

Feature: Freedom of Religion

Tyson Foods chaplains dispense "chicken soup for the soul" amid spiritual revival

By Bruce Shutan

In the nation's Bible Belt, America's spiritual revival has spilled from houses of worship into the workplace—posing both a delicate management challenge and an opportunity for human resource professionals to demonstrate goodwill.

Springdale, Arkansas-based Tyson Foods, Inc., has taken the lead on advancing a growing movement involving chaplains who informally counsel employees on everything from family problems, stress, and abuse to immigration concerns, illness, and death.

The world's largest meat processor, which has about 120 production facilities, was the chief sponsor of the first national conference on workplace chaplaincy last summer at Yale University. The event drew 120 attendees, including businessmen, clergy, and theologians. It is now one of about 30 conferences on spirituality and the workplace.

“The view is, if you can talk about football and basketball on Monday morning, then you should feel free to talk about your religion,” observes Larry Hopkins, Tyson's vice president of recruiting, education, and retention. Adds Director of Chaplain Services Alan Tyson (no relation to the family after which the company is named): “There have been some estimates that anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 people are doing workplace chaplaincy, and an increasing number of companies have their own internal programs like Tyson Foods.”

Those organizations include ServiceMaster and Ukrops, as well as Yum! Brands Inc. units Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, and Wal-Mart subsidiaries. Some turn to nonprofits such as Market-place Ministries in Dallas, Texas, which deploys a team of chaplains in 415 cities in 38 states.

Faith or Foe?

While mixing religion and politics is almost always combustible, religious expression in the workplace has been described as synergistic. University of Southern California Marshall School of Business Professor Ian I Mitroff once said, “Spirituality could be the ultimate competitive advantage.” When considering the impact of chaplain services on employees, the thinking is that they could become happier, healthier, and more productive citizens.

The Fellowship for Companies for Christ International estimates that 10,000 bible and prayer groups meet regularly in the workplace, while 48% of Americans responding to a Gallup poll say they talked about their religious faith at work that day.

Yet, that is not to say that everyone is comfortable with this phenomenon—or that there are no potential pitfalls. While private companies have more leeway than government to introduce religion into the workplace, Americans United for Separation of Church and State in Washington cautions that land mines remain, and employers need to be aware of them. “If

employees feel pressured by management to take part in religious activities against their will, or if evidence surfaces that employees who share a supervisor's faith get benefits like promotions and better treatment, it's guaranteed that lawsuits will result," says Rob Boston, a spokesman for the organization.

"The idea of a chaplain in the workplace might seem like having a man on the moon," admits David Miller, executive director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture at Yale Divinity School, which hosted the Tyson forum, and assistant adjunct professor of business ethics. "On the other hand, like a lot of innovative and breakthrough ideas, it may seem incongruous. As a culture, we've become comfortable thinking about clergy or chaplains in hospitals and prisons where people are dealing with pain and suffering, which some would argue is also evident in the workplace."

While Miller stresses that corporations are meant to be places of business and not houses of worship, he believes that, with the right corporate culture in place, "it has the potential to play a very fruitful role in today's bottom-line-focused world." The challenge is to respond to employee needs without crossing inappropriate boundaries relating to religious identity.

Bearing in mind that atheists, agnostics, or others may be uncomfortable with religious expression in the workplace, employers may want to consider also making available psychologists or social workers alongside chaplains, notes Thomas W Dunfee, the Joseph Kolodny Professor of Social Responsibility in Business and professor of Legal Studies and Business Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. Still, he believes that chaplains may be capable of providing support for certain employees "in a context that no other type of social intervention can provide quite as effectively if there's a death in the family or illness."

The Role of HR

At Tyson Foods, 127 chaplains assist employees in 77 production facilities as part of a larger effort to become a faith-friendly company. For the most part, the group is comprised of - Tyson employees who double as part-time members of the cloth. The program, which is strictly voluntary and free of charge to employees, dates back to 2000 just before the company acquired beef and pork powerhouse IBP, Inc.

In terms of logistics from a human resources standpoint, Hopkins does not see any significant obstacles and considers the chaplain program an excellent communication tool at a time when vice presidents of HR are hard pressed to find time for personal interaction with employees. Tyson notes that many HR professionals who initially were skeptical became some of the program's greatest supporters once they had a chance to see how employees benefited from this spiritual outreach.

"We just ask that clergy spend time on the factory floor and report to the plant's personnel manager," he says. "We do not expect a report from them as to what they specifically see. So, if they know that someone is having problems, we feel comfortable that the chaplains will handle it."

While monthly activity generally is tracked, details from conversations are never divulged given the confidential nature of this highly personal information. Exceptions are made when an individual is determined to pose a danger to himself or others. There is also a legal and moral responsibility to report any harassment or illegal activity that puts the company at risk in keeping with Tyson's code of conduct.

The number of chaplains per plant may vary from one to five, depending on the size and needs of the workforce. Spiritual foot soldiers undergo orientation training to learn more about Tyson's HR policies and benefit plans, using their working knowledge of insurance issues to help field inquiries about employee assistance programs (EAPs) or local community resources pertaining to drug, alcohol, financial, marital, and emotional issues. About 85 chaplains recently were trained at company headquarters for two and a half days as part of an annual exercise that has occurred in each of the past four years.

Chaplains essentially offer a short-term pastoral care approach and are able to make referrals for long-term assistance, but there is more to the scope of their services than meets the eye. For example, they are able to officiate at weddings and funerals for employees and their families, as well as counsel trauma victims in the event of plant emergencies or other accidents.

"It's good to have that arm for HR professionals who know we can get them a chaplain if one is needed," Hopkins says. Yale's Miller believes traditional HR programs or EAPs may lack the time or hands-on touch needed for matters of the human soul.

Tyson employees appear to have developed an appreciation for the chaplain program. "I know they're extremely happy to have that service available to them and, anecdotally, we hear stories about how people are using the service and chaplains are making a difference in their lives," Hopkins notes. "It's also one more factor that enhances our effort to retain team members by providing a positive work environment for them or, as in this case, a faith-friendly environment."

Diversity and Tolerance

While federal law bars religious discrimination both in and out of the workplace, federal lawmakers recently took precautions to protect this form of expression. The Workplace Religious Freedom Act of 2005, introduced in both the House and Senate as H.R. 1445 and S. 677, is patterned after the Americans with Disabilities Act in that it would require businesses to accommodate religiously observant employees.

Although Tyson Foods operates where Christianity is the predominant faith, the program attempts to foster tolerance of multiple religious beliefs and expression. Only chaplains who are open to ministering across both denominational and faith lines are chosen to walk through the company's production facilities, break rooms, hallways, and offices.

"We're very diverse and have lots of different religions, with a Muslim imam and Catholic nun as chaplains, and anyone's faith is welcome," Hopkins reports. In plants where there are a

number of Muslim employees, steps also have been taken to accommodate the faith's required prayer times.

"They're not there to force their faith on anyone," Tyson says of the company chaplains. "If people want to avail themselves of our service, we make ourselves available and, if a non-Christian has religious or spiritual questions, we certainly would ask a chaplain to put them in touch with a religious leader of their faith community, if we don't already have [one] on the chaplain team at that plant."

Meanwhile, the chaplain program at Tyson Foods is expected to grow. "We're adding chaplains every month when plants come online and want the service," Tyson says.