



DEEP DIVE

# How workplace chaplains are giving Tyson Foods a major assist

The company's chaplains help employees grapple with the personal and the professional, which, in turn, strengthens its HR department, Tyson Foods VP of Human Resources said.

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Katie Clarey  
Contributor

*Tyson Foods*

**W**hen Antoinette Kemp joined Cobb-Vantress Inc. as a chaplain, some workers at the Tyson Foods subsidiary weren't sure she should be there. One worker she met expressed his total disapproval that she — the first chaplain to service his facility — had joined the company, and his wife, also an employee, was clear she at least didn't endorse Kemp.

But the couple's opinions of Kemp and her role changed when they felt her support after a co-worker's child committed suicide, Kemp told HR Dive in an interview. "They were close to this team member and had a conversation the night it occurred," she said; "they didn't know what to do." So they called Kemp, thinking she should at least know what happened.

Kemp reached out to the family immediately after promising the couple she would follow up with them, too. “I came back about a month later and encountered the gentleman who was totally against me being there,” Kemp recalled. “He said ‘Chaplain, I owe you an apology. My wife and I reached out to you because we didn’t know what to do. What I was really impressed by is how you helped the family.’”

As Kemp continues to counsel employees enduring crisis, pondering change or celebrating milestones, chaplains at thousands of employers around the country join her in doing the same kind of work. Sometimes they assist employees work through their beliefs or help them make sense of a tragedy or milestone, personal or professional. Other times they pray at the groundbreaking of a new building, comfort a workforce grieving the loss of a colleague or initiate the celebration of a marriage or birth.

And as they do so, they solidify their place in the modern business world. Their position is one that’s growing in popularity as leaders recognize how chaplains enhance corporate culture and strengthen HR functions.

### **Where there is pain, there are chaplains**

Chaplaincy may seem like an untraditional role within a corporate setting, but it’s not a new profession. “When they’re out in the field, they’re typically there because of pain or suffering or fear. Think about military chaplains. Think about hospital chaplains,” said David Miller, professor of business ethics and director of Princeton University’s Faith and Work Initiative. “Is there any pain, suffering or fear in the corporate world? You betcha.” He ticked off several possibilities: losing a job, stealing credit, enduring harassment.

But employees don't have to encounter trials at work to struggle at the office, Miller told HR Dive in an interview. "We bring our worries from home to work," he said. Anxiety about a sick child may delay a big report, Miller offered. Struggles with alcoholism may drown out information delivered in a Monday morning meeting. "For many people, the way they get through rocky times is their faith, to anchor them, to get them through the challenging patch," Miller said.

And that's what makes workplace chaplains valuable resources. "Some enlightened companies have taken the bold step, that, if we're telling everybody to bring their whole selves to work, bring your spirituality to work and we'll help you with that," Miller said.

### **The reality of the whole self**

Tyson Foods appears to be one such enlightened company. "Part of our core values is to be faith-friendly," Tyson Foods VP of Human Resources Rod Nagel said. "We went out and recognized that dimension of a person's being. When we did that, we wanted to do that in the right way. So for us, part of doing it the right way is to have professionals in that space."



*Chaplains at Tyson Foods.*

*Tyson Foods*

Tyson Foods employs 92 chaplains and has eight open positions, boasting a 100-person program that reports to HR when it's at full capacity, according to Karen Diefendorf (pictured at top), director of chaplain services at Tyson Foods. One chaplain is Muslim, but the majority come from a Christian background, representing denominations such as Lutherans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, United Methodists and "all flavors of baptist," Diefendorf said.

"I think faith is an important part of a lot of people's 'whole selves,' we call it. They're bringing their faith to work whether we want them to or not," Nagel said. Kemp echoed Nagel's sentiment as she described her work; "Bringing what you are — the whole you — to the workplace, it doesn't mean we work it out for you, but it's important that you have someone like a chaplain to help you work through that."

Other companies have seen this benefit of chaplaincy, as well, according to Miller. "There's a growing recognition that spirituality is a big part of what it means to be human," he said; "if we can bring our dog to work, why can't we bring our faith to work?" As employees and leaders ask this question, corporate chaplaincy is taking off within what Miller refers to as the "spirituality at work phenomenon." Chaplaincy may not be "everyone's cup of tea, but it's something that if it's implemented in an appropriate way, it's something everyone can be proud of," he said.

### **Approaching faith: 'A ministry of availability'**

As Miller pointed out, a chaplaincy program can succeed only when implemented properly. Diefendorf put it simply: "It's a ministry of availability. We don't try to encroach on people." This may seem counterintuitive. A chaplain, like a pastor, likely holds a single, well-developed set of religious beliefs. But unlike a pastor, a chaplain doesn't evangelize or preach. Kemp, who worked as a

pastor before she moved into chaplaincy, said the positions share at least one function: “caring for people’s souls and hearts and spirits and human wellbeing.”

Diefendorf agreed. For a chaplain to give counsel without an accompanying sermon requires a certain approach. “With a chaplain, the conversation doesn’t start with them, their denomination, their faith tradition,” Diefendorf said. “The conversation starts with the team member and their life events, good or bad. We help them utilize their belief system to deal with life.” So when she meets with Tyson Foods employees, she asks them to first tell her how their beliefs are helping them and follows up by asking how their beliefs are hindering them. Her beliefs may never enter the conversation.

“As a chaplain you see yourself as a guide, like a light. The place where we start is always where the team member is,” Kemp said. “When I approach faith, it’s based on the faith of the individual I’m trying to service.”

It’s worth noting that this is the strategy traditional chaplains have taken, according to Miller. “Most military chaplains and hospital chaplains are trained to be very skilled to be supporting someone in a tradition other than their own,” he said. “It can be done — we have really good role models for that.”

## **How chaplaincy complements HR**

As chaplains intercept employees who bring parts of themselves to work that once belonged firmly in the realm of the personal, they veer into HR territory. And this comes as good news for HR professionals. “If it’s designed the right way, it’s a huge compliment to the team. I’m surprised that more companies

haven't done it," Miller said. "There are thousands of companies doing this now."

HR leaders who are keen to implement the "whole-self" corporate culture within their workspace may be particularly interested in chaplaincy programs. Kemp emphasized how a company brand centering around the person — and all that the person entails — will benefit a business. "Thinking of your brand and who you are as an organization, it behooves you to think about the people that shape your brand. They are part of that fabric," Kemp said. "It's extremely rewarding and very exciting and exhilarating to be in a corporate setting that understands that these things are one in the same."

But a chaplaincy program also can lend an assist to HR professionals whose primary responsibilities lie within compliance. "[Chaplaincy is] another tool in the tool kit. HR has so many responsibilities these days, particularly legal ones," Miller said. "There is just a whole host of things that they're really playing a monitor role. They don't have an extra hour for a fireside chat."

In fact, while it's helpful to compare chaplaincy programs to employee assistance programs to understand how they serve workers, Miller said, chaplains can address issues at a much deeper level, according to Nagel. "I guess for us, we see it as much more than [an EAP]. It's so much more personal than that," he said. "Our chaplains are in our facility, in our locations on a daily basis. They develop relationships with our team members. The connections they have with our team members and, frankly, their families is much deeper than one could get from an employee assistance program."

These relationships offer HR quite the advantage. "Chaplains develop an expertise that HR doesn't necessarily have," Nagel said. And these relationships can be useful to HR when problems arise,

Diefendorf said. “I think our chaplains, when they engage with our team members who have maybe missed a lot of work, they’ll often tell the chaplain what they’re embarrassed to tell their supervisor,” she said. A chaplain might hear, for example, that an employee’s childcare fell through, that her car broke down or that she couldn’t make rent, while a supervisor just sees a habitually tardy worker.

Of course, a chaplaincy program won’t offer HR any of these benefits if it lacks good planning, personnel and implementation. Miller, who has designed chaplaincy programs, offered several best practices that help chaplaincy programs thrive in the corporate setting:

### **Best practices for chaplaincy programs**

- Take a multi-faith approach.

This is especially important for larger, publicly traded companies, Miller said. “There are some small business owners that might want their chaplain to be a Christian, to be talking about Jesus and so forth. In certain contexts, I can understand and respect that,” he said. “If it’s a larger organization, that begins to get problematic for a number of reasons.”

- Hire vetted chaplains.

Generally, employers should try to add to their staff chaplains who are accredited or recognized by an organization, Miller said. Ideally, candidates will have a seminary degree. (It’s worth noting that Tyson Foods looks for chaplains who have a Masters of Divinity or its equivalent.)

- Train for “spiritual triage.”

Good chaplains know they aren’t long-term counselors, Miller said. “Their goal is to get the person to the right

resource,” he said. “Well over half their time is just listening, helping people with social services, directing people to resources they didn’t know were available to them.”

- If possible, hire chaplains who speak multiple languages.

Depending on the setting, a workplace could include employees whose native language is not the official language. A chaplain who speaks their native language can prove helpful, Miller said.