



John H. Tyson

Chaplains at work

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

Five years ago, when John H. Tyson took over as chief executive officer of the company his grandfather John W. Tyson had started 65 years earlier, he wanted to make sure that employees felt comfortable about bringing their faith into the workplace with them.

“If people can talk about yesterday’s football game on Monday, they ought to be able to talk about their faith on Monday,” Tyson told TPE.

Such an “environment of permission” allows 114,000 religiously diverse workers to express their beliefs.

Tyson became a Christian at 18 when he responded to a Billy Graham Evangelistic Association motion picture altar call. But in college he turned to worldly ways, delving into a lifestyle of alcohol and illegal drugs.

After gaining sobriety, thanks to God and Alcoholics Anonymous, Tyson had to re-establish his credibility by being a responsible jobholder. And he did. He moved up the corporate ladder by proving himself worthy.

Now he follows the philosophy that lessons learned early in life — and soon after being hired — have a lasting impact. “Instilling the right values and ethics has to start early,” Tyson says. “We have to create an environment where it’s understood that situational ethics are not available, even though they may be legal.”

Tyson moved into the top leadership position in a period when his own faith had been growing. He sensed a stirring to share his faith with others, but didn’t feel compelled to become a missionary, either overseas or in an inner city. Then it dawned on Tyson that he had a readymade mission field where faith could be shared.

In 1998, Tyson Foods purchased competitor Hudson Farms, which had operated a chaplaincy program at its plants. When Tyson became CEO in 2000, he called Alan Tyson, who had overseen the chaplaincy program at Hudson. The men aren’t related.

At Tyson Foods, Alan Tyson came up with the idea of hiring part-time chaplains who already live in the community and have a faith-based connection there. That usually means a local pastor.

As director of chaplaincy services for Tyson Foods, Alan Tyson has instructed chaplains to informally make themselves available by walking through production areas, break rooms and offices.

The clergy are as diverse as the employees, including Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Evangelical Free, Nazarene and ministers of other denominations. There also are nine credentialed Assemblies of God ministers, who are Hispanic, African-American and white. In all, Tyson Foods pays 131 chaplains to work in 83 North American chicken, beef and pork production plant locations. Typically they work around 15 hours a week.

John Tyson understands that the company chaplain may be the only

spiritual connection a nonchurch-going employee has when a family member is in a crisis situation.

“They are there for problems like, *My kid’s in trouble*, *My spouse isn’t behaving right* or *I’ve got financial problems, who can I talk to?*” he says.

Alan Tyson, who served 23 years as an active-duty U.S. Army chaplain, says having chaplains on-site is good for morale and minimizes turnover. Anymore, he says, human resource departments are too overwhelmed with insurance and payroll issues to handle such personal problems of workers.

“We look for local pastors who have the time and the gift of strong pastoral care skills,” he says. The chaplains sometimes need to make referrals to other professionals who specialize in marriage counseling, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol addiction.

“We’re not there to do long-term, in-depth counseling,” Alan Tyson says. “But we’re there as first responders to care for people and to offer the skills of pastoral counseling.”

Three years ago, Tyson called on Assemblies of God Pastor Dan Swearingin to serve the Sedalia, Mo., plant, hatchery, feed mill and animal foods complex. Swearingin, who has since retired from pastoring, generally is around for parts of four days each week, working different hours to cover the three different shifts at the plant that employs 1,500.



Alan Tyson (right) confers with an employee at plant headquarters.



Chaplain Miguel Ybarra (left) is one of the bilingual chaplains at the Dakota City, Neb., complex



Chaplain Ramon Hernandez (left) counsels a worker at the plant in Goodlettsville, Tenn.

“My assignment is just to help people,” Swearingin says. “Prayer is the best and most consistent way I can offer help. It’s not necessarily my role to make Christian converts or to deliver sermons, but whatever else a pastor does, I’m willing to do it when called upon.”

That includes funerals, weddings, counseling those contemplating divorce and even those with suicidal thoughts. He also refers workers who are having housing problems — several hundred came from South and Central America as well as Eastern Europe — to agencies that might help.

Although Swearingin’s pastoral role has switched largely from speaker to listener, he is making an impact. One grateful employee, David D. Smith, says that Swearingin visited him repeatedly while he took time off to stay with his hospitalized father.

“When the plant first got chaplains, I really had a hard time understanding why,” Smith says. “Now that my family has gone through this difficult time, I’m thankful that Tyson Foods has this benefit. Chaplain Dan went way beyond the call of duty to offer my family comfort during this period of illness.”

For three years, Ramon Hernandez, an Assemblies of God church planter in suburban Nashville, also has been a chaplain at the Goodlettsville, Tenn., fresh meat processing plant with 1,500 employees.

“What a privilege it is to be a part of ministering to people in such a large workforce,” Hernandez says. Although he is scheduled no more than 15 hours a week, he is available 24 hours a day to deal with a crisis, such as an employee who has just learned he has a disease.

Hernandez believes it makes good business sense for Tyson to hire chaplains. “You can’t equate what we do in dollars and cents,” Hernandez says. “If we’re able to keep an employee working in a satisfied mode, he’ll be more productive.”

Often, Hernandez will hang out at the company cafeteria during lunch. He prays privately and confidentially with workers as the need arises.

“Most people do believe that prayer will help ease them through the pain and suffering they feel,” says Hernandez, who sometimes comforts with Scripture. He has led several workers and family members to make salvation decisions for Jesus Christ.

“The biggest reward is to see someone delivered through a crisis and accepting the Lord as their Savior,” he says. “It’s exciting to see them touched by God, to become part of a church and to grow in the Lord.”

Hernandez speaks both English and Spanish, which is helpful considering that 40 percent of the plant’s labor force is Hispanic. But there are language challenges, given that some workers only speak their native tongue, ranging from Vietnamese to Yoruba.

About a year ago Miguel Ybarra became the fourth chaplain on duty at the Tyson complex in Dakota City, Neb.

“This is a wonderful opportunity to minister to people one-on-one,” says Ybarra, one of two bilingual chaplains at the plant. “By the time I’m finished talking to them, I hope that I have offered some counsel that is helpful.” Ybarra also is a part-time pastor at Morningside Assembly of God in Sioux City, Iowa.

While workplace chaplains aren’t allowed to proselytize, Ybarra says conversation topics often involve God, the Bible and church. “I try

to pray with them and for them after every session, and let people know that the Lord is the only One who can help.”

Around 60 percent of the plant’s 3,800 employees are Hispanic, and that presents unique challenges. Many workers who have immigrated ask how to raise children in U.S. society. Ybarra also helps grieving employees who are unable to attend the funeral of a parent in Central or South America deal with their anger and guilt.

The model established by Tyson Foods has the admiration of Alvin Worthley, national chaplaincy director for the Assemblies of God.

“John Tyson has given employees the opportunity to develop their spiritual lives,” Worthley says. “He does it in an open fashion, but also a fair fashion.”

Worthley also credits Alan Tyson for setting the tone that has raised the self-esteem of the conglomerate’s workers. When Tyson Foods purchased IBP in 2001 it tripled the size of the Springdale, Ark.-based company. Tyson is now the world’s largest meat processing and marketing company, with \$28 billion in annual sales.

After the megamerger, John Tyson — less than a year into his new role — devised a revised list of core values that included statements such as “We strive to be a faith-friendly company.”

“We have to treat all people with respect, honor, integrity and trust,” Tyson says. “I’m a Christian. I strive to honor the Christian God.” **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

MAKE AN INVESTMENT IN SOULS

THROUGH TODAY'S PENTECOSTAL EVANGEL ENDOWMENT

Since 1997, more than 15,000 individuals have reported their decision to follow Jesus Christ through reading *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

Your planned gift or donation to Today's Pentecostal Evangel Endowment can help many more find eternal life.

For more information, contact Ron Kopeck of Today's Pentecostal Evangel at (417) 862-2781, ext. 4107

NEED A BUS?



GOSPEL PUBLISHING HOUSE would like to introduce **EVERY CHURCH** in our fellowship of churches to our transportation partner, **CARPENTER BUS SALES.**

If you need a bus, give them a call. They're America's #1 Church Bus Dealer... and our friends!



1-800-370-6180
carpenterbus.com

BUILDING BETTER STUDENTS

- youth alive campus missions
- youth alive campus clubs
- youth alive prayer zone partners
- youth alive the seven project

www.yausa.com

YOUTH ALIVE - 1445 N. Boonville Avenue - Springfield, MO 65802 - 1-800-545-2766