



Faith at work: Some corporations hire on-site chaplains

By JOHN MURAWSKI McClatchy Newspapers | Posted: Saturday, October 17, 2009 2:15 am

WAKE FOREST, N.C. - A dozen employees from all ranks fill a conference room, with as many more calling in by speakerphone. One carries a guitar, another distributes photocopies of hymn lyrics.

Sidney Hinton, the chief executive officer, takes his seat at the head of the table to preside over his company's monthly prayer-and-praise worship. The scene that follows at Power Secure International, a publicly traded energy-services company in Wake Forest, would be unimaginable at most corporate offices.

With his Bible close at hand, Hinton first offers a prayer of praise to the Holy Spirit. He then leads employees in the singing of hymns, his eyes shut in intense devotion. Next come readings of Bible verses and sharing of personal testimonials. That's followed by prayers for sick employees, for hospitalized family members, for the company's sales team.

At PowerSecure, Hinton has brought aboard Charles Ligon as a full-time, on-site corporate chaplain. His wide-ranging job is to pray if employees so request, teach debt-management courses, provide crisis support and help resolve workplace issues. On several occasions he has guided employees through a conversion experience to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior.

Corporate chaplains are an increasing presence in American workplaces - about 4,000 of them minister to workers nationwide, mostly in Southern states. But the ministers typically work for an outside agency and visit their assigned companies just a few days a month, said Mark Cress, president of Corporate Chaplains of America, an agency based in Wake Forest, outside Raleigh, with 115 chaplains.

The chaplains provide a benefit for those employees who feel more comfortable discussing personal issues with a minister.

"We don't do Bible studies or prayer meetings in workplaces," Cress said. "It's not our job to turn a business into a church. We don't want employees to think we're there to beat them over the head with a Bible."

As radical as Power Secure might seem in the 21st century, the company is operating within safe legal limits, several law professors said. Federal discrimination law gives private employers plenty of leeway to set their own corporate cultures as long as they don't discriminate.

An Arizona company was vindicated two decades ago in a federal appeals court ruling that set ground rules for workplace ministry, said UNC Chapel Hill law professor Glenn George. The federal court ruled that the private company could require its workers to attend devotional services as long as it paid the workers for the time spent in worship, and as long as an atheist employee was exempted from having to attend.

"The fact that you're just uncomfortable with a chaplain on-site comes nowhere close to actionable harassment, as long as it's truly voluntary and there's no benefit or coercion," George said.

In the Charlotte area, Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Consolidated has an on-site chaplain a day or two a week at its locations, including its Charlotte headquarters and manufacturing plant.

The Coke bottler's chaplain, who comes from Corporate Chaplains of America, has held weddings and funerals and has "saved marriages and helped guide people through all kinds of personal problems that can definitely affect their job performance," said spokesman Lauren Steele. The chaplain is available if workers want to drop in and talk.

"We think this is a good way to show our employees we care about them, not only financially, but also emotionally and spiritually as well," he said.

At PowerSecure, the company is taking a calculated risk that some employees or job applicants might be turned off by its values. PowerSecure employs 350 people, including 150 in the Triangle, and competes for top talent in engineering, sales and other areas.

"They're walking a tightrope for sure," said Ben Rosen, a UNC Chapel Hill business professor who specializes in organizational behavior. "Are (some employees) worried they're losing points with the boss? On the other extreme, some workers will say they've never felt more welcome and at home."

Both Hinton and Ligon stress that they adhere to very clear guidelines for Power Secure's workplace ministry.

"There's no contingencies on someone's faith," Hinton said. "It's not some secret way to get someone to become a Christian."

Hinton, 47, said he learned a lasting lesson on acceptance when he was a "goofball" who flunked out of college and went to work in a mailroom at age 19 when his wife was pregnant with the couple's first child. That forced Hinton to get his act together so he could re-enroll and eventually graduate from college.

"I know if it wasn't for grace and second chances, I wouldn't be here at all," he said.

Even in this openly Christian workplace, most PowerSecure workers don't venture into the religious dimension. Less than half avail themselves of the company's chaplain, and not more than a fourth have attended the monthly devotionals. Hinton said that one of PowerSecure's officers once confided in him that he does not believe in God, a position Hinton says he respects as a matter of private conscience.

"I could see how many corporate environments would be scared to embrace something like this," said Power Secure CFO Chris Hutter, who does not attend the monthly devotionals. "But being here two years has opened my mind as to how faith in the workplace can be employed effectively."

Ligon, 53, formerly worked more than a decade for a power company where he marketed energy-saving programs to industrial, commercial and government customers. At age 38, Ligon changed careers and studied divinity at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest.

In his nondenominational role at PowerSecure, he spends most of his time making the rounds at company offices in Wake Forest, Raleigh, Morrisville and Greensboro, as well as out-of-state locations, to connect with employees and let them know he's available for them if they need him.

"One reason I'm here is to show the employees they're valued," Ligon said. "I think I can improve the productivity of the company because I can help people solve problems."