of 1,004 adults by the Barna Group, a Ventura, Calif., research company. Although membership in churches and other religious organizations has been falling for years, 71% of U.S. adults say they have developed their own slate of religious beliefs, rather than accepting the tenets of a particular faith or religious group.

### The Juggle

[Would You Call on the Office Chaplain?](#) Join the discussion with Sue Shellenbarger on the Juggle, the Journal's work and family blog.

The chaplains say they don't proselytize or push any particular beliefs. Instead, they spend most of their time encouraging and calming people, offering emotional support or providing referrals to social service agencies or employee-assistance programs. If employees want to talk about religion, the chaplains do so, but only if asked. "We're going in as humanitarian care-givers. If I'm helping somebody, they don't care if I'm Baptist or Buddhist," says Gil Stricklin, chief executive of Marketplace Chaplains, a nonprofit Plano, Texas, provider of 2,455 chaplains in 425 companies. Voluntary expression of one's religious beliefs at work is permissible under law, but employers can't legally pressure employees to take part in prayer or devotional services.

### *Programs Expanding*

Praying and talking with the Rev. John Salas gives her hope and peace of mind, she says; "I'm starting to be a bigger believer" because of him.

A growing number of companies are offering the services of chaplains in the workplace. Managers say many employees who wouldn't think of calling a therapist or an employee-assistance program will willingly turn to a chaplain. Executives at [Tyson Foods Inc.](#), which employs 120 chaplains serving a work force of 117,000, say they believe the service reduces turnover. Other companies contract with chaplain-placement services to handle workplace disruptions that managers can't.

Following the military-chaplain model, these roving

While Bible Belt employers were the first to enlist chaplains when the services sprang up in the 1980s and 1990s, chaplain programs have grown fastest since 2001 and are expanding to other regions. Corporate Chaplains of America, a Wake Forest, N.C., nonprofit, services 650 employers from Vermont to California. And among a growing number of start-ups, Capital Chaplains, Middleton, Wis., has built its client base to nine employers since its founding in 2005, says its owner, the Rev. Steve Cook.

In another side of spirituality at work, about 15% of employers have set aside space for prayer or religious practices in the workplace, and 9% allow religious groups to meet on-site, says a 2008 survey of 543 employers by the Society for Human Resource Management. [Texas Instruments Inc.](#) offers "serenity rooms" where employees can go to pray and meditate.

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## Work & Family Mailbox

### Reforming the Office Jerk

Chaplains say they expect at least one or two employees at almost every work site to greet them with suspicion or hostility when they are first introduced, sometimes confronting them in anger. "I simply say, 'Hey, I totally understand that. This is voluntary on your part. You don't have to talk to me,' " says Corporate Chaplains' Mr. Wetherbee; usually, "after they get to know you, they start to trust you and tell you" about their lives.

Phil Rowland, a Spartanburg, S.C., toolmaker, says his workplace chaplain, the Rev. Jeff Brown, helped him through a devastating loss, when his sister lapsed into a coma and had to be taken off life support. "He was praying with us as my sister passed away," he says.

Mr. Brown, a former Army helicopter pilot in the Gulf War who now works for Corporate Chaplains, ministers at three companies to a total of about 500 employees, from agnostic to Buddhist to Catholic. He gets so many employee requests to pray for various loved ones—up to 10 a week, he says—that he sometimes taps the names into his BlackBerry so he doesn't forget. His pockets are stuffed with business cards so that when someone seems distressed, he can hand them his pager number.

Randy Turnbow, president of EME Inc., a Compton, Calif., aerospace metal-finishing company, says the chaplain service helps his 125 employees concentrate on their jobs. "If the employee can come to work with a better attitude, feeling better about the rest of their lives," he says, "they're better employees."

While blending faith and work was once considered as undesirable as mixing church and state, old barriers to expressing faith in the workplace have been falling since the 1980s, says David W. Miller, who heads the Faith and Work Initiative at Princeton University. A growing number of executives "take their faith seriously" as a source of meaning and direction, he says. Thousands of nonprofits have sprung up to coach executives in spiritual matters or foster spirituality at work, Dr. Miller says.

## *Faith in the Workplace*

Many corporate executives provide chaplains because they see faith as an important resource for employees at work. At Arkansas-based Tyson Foods, chairman John Tyson, who started the chaplain program, has spoken publicly about being a Christian. Today, the company's core values statement says that it is a "faith-friendly company," adding, "we strive to honor God." Tyson tries to recruit chaplains from denominations that are common at each of its work sites, says Rick McKinnie, director of chaplain services. Mr. McKinnie recently took an imam to meet with workers at a beef-packing plant in Nebraska, to talk with Somali Muslims there.

Lindy Capper, a senior compensation analyst for Tyson, says a company chaplain sat with her in the hospital while her young son had surgery, then comforted her after her son's death. The chaplains "have faith and they pray with me, and I just love that about them," she says. "If I couldn't share my faith, I

couldn't bring my whole self to work."

**Write to** Sue Shellenbarger at [sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com](mailto:sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com)

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