“The suits care about us”: employee perceptions of workplace chaplains

David W. Miller, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri & James D. Lorusso


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2018.1501414

Published online: 26 Jul 2018.
“The suits care about us”: employee perceptions of workplace chaplains

David W. Miller, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri and James D. Lorusso

Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA; Lorentzen Center for Faith and Work, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN, USA

ABSTRACT
Workplace chaplaincy is an intriguing phenomenon, wherein organizations hire clergy persons to serve the social, spiritual, and psychological needs of their employees. The authors interviewed 56 employees in nine organizations to explore employee perceptions and experiences with chaplaincy. The results indicate that employees perceive chaplaincy as a demonstration of management’s care and concern for them as whole persons by having chaplains meet their work and non-work needs. Employees report that workplace chaplains care for them in five ways: attending to their work-related issues; addressing their practical and social needs; meeting their psychotherapeutic needs; facilitating urgent care as first responders in a crisis; and providing religious or pastoral services. The study suggests that employees’ experience of such care from chaplains can be interpreted as perceived organizational support, which enhances their sense of well-being and their organizational commitment. The article concludes with recommendations for future research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 January 2017
Accepted 12 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Workplace chaplains; employee spirituality; qualitative research; religion; employee care; qualitative

Introduction
Mary walked onto the company premises feeling frustrated and alone. Her middle son was in the hospital after an accident, and she didn’t know where to turn for help. Shortly after Mary began her shift on the factory floor, the company’s chaplain, John, walked in and started as he always had – by walking around and greeting each employee. When he got to Mary’s station, he bid her good morning, and as was customary, asked about the family. After pausing a moment, Mary quietly responded that she needed to talk to him about something. When her break came, Mary walked into John’s office, which was located in the human resources offices at the plant. “Chaplain John, I’m beside myself and can’t focus on my work or anything,” she said. “My son Joe is at the hospital after an accident. He and his friends were cruising around town, and were hit by a drunk driver. They are all at the local hospital, and we don’t have health insurance.” She asked him to pray for her son, so he said a quick prayer with her and promised to go and visit him at the hospital. Soon Mary was back at her station, still worried but feeling much calmer having shared her burden with the chaplain. By the time she left work, she was overjoyed to learn that her son was back at...
home. Chaplain John, she discovered, had visited him at the hospital, and finding that he could be discharged that day, had paid the bill – using money from the employee benevolent fund – and given him a ride home.

In an age of growing pessimism and distrust of organizations – particularly businesses – due to ethical malpractice, leadership failures, and most recently the economic crisis, managers and scholars alike are interested in finding ways to engage employees and increase positive behaviors at work (Podolny 2009; Saks 2011). Over the past two decades, the wider subject of spirituality and religion in the workplace has steadily gained traction as an important and timely area of research in management studies and other academic disciplines, with new conceptualizations, definitions, and empirical studies joining the small but growing body of literature (e.g., Ashmos and Duchon 2000; Fry 2003; Miller 2007; Miller and Ewest 2013). Studies have also found that organizational support of spirituality at work correlates with positive outcomes, including organizational commitment (Bell-Ellis et al. 2013; Vandenberghe 2011), employee engagement (Saks 2011), and citizenship behaviors (Chen and Yang 2011). Most of the available literature utilizes quantitative methods and measures to empirically test these relationships. Our focus in this article is on qualitative descriptions and analysis.

Workplace or corporate chaplaincy is a growing phenomenon in the workplace. Its contemporary formulations build on a centuries-old history (Fones-Wolf and Fones-Wolf 2015). Despite the rich history and current growth of workplace chaplaincy, there has been scant scholarly study (Elkin 1992; Nimon, Philibert, and Allen 2008; Seales 2012). This specialized manifestation of spirituality at work or the Faith at Work movement per Miller (2007) has received some ecclesial commentary but little academic attention or empirically rigorous study (Fones-Wolf and Fones-Wolf 2015; ; Nimon, Philibert, and Allen 2008; Seales 2012). Our project seeks to address this gap in the management academy.

In this article, we explore the question: how do employees experience workplace chaplaincy? Our findings are based on an analysis of 56 interviews with rank-and-file employees in nine organizations. The employee perspective is especially important to explore since chaplains occupy an interesting middle position organizationally, where they are in sympathy with both management and employees and so can sometimes be perceived as being on one side or the other (Bell 2006).

**Literature review**

Chaplains can be found in a variety of settings today, most prominently in the military, healthcare, and correctional institutions, but they have also long served in the marketplace. Historian Daniel O’Conner, for instance, traces how chaplains were enlisted to work alongside employees of the British East India Company as far back as the early seventeenth century (O’Conner, 2013). In the early- and mid-twentieth century, the British Industrial Mission sent Anglican clergy to settle disputes between labor and management. During this same period, French *worker-priests* took positions as frontline employees as a way to reconnect the Catholic Church to working people and support labor rights (Dale, 2001; Miller 2007; Plummer, 1996; Seales 2012).

Originating in the late-twentieth century, corporate (or workplace) chaplaincy differs from its predecessors in many ways. First of all, it should not be understood as the
direct descendent of these earlier instantiations of chaplaincy in the marketplace but rather associated with the growing interest in recent decades among businesses to attend to the spiritual and religious needs of their employees (Cadge and Konieczny 2014; Lambert 2009; Meyer and Davis 2002; Seales 2012). Scholars refer to this trend variably as the faith at work movement (Miller 2007) or workplace spirituality (Ashmos and Duchon 2000; Lambert 2009). Central to this social movement lies the recognition that work is intrinsically rewarding and employers have an obligation to – and can benefit from – nourishing this need. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003), for example, suggest that workplace spirituality can promote a thriving organizational culture, stating that it “promotes employees’ transcendence through work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (p. 13).

Scholars attribute the rise of this movement to a variety of factors. Hicks (2000), for instance, credits “current interest in workplace spirituality” to “demographic and religious changes in US society, overall improvements in the US standard of living, and a variety of transformations in the workplace itself” (p. 27). On the other hand, Miller (2007) suggests that the faith and work movement constitutes a populist response to the church’s failure to recognize the role that individual religious faith is relevant to vocational life. A third perspective by Lambert (2009) suggests that workplace spirituality is not merely the product of social change nor a reaction to the failures of institutional religion but “an important religious movement” in its own right, “shaping and being shaped by American business culture” (p. 18). Despite their theoretical differences, these scholars agree that faith and spirituality is receiving increased attention in the private sector, and we understand workplace chaplaincy as an integral part of this movement.

Unlike industrial chaplains or worker-priests, corporate chaplains are hired directly or indirectly (through third-party providers) by firms to serve the staff as an employee benefit (Wolf and Birgit 2018). Moreover, their primary aim is not to proselytize but, as Seales (2012) notes, corporate chaplaincy has largely shed its Protestant Christian roots in favor of a more generic focus on “spiritual needs,” reflecting today’s religiously diverse workforce. These chaplains serve as ecumenical agents on behalf of the company, providing social support, spiritual counsel, and psychological support to employees in corporations varying from small businesses to Fortune 100 companies. In this way, they provide many services similar to, but not necessarily identical to, traditional Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) (Nimon, Philibert, and Allen 2008). Kahne and Chaloner (2005) describe corporate chaplaincy as employers’ attempts to create a positive work–life balance because the latter assume that “when workers carry their personal problems to work, sinking morale, low productivity and even chronic absenteeism increase.” The authors add that “companies have invested in … the creation of places and times to allow staff to release emotions through private dialogues with a trusted external person” (p. 294) to support that need for work–life balance. As Wolf and Birgit (2018) noted in their recent literature review, “the holistic view of humans and enabling human dignity in working life can be emphasized as the main goals” (p. 52) of chaplaincy in the workplace.

Workplace chaplains and the services they offer differ from their EAP counterparts in many ways, particularly by their physical presence in company workplaces (Nimon, Philibert, and Allen 2008). They enjoy freedom that is both physical and organizational in the
workplaces they serve (Bell 2006; Miller and Ngunjiri 2015; Miller, Ngunjiri, and LoRusso 2017), crossing boundaries between management and workers, freely roaming manufacturing plant floors and corporate cubicles, and offering services both religious and nonreligious in nature – everything from praying for a sick employee or visiting a hospitalized family member, to performing religious rituals and providing referrals for social services or psychological counseling (Fones-Wolf and Fones-Wolf 2015; Heiney et al. 2007).

**Methods**

The methods discussed in this section focus on not only this particular paper, but the larger study from which it is derived. The overall study aimed to understand the growing phenomenon of workplace chaplaincy from the perspective of various constituents: chaplains, human resource (HR) professionals, middle management, rank-and-file employees, and senior organizational leaders. This article focused on the guiding question; how do rank-and-file employees experience chaplaincy in the workplace? Data consisted in qualitative interviews with 56 employees from nine participating organizations, ranging from modestly sized, privately owned companies to Fortune 100 firms (see Table 1).

The qualitative approach utilized for the overall study was informed by hermeneutic phenomenology, which comprises a variety of philosophical theories and social-scientific methods that attempt to report directly on lived human experience. In particular, it is “the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith 2007, ix). Thus, the focus of the study was on the *phenomenon* of workplace chaplaincy as experienced by employees and the other constituents mentioned above, consisting in a total of 117 interviews, 56 of which were with rank-and-file employees. Our approach is informed by van Manen’s (1997, ) perspective on hermeneutic phenomenology, where “the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience” (p. 91). Our goal is to understand the meaning of chaplaincy from the perspectives of those who hire chaplains, chaplains themselves, those who interface with chaplains in the workplace such as HR professionals, and for this specific study, the employees who are served by chaplains. In a sense, we were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Number of employees</th>
<th>Number of chaplains</th>
<th>Chaplainy provider</th>
<th>No. of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A&amp;J Speciality Services</td>
<td>Property restoration and emergency response</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardone Industries Autoparts (Re)manufacturing</td>
<td>~3,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Internally administered</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coyle Carpet One Dane</td>
<td>Carpeting and flooring</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Metal fabrication and stamping</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herr Foods</td>
<td>Snack foods</td>
<td>1,000–2,000</td>
<td>20–25</td>
<td>Marketplace ministries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervarsity Christian Fellowship</td>
<td>Christian nonprofit</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PacMoore</td>
<td>Contract food manufacturing waste management</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pelliteri Waste Systems</td>
<td>Waste management</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Capital chaplains</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson Foods</td>
<td>Food processing</td>
<td>&gt; 115,000</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>Internally administered</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
asking ourselves, “what constitutes the nature of this lived experience” (Creswell, p. 79) of workplace chaplaincy, in order to be able to render for the reader, the nature of workplace chaplaincy “as an essentially human experience” (van Manen, p. 92). According to the phenomenological approach, the way in which these employees experience chaplaincy reveals something about the nature of the phenomenon itself (i.e., workplace chaplaincy).

Hermeneutic phenomenology incorporates insights from hermeneutical methods that stress the importance of interpretation in human perception. Although it agrees with other phenomenological approaches that assume the primacy of experience, this methodology argues that such experiences are always interpretations and therefore always tentative and subjective. It maintains that “interpretations are all we have and description itself is an interpretive process” (Kafke 2011, 187). In other words, a phenomenon is not only closely linked to the experience of it but also actually inextricable from how individuals interpret it. Thus, understanding how employees perceive workplace chaplaincy turns out to be vital to illuminating both the phenomenon itself.

Data collection

This article reports on results of semistructured conversational interviews with 56 non-managerial employees from nine companies participating in the study. Of the employees who participated in interviews, 24 worked in firms that relied on externally contracted agency providers of chaplains – that is, chaplains are employees of the agency, what Wolf and Birgit (2018) referred to as the “rent-a-chaplain” model, while the rest worked for companies with internally staffed and managed chaplaincy programs (chaplains are employees of the firm). The focus of our interview was on gathering lived experience material – stories, anecdotes, recollections of experiences that employees had with chaplains; however, as van Manen (1997, ) notes, gathering experiential material and analyzing the material are iterative processes in phenomenological research. That is, though our primary goal was to hear stories that demonstrate how employees interact with chaplains, we were also asking them to reflect on the meaning of chaplaincy. For example, one of our interview questions asked them to share stories that would help us better understand the role and impact of chaplains in employees lives. “The conversational interview turns increasingly into a hermeneutic interview as the researcher can go back and again to the interview in order to dialogue with the interviewee about the ongoing record of the interview transcript” (p. 92). Employing a semistructured interview approach, we utilized prompts focusing on why and how employees engage with chaplains. Interviews began with questions about the employees name and history with the company, then focused on their engagement with the chaplains:

1. What types of issues do you bring to the chaplain?
2. Please share with us any stories or incidents that you feel would help us understand the role and impact of chaplains among employees.

These two questions would be further unpacked with follow-up questions based on the stories and responses received. In each of the organizations sampled, we had permission
from the senior leaders to conduct the study, and the support of their HR personnel as well. In most of the organizations, chaplains acted as our contacts; they invited the employees to participate in the interviews. They selected the employees, then invited them to participate, thus this was purposive sampling of employees with whom they’d had significant engagements. In most cases, the interviews were held in an empty office where the door could be closed to assure privacy. Once an employee walked into the room, we would introduce ourselves and explain what we were doing, invite them to sign the consent form to allow us to record the interview, and we assured them that they can withdraw participation at any time without any consequences to them. In cases where an employee was not fluent in English, a translator was also present in the room to help translate back and forth from English to their native language. Because these interviews with rank-and-file employees were conducted in the middle of their workday, many were only 20–30 min long so as not to be overly disruptive to the workflow on the factory floor, manufacturing plant, etc. This is in contrast to interviews with leaders, HR professionals, chaplains, and those in white-collar work that could be anywhere from an hour to several hours. In addition to interviews, where possible, we observed the operations of the companies – factory floor, meat processing plant, manufacturing plant – to get a feel for where chaplains engaged in employees within the workplace.

After a contracted third party transcribed the interviews verbatim, each of us engaged in thematic analysis of the transcripts. Each of us read the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data; by this time, we had already analyzed and written about the perspectives of leaders and HR professionals. Therefore, as we had an a priori codebook, but we also were interested in emergent codes in order to create categories that provide answers to our research question and interview prompts for this data set. The third step involved searching for broader patterns, thus developing themes, naming themes, and selecting quotes to illustrate those themes. We did this step collectively, which involved discussions about the labels for the themes and the most appropriate quotes to illustrate selected themes. We checked our themes against previous work on leaders and HR professionals, finding that the five themes helped to explain how chaplains serve employees in these organizations.

**Results**

Our analysis of the employee interviews revealed their consistent articulation that chaplains address a wide range of work-related and nonwork-related matters, spiritual and nonspiritual dimensions, and actively provide assistance inside and outside the workplace. This aligns with reports from workplace chaplains themselves who expressed in separate interviews the extent to which their roles serve both work-related and nonwork-related employee needs. We identified five themes or ways in which chaplains assist employees: (1) attending to the work-related issues of employees, (2) addressing the practical and social needs of employees, (3) meeting the psychotherapeutic needs of employees, (4) facilitating urgent care as first responders in a crisis, and (5) providing religious or pastoral services.
Attending to work-related issues of employees

Because a workplace, whether an office or an assembly line, is not merely a place where production occurs but a dynamic social context where individuals must interact with one another (Choi, Tran, and Park 2015), the work environment can be a source of stress, distress, and conflict with others. Chaplains, according to employees, contribute significantly to a more stable, positive, and predictable environment. One employee, for example, expressed feeling “valued by management” because “they’re willing to make the investment to have chaplains here.” Chaplains, he continued, help individuals to “be more productive while they are at work.” Similarly, another employee claimed that having chaplains meant that “people are happier to come to work; they are more willing to work, knowing that pastors are there to support them whenever they have some kind of emotional issue.” Thus, there appears to be a connection between chaplains and employee well-being, on one hand, and organizational commitment on the other. Accordingly, due in part to the presence of chaplains, “the emotional state of the person is not something the leader is worried about.”

While chaplains might improve employee well-being and organizational commitment, employees also valued the fact that chaplains helped address the sources of work-related distress. Interpersonal conflict such as sexual harassment, for instance, not only disturbs the safety and well-being of people in a workplace setting, it can interrupt work quality and productivity. Chaplains are uniquely situated to navigate such potentially destructive behavior due to their training, moral authority, and trusted role. One employee shared with us how she had been repeatedly subjected to inappropriate comments from her male coworkers and, for fear of retaliation or not being believed, was afraid to report it to management or HR. The chaplain, she stated,

… helped me get the courage and confidence and belief in myself to stand up and say what I felt about it, and I did because of him encouraging me. And seeing how proud he looked. And once I expressed how I felt about the language being used, it did change. And they were more respectful, definitely.

Here, the chaplain helped this employee to deal directly with a situation that otherwise would have worsened, certainly for the female employee and potentially for the organization as a whole. In every organization we studied, the chaplains have an obligation to report harassment to HR, and can help employees navigate that process.

Further, as people who work at the nexus of management and workers, chaplains are perceived by employees as advocates for them. For example, one employee described how the chaplains “are well prepared to talk for” employees when unsympathetic management refused to allow employees to leave the food-processing line to use “the bathroom, or get a drink of water.” Another interviewee expressed confidence in the ability of the chaplain to “listen and consider to see what they can do for us when employees are scared about getting in trouble” by speaking directly to management. “It is better if we tell somebody like the chaplain,” he admitted. Chaplains have the kind of authority that, unlike front-line employees, allows them to address concerns without fears of retaliation.

Employees also reported high levels of pressure, distress, and insecurity associated with downsizing, restructuring, and other forms of organizational change, a factor with
which every organization must deal. We learned that chaplains can be a vital analgesic for the pains of transition and the seemingly constant workplace changes. For instance, when one employee’s manager left for maternity leave, it became an added source of stress for her subordinates. The employee confided, “We hired and fired several people in that time in our department. Got one girl that has some serious health problems.” To deal with what the employee perceived as “a lot of like new situations,” she began meeting with the chaplain “on a fairly regular basis to talk about how things are going.”

In addition to major organizational changes, tensions can also arise on a day-to-day basis among various groups of employees. Our research suggests that employees see chaplains as bridges between the divides that often impair communication and impede a sense of community. As today’s workforces become increasingly diverse, coworkers may find themselves coming up against cultural misunderstandings and barriers. It is significant, then, as one employee observed, that “every chaplain I’ve seen has been bilingual.” Moreover, language differences can contribute to friction between an immigrant workforce, on one hand, and supervisors and managers who often do not share or understand their social norms or cultural background, on the other. Culturally literate chaplains, as one employee explained, have

been very valuable for times when there’s been a language barrier between supervisors and, you know, other people in the plant. So when a chaplain comes in they are able to bridge that gap. They get to really, you know, the meat of the issue.

Religious differences between employees or between employee and employer can also serve as sources of division or tension in the workplace. The rise in religious discrimination and harassment Equal Employment Opportunity Commission cases and recent Supreme Court rulings has highlighted this (e.g., EEOC v. Abercrombie & Fitch). Although chaplains themselves typically have a certain religious or denominational identity, our research revealed that employees nonetheless see them as a helpful resource for managing religious diversity and dealing with the misunderstandings and divisiveness sometimes evoked by religious differences. Chaplains typically bring an ecumenical spirit to the workplace. For example, after being initially resistant to the chaplain, one employee eventually recognized the chaplain’s important role in making the workspace safe for religious expression for people of all faith traditions, not just the nation’s dominant religion, Christianity. The chaplain, he said, would “ask me what’s your beliefs on this or belief on this. And it’s kind of nice to exchange, you know, from the other side.” Likewise, other individuals declared that chaplains seemed to make religious or sectarian differences less important. “They keep the denominations out, and you know, I’m a Baptist, but that doesn’t matter because sometimes people put too much on denomination anyway.” Or as another stated, “It’s really exposed our team members who otherwise may have never learned about a different religion or culture.”

Moreover, when tensions over religious identity and practices do flare up, the chaplain is there to tackle it up front. As an example, an employee recollected a past experience thus:

A few years back, when there was lots of 9/11 tension between Muslims and Christians and Jewish people, the chaplaincy program had somebody talk about the Muslim faith at the company and the Jewish faith and the Christian faith and did an incredible job of really linking all of those stories together …. I really think that it helped bring a lot of people together.
This section has revealed some of the examples of how chaplains helped employees deal with issues at work, including work-related stressors such as harassment, interpersonal conflicts, religious and cultural diversity issues, and advocacy with supervisors to create a better working environment. As noted at the beginning of the section, this kind of care at work also helps employees feel more valued and helps them be more productive at work.

**Addressing the practical and social needs of employees**

In addition to work-related issues, employees told us that chaplains are often willing and able to address practical issues that originate outside of work, and that may have an indirect or subconscious effect on their behavior, performance, or well-being at work. Many companies encourage their employees to “bring their whole selves to work” and accentuate the importance of work/life balance (Kahne and Chaloner 2005). As a result, workers are looking for better benefits with regard to childcare, sick leave, and personal leave to tend to family matters (Marques 2005). For instance, this paper’s opening vignette perfectly illustrates how a chaplaincy program can meet these practical needs. The chaplain was able to deal immediately and effectively with a number of concerns. In the office, he made himself available to the employee for counsel, prayer, and comfort. Outside the office he quickly arranged to use money from the employee benevolent fund to pay the hospital bill, and finally ensured the employee’s son had a ride home from the hospital. The chaplain’s responses were immediate and effective in handling the employee’s crisis in a timely manner. Similarly, a different interviewee recalled how the chaplain had recently helped her when her elderly mother lost her home in a fire. The chaplain quickly put the employee in contact with a suitable assisted living home for her mother. The employee emphasized how the chaplain not only took this initiative but also did so “over the weekend,” when presumably the chaplain was not officially on duty. Such dramatic incidents demonstrate that chaplaincy work is unbounded by the formal temporal and spatial constraints of the workplace (Bell 2006). Chaplains are uniquely positioned and empowered to take an interest in the broader lives of employees. An interviewee explained that “the chaplains will be there for that kind of stuff … anything you need them for.” These and many other examples demonstrate how a chaplaincy program represents an effective means for companies to extend holistic care to all aspects of their employees’ lives.

Some of the employees interviewed were recent immigrants to the United States, and chaplains appear to be especially adept at meeting the needs of these new arrivals. At times this may mean providing direct assistance with the immigration process, including helping to translate for those with limited English proficiency. One employee recalled how the chaplain accompanied him to the immigration office to support his wife when no one else could be found. After asking friends to no avail, he stated, “I went to the chaplain’s offices, and I was very stressed, because you cannot play around with immigration. He told me that he’d be there for us.”

In addition to supporting employees as they move through legal immigration requirements, chaplains are a vital resource for immigrant employees who need to
adjust to life in the United States and need culturally appropriate life skills that nonimmigrants might take for granted. For example, as one individual stated,

When I came to the United States in 1999, my English was zero and I didn’t know how to communicate with people. The chaplain helped me to learn English and how to manage money, things like credit scores and where to find stuff.

In one company, the chaplains helped to set up English-language learning to cater for the different waves of immigrants who were employed at the firm. Some employees needed help with basic life skills and finding community resources; the chaplains were at hand to offer appropriate help.

All in all, whether first-generation immigrant or not, employees perceive chaplains as an invaluable resource to meet challenges that originate outside the workplace. Without workplace chaplains, many companies may not even be aware of these challenges and the related stress that might negatively impact productivity, let alone have the appetite or capacity to respond to them. Our interviews indicate that chaplains contribute to employees’ sense of well-being by addressing the practical and social needs of employees and their families. It also seems logical to infer from our research that grateful employees might be more likely than others to reflect their appreciation through greater commitment to their organizations.

**Meeting psychological needs of employees**

In addition to practical concerns, employees said they sought out the chaplains for a wide range of psychological needs. Although some chaplains may also be certified professional counselors, certification is not typically a job requirement. Therefore, chaplains are trained to and often refer these employees to an appropriate professional when help is needed. Many possess what the chaplains call “a referral bible,” an expansive collection of local and regional professional contacts whose help can begin where the chaplain’s ends. One employee recalled a time when she had left a partner struggling with addiction, and her daughter was having difficulty adjusting to the new situation at home. “The chaplain, she said, was instrumental in getting me quickly introduced to a successful child psychiatrist who had dealt with similar kinds of issues … in a matter of three or four sessions that psychiatrist was able to really help [the daughter] turn a corner.” Similarly, another employee shared how a chaplain helped her in managing her daughter’s mental health struggles. The chaplain, she said, even “went to visit my daughter in the mental hospital and that, that kind of sickness is really hard for me, as the mother.” Not only was the chaplain helping the employee with her own emotional struggles but also was available to her family members too.

Employees may obtain referrals for psychological services for issues such as domestic abuse, marital and parental issues, addiction, depression, and other physical or psychological illnesses. Though some chaplains may not provide more formal or specialized levels of psychological counseling or care, they find ways to offer basic pastoral counseling while facilitating and referring the employee to more extensive therapeutic processes or resources. Some chaplains organize and facilitate support groups for those dealing with health issues.
Employee support groups represent only one alternative to professional counseling. Chaplains also provide direct counseling when appropriate. One employee who was struggling with feelings of isolation on the job received help from the resident chaplain.

Eight to 10 hours of sometimes not a lot of social interaction weighs on me personally. It weighs on me and having someone on-site that’s kind of trained and that you can just talk to for a minute or more if you like . . .

While chaplains provide support for individual psychological distress, some employees also looked to chaplains for help with marital and family concerns. As an illustrative story, one employee said the chaplain “saved our marriage. Without him we would’ve parted ways, and life would have been a whole lot different . . .. [The chaplain] made us see that there’s more to life than work and play.”

Directly and indirectly, therefore, workplace-chaplaincy programs have helped many employees who otherwise might have neither sought out nor found appropriate psychological assistance. Employees consistently reported to us how much they appreciated receiving this basic psychological care and referrals provided by chaplains, and their awareness that such services were not available in many other local organizations. They felt proud of their organizations for providing such.

**Facilitating urgent care as first responders**

Life can be unpredictable, and when crises spring up, employees often look to chaplains as the first and last line of support. Sometimes such crises occur in the workplace, as with an industrial accident, death, or even a shooting. Other times, the crisis may be nonwork related, such as a fatal car accident or heart attack, but nonetheless just as devastating. For many of the employees we interviewed, it was a crisis that first prompted them to seek out the chaplain, even if they had previously resisted the idea of or simply not felt the need. As one interviewee explained,

Somewhere along the line, life is going to get you to the point where you’re going to need some help. And you’re going to put your pride on the shelf, and you’re going to have to ask for some help from somebody, and the chaplaincy’s there.

Frequently, chaplains are literally the first people on the scene when things go awry, providing emotional support to employees, friends, and family. As one employee stated, the chaplain

... goes in and gets close to them, sits down by them, talks to them and everything. Kind of take the time for each individual, one by one. Takes the time to listen, to comfort, to be with them.

Or when another employee’s husband was terminally ill in the hospital, “the chaplain came up to see us, and when he died, one of the chaplains was there.” The chaplains were fully present in the hospital, at home, and during the funeral, to help her and her family deal with this crisis. Another employee talked about going through a difficult period, and coming to work with that stress,
It was so hard, I was crying “Oh my God, I can’t do this job”. Chaplain comes in and talks to me and I feel better. He even helped me doing and talking to me.

Interviewer: he’s helping you work as he talks with you?

Interviewee: yeah, it was nice … I have a daughter, and she have lupus, and she come and talk to me and I tell her that my daughter just lost her baby. And my daughter was very depressed. She go and visit my daughter in that mental place …

In addition to providing comfort during unexpected trauma, chaplains also serve as a crucial point of intervention for crises before they worsen. Consider the following story that one individual shared:

I had a little deal with my daughter when I was trying to get a 20-year-old man out of my 14-year-old daughter’s life. His intentions were not good. And, um, one of our chaplains at the time, he’s not here anymore, but [he] was instrumental in getting me actually thinking about it right, because I wasn’t thinking about a very legal solution to the problem.

The chaplain intervened to steer this employee away from an illegal solution to his problem. Another employee recalled how his company’s chaplain was instrumental in helping stop a suicidal coworker threatening to jump from a bridge. “if [the chaplains] weren’t here,” the employee speculated, “there would not have been somebody there to intervene.” Without chaplains, dealing with these kinds of crises can fall solely into the hands of other employees, as one individual recalled from a time before his employer introduced the chaplaincy program. After speaking with a coworker who admitted to attempting suicide, he stated “the first thing I did is make sure he promised me he would not try to attempt suicide after that. And then I tried to steer him towards some help as I remember.” This interviewee said that a chaplain would have been a welcome presence during this crisis: “That was a mess, that would have been a time when I wish we did have some chaplains real handy.”

In another example, an employee shared how the chaplain had helped her as someone who struggles with bipolar disorder and suicidal ideation:

I told him I didn’t want to live anymore. I didn’t have no joy in my life. There was no joy … What was the use of living? He helped me through it. I am bipolar and I take medicine, but sometimes the depression is really tough … I have better medication now.

The mere presence of chaplains not only complements and supports workers and managers in a crisis, it means that someone equipped with the expertise to avert disaster proactively and steer employees toward appropriate referral resources is readily available.

**Performing religious or pastoral functions**

As noted above, chaplains spend a great deal of time helping employees with both work and nonwork-related issues and practical matters, providing counsel, or responding to crises. And yet their public identity as well as their professional training remains that of a clergyperson with a certain religious affiliation, pastoral skills, and the spiritual guidance expectations others may place on him or her. Not infrequently, employees call on chaplains to pray for them in particular situations. And as religious figures,
chaplains are trained and able to perform a range of religious and pastoral roles. These may include offering voluntary Bible or book studies, coordinating prayer groups, officiating at funerals, and conducting hospital visits. They are also trained to do this in an interfaith context, ministering to those in traditions other than their own. Many workplace chaplaincy programs have a policy guiding what to do if an employee’s specific religious identity insists they speak with a clergy person of their own religion, arranging for a referral to an appropriate clergyperson. The policies and practices around the specific religious functions corporate chaplains are permitted to conduct vary from company to company. Although US federal law protects religious expression in the workplace, such protection is not unlimited. Each of the companies we studied established guidelines for how and when chaplains may perform religious activities. Generally, companies stipulate that chaplains may act in a religious capacity only when expressly invited to by an employee; participation in prayer or other activities must be voluntary; and proselytizing is not permitted. While these general rules might seem unambiguous, knowing in practice when to adopt a religious persona can be challenging. Yet as one employee observed, chaplains find careful ways to navigate this space. The chaplain doesn’t “push the issue, he respects the boundaries and just lets you know he’s there if you want to talk about God.” Thus, while a chaplain may broach the subject of “God,” he or she does so only to discover the employee’s interest or lack thereof, to establish boundaries, and to reinforce the message that the employee holds the prerogative.

Workers occasionally seek out the chaplain for religious functions, particularly prayer. One employee recalled: “He was there when my husband had prostate cancer, to pray and just show that he cared.” Another mentioned that when a coworker “lost her son in Afghanistan, the chaplains invited everyone together in the auditorium, and we prayed.” Other chaplains choose to establish formal procedures for those wishing to engage in prayer.

Some employees told us that chaplains organize formal religious events or carry out more traditional religious services like marriages or funerals. Many workplace chaplains engage in chaplaincy on a part-time basis while also serving as pastor of a local church. Some employees thus seek them out for pastoral care, such as premarital counseling. One shared that “the chaplain did that two years ago, and not only have I built a relationship with [the chaplain], because of the premarital counseling, we also attend his church.” This dual role as minister outside the workplace and chaplain within was seen as a positive dimension for other employees as well. One explained that

knowing some of the ministers from the community, I mean, one of the ministers actually married my wife and I . . . . So, it’s good seeing these guys in here [at work] from the community and so forth. I know them from here, but I know them from outside here as well.

While none of the participants mentioned concern about the dual role, some company policies expressly forbid chaplains from using the workplace as a recruiting ground for their churches, and policies discourage chaplains from having employees attend their church, for fear of unintended favoritism or pressure on the employee.

Employees who, like many shift workers, work irregular hours, nights, and weekends and cannot regularly attend a church appreciate the voluntary worship services that
some chaplains host in their workplaces. “I think it’s good,” one worker said. “Because you are at work, you can [have church service] here.” For workers like this one, the workplace becomes the worship space, giving individuals a chance to practice and express their faith that would otherwise be unavailable to them. When the Sabbath day becomes Wednesday, as it does for many working people in the twenty-first century, a chaplain could represent the only connection that someone might have with his or her chosen religious tradition.

In sum, the responses we gathered from employees reveal workplace chaplaincy to be a much-appreciated benefit offered by the employer. Workers seek out chaplains for a number of activities, both work and nonwork related, religious and nonreligious, and including meeting practical and social needs and psychological needs, offering urgent care as first responders, and performing religious and pastoral functions. In so doing, chaplains provide psychosocial support, help with resources for material support, improve communication, and bridge cultural divides, easing distress inside and outside the workplace. Together, these responses illustrate employees’ perceptions that chaplains contribute to the perceived organizational support (POS) and that their services help employees feel a sense of well-being and report increased commitment to their organizations.

**Discussion**

When we look at these five overall themes regarding the care employees receive from workplace chaplains – helping with workplace stresses, addressing practical and social needs, helping them with psychological and emotional issues, serving as first responders in times of crises, and providing spiritual and pastoral care – we suggest that employees express their experiences with chaplains in terms reflective of POS (Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Valerie 1990), employee well-being (Baptiste 2008), and organizational commitment (Bell-Ellis et al. 2013). However, this being a qualitative study, in the end we argue that one of the important implications is a need for further studies to statistically correlate the relationship between these potential variables. Our discussion here focuses on how we interpreted the employees lived experience of chaplaincy in terms suggestive of these desirable organizational variables.

Employees reported that having a chaplain at work helped them “feel happier to come to work,” reflecting a sense of well-being, and to be “more productive at work” reflecting engagement, and other such phrases. We argue that the chaplain helps lubricate the relationship between employees and the organization. Workplace chaplains “seek to meet employees’ socioemotional needs in the organizations,” which in turn may lead employees to reciprocate by feeling “obligated to the organization” (Suk Bong, Thi Bich Hanh, and Byung Il 2015, 936). We interpret our results through the lens of POS, whereby employees perceive the care they receive from chaplains as one way that the organization and it’s leaders meet their needs. POS “suggests that where there is perceived support from supervisors and employees trust in managers, then employees will reciprocate and respond with positive work attitudes through increased motivation and commitment that can lead to enhanced performance” (Baptiste 2008, 287).

Our argument is that the chaplain’s role as provider of social, spiritual, and psychological care to employees may serve to mediate positively the relationship between
employees and organization – a relationship we recommend needs testing quantitatively. In our study, one of the most frequently occurring words in the transcripts was “trust.” Employees talked about trusting chaplains and how chaplains could be trusted to hold in confidence whatever they were told. Employees would give examples such as “you have problems, you can’t talk to your coworkers, or your supervisor, but the chaplain, you know, feels so comfortable to talk to him because your business is not going to be all over the place.” Chaplains’ care for employee needs within and beyond the workplace may have helped build more organizational trust, the “fundamental assumption inherent in most employment relationships . . . [being] that the employer will operate in a trustworthy manner” (Gillespie and Dietz 2009, 127). As one employee aptly captured in a quote used at the beginning of the results section, “a chaplaincy program gives the workers an idea that they are valued by management if they are willing to make the investment to have the chaplains there.” Thus, as a value-added benefit (Miller and Ngunjiri 2015), employees perceive chaplaincy as a tool to help care for them. It appears to increase the trust that employees have for their organization; it would be beneficial to test that relationship quantitatively.

Employee well-being is the “individual’s feelings about themselves in relation to their job,” including elements such as “pay, colleagues, supervisors, working conditions, job security, training opportunities, involvement, team working and the nature of the work undertaken” (Baptiste 2008, 287). As Guest (2002) argued, “one of the issues that needs to be considered . . . is how the experience of work relates to life outside of work” (344). This study suggests that their presence in organizations and their work with employees help bridge the workplace with life outside of work – by caring for employees’ needs both within and beyond the organization. This connection appears to contribute to employees’ experience of well-being, seen as positive feelings about life and work (Guest 2002). And since the chaplain is hired by the organization’s leadership to serve the work and life needs of employees, chaplaincy may contribute to employees’ feelings of well-being and positive attitude toward their employer. Thus, employees report not only feeling happier to come to work, but also feeling more engaged or productive when they are at work because they have the necessary support outside of work.

Further, Choi, Tran, and Park (2015, 933) argue that “employees with positive perceptions about their leader have a greater affective organizational commitment. Support from the leader increases the employee’s sense of moral obligation to fulfill organizational objectives and may be reciprocated by a higher level of employee affective organizational commitment” (Suk Bong, Thi Bich Hanh, and Byung Il 2015, 933). The results appear suggestive of this relationship; employees reported feeling more valued because of their organizations investment in chaplains to meet their work and life needs, thus contributing to employees’ commitment to the organization. Other studies found that organizational leaders perceive chaplaincy as contributing to more-committed employees, which the leaders reported as manifesting in reduced turnover, higher levels of safety, and reductions in absenteeism (Kahne and Chaloner 2005; Miller and Ngunjiri 2015; Miller, Ngunjiri, and LoRusso 2017, 2018).

The results demonstrate that employees reported feeling the care that they received from chaplains enabled them to have a more positive regard for their organizations. The care employees receive from chaplains can be seen as creating in them a sense of obligation to the organization (Suk Bong, Thi Bich Hanh, and Byung Il 2015). As a
voluntary or discretionary value-added benefit over and above the usual benefits employees expect and receive, chaplaincy is likely to engender a sense that the organization is supportive of them, and in turn they respond positively by being or feeling more committed to it. As they explained, employees perceived their organizations as doing “something extra” to care for their needs. And they respond by “being more productive at work,” “doing a better job,” and other positive behaviors.

Further, the quotes in the results section indicate that employees viewed chaplaincy in terms that suggest POS in the form of caring for their well-being at work and in their life outside of work. As Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) explained, “an employee who sees the employer as supportive is likely to return the gesture ....” (833) and is “somewhat akin to an organization’s commitment to an employee” (884). The participants in our study reported that chaplains’ care for them was how their organization showed that “it cares” or that supervisors, managers, or leaders were committed to their welfare. To describe how it felt to have work-related needs met and to have the support necessary to meet needs outside of work, employees used the idea of feeling like family: “they make you feel more like a family; they really care about you; we’ve got the feeling, the confidence that somebody is there for us.” Employees appreciated feeling supported both in and outside of work. It comes as no surprise that organizational leaders perceived chaplaincy as contributing to positive outcomes such as retention, reduced absenteeism, and increased safety (Miller and Ngunjiri 2015). It is possible that employees reciprocate the POS with appropriate work behaviors that contribute to those positive outcomes.

In summary, employees experience the care they receive from chaplains in terms of POS. This care further enables employees to feel a sense of well-being, which, as Kahne and Chaloner (2005) argue, fits with the reason leaders hire these external support because workers do bring their nonwork problems into work with them. Finally, we note that employees report being more committed to their organizations as a result of this support. These qualitative results are a promising first step toward further research and future organizational practice, as we argue below.

**Implications**

Our study demonstrates how employees experience workplace chaplaincy as one variation or manifestation of the wider Faith at Work (or workplace spirituality) movement (Miller 2007) and, beyond that, suggests that chaplaincy may contribute to individual employee-level outcomes such as employee well-being, commitment, and POS. This study further illustrates that chaplaincy occurs at the nexus of appreciating that employees bring their whole selves, including their spiritual, social, and emotional selves to the workplace and recognizing that people desire community and connection at work (Ashmos and Duchon 2000). This affirms previous research suggesting that the impetus to hire chaplains stems from an aspiration to create or sustain a positive organizational culture, thereby communicating to employees that the organization and its leadership care for them (Kahne and Chaloner 2005; Miller and Ngunjiri 2015; Miller, Ngunjiri, and LoRusso 2017). Chaplaincy is a resource for social support in and outside of the workplace, thus emerging as a spiritually grounded form of EAP. It compares favorably with EAP, but goes above and beyond what EAP provides by physically bringing
chaplains into the workplace and extending employee care outside of work to their families (Nimon, Philibert, and Allen 2008). We recommend further studies of workplace chaplaincy to provide empirical support for the relationship between chaplaincy and organizational outcomes including the three suggested by our results of POS, employee well-being, and organizational commitment, as well as others such as job satisfaction, engagement, and leadership.

Further studies of the construct of chaplaincy and its various modalities are necessary, especially in view of the growing religious diversity of the employees whom chaplains serve. This diversity could be further analyzed according to other demographic factors such as age, rank in the organization, ethnicity and national origins, immigration patterns, and geographic location of the workplace. In the context of globalization, cost pressures, and flatter organizational structures, to name but a few trends in the corporate arena, workplace chaplaincy appears to serve a role that is otherwise unfulfilled by traditional line management and HR functions. Scholars and practitioners alike should welcome further studies to gain deeper understanding of challenges and possibilities that workplace chaplaincy offers today’s organizations.

The questions below, while not exhaustive, serve as further suggestions for future research:

(1) What is the relationship between organizational culture and the use of workplace chaplaincy? For instance, does having a positive organizational culture precede bringing chaplains into the workplace, or is a positive organizational culture a result of workplace chaplains?
(2) Is there a relationship between regional cultures or industry sectors and workplace chaplaincy?
(3) What role does the religious identity of the chaplain play in an increasingly religiously diverse workforce?
(4) What is the relationship between individualism/collectivism and workplace chaplaincy?
(5) What is the impact of an employee’s religiosity and the likelihood of using the services of a workplace chaplain?
(6) What is the relationship between chaplaincy and the leader–member exchange relationships?
(7) How do employee experiences of chaplaincy services and traditional EAP compare and contrast?

**Conclusion**

This study reveals five ways that employees reported that their organizations cared for them. First, chaplains attend to work-related issues such as harassment, advocating for employees’ needs, helping employees manage work stressors, and helping employees navigate religious and cultural differences. Second, chaplains address the practical and social needs of employees such as immigration, language issues, and family issues. Third, chaplains meet the psychological needs of employees by providing basic counseling as well as referral services. Fourth, chaplains serve as first
responders during crisis situations for employees and their families. And finally, chaplains perform religious and pastoral functions when invited to do so by employees. As discussed above, we suggest that these actions can be interpreted through the lens of POS, which helps to enhance employees sense of well-being and likely results in enhanced organizational commitment. However, we recognize that our interpretations are just that, interpretations. Phenomenological studies such as this, although they reveal patterns in how employees experience corporate chaplaincy, can neither provide empirical verification of employees’ claims nor demonstrate any causal relationship between corporate chaplaincy and the outcomes we propose. More studies are needed to further support these findings, and to mitigate against the limitations of this present study.

One such limitation is the fact that we had 56 interviewees; whereas this is a decent sample size for a qualitative study, the interviews were limited in length due to the needs of the workplaces. Most of these interviews were of line or factory floor workers in food processing and manufacturing. Secondly, most of our participants were selected by the chaplains, based on the criteria of sustained engagement – that is, they could provide rich stories that would help us gain a better understanding of how employees experience chaplaincy. However, this leads to the limitation that we then were not able to gather counterstories that could serve as a critique of chaplaincy from the perspective of the employees. Finally, our study also faces the limitation of being overwhelmingly focused on Tyson Foods. Whereas this is understandable as it has the largest number of chaplains (125) and employees who experience chaplains in their various locations and plants in our sample, it also means that the study results are skewed in favor of how chaplaincy is run at Tyson Foods. Tyson Foods holds annual training conferences for their chaplains who are all employees of the company. It would be informative to have a similarly large corporation as a case study with externally sourced chaplains and find out whether employees experiences would be significantly different.

In conclusion, in an age of growing distrust of institutions, lack of loyalty, debates about livable wages, and perceptions of CEO greed and indifference to employee needs, our research suggests that workplace chaplaincy may have a unique and positive contribution for corporations and for employees both in and outside of work. The results of our research suggest that offering workplace chaplaincy as an optional employee benefit communicates to workers that they are valued and that their leaders care about them enough to invest in the service (Miller, Ngunjiri, and LoRusso 2018). And workers feel that they are able to be healthier, safer, and more effective, and productive; as one interviewee phrased it, “if they are not worried about issues at home, or issues that don’t pertain to work … they might do a better job.” Based on the results of this study, we conclude that business leaders should think critically about the potential benefits a workplace chaplaincy program could have for their organizations, even if their organization is publicly traded and has a secular culture. The five categories of benefits we identified through analysis of the employee interviews strongly suggest that employees who are exposed to and have benefited from workplace chaplaincy services feel that “the suits care about us.”
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

David W. Miller is the director of the Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative, as well as a lecturer and professional specialist at Princeton University. His research interest in the area of faith and work includes ethics, faith-friendly companies, workplace chaplaincy, and The Integration Profile which is a validated assessment instrument based on a theoretical model initially proposed in his book God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement (OUP, 2007). David’s research is published and cited in various outlets, and he serves as advisor to CEOS and executives on issues of faith, ethics, and leadership.

Faith Wambura Ngunjiri is the director of the Lorentzen Center for Faith at Work, and associate professor of ethics and leadership at the Offutt School of Business, Concordia College. She is co-editor of Religious Diversity in the Workplace (Cambridge, 2018), Women as Global Leaders (IAP, 2014), and Women and Leadership around the World (IAP, 2015). She authored Women’s Spiritual Leadership in Africa (SUNY, 2010). Her research focuses on spiritual leadership/faith at work, and on women’s leadership.

James D. LoRusso is associate research scholar in the Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative within the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. His research interests include theory and method in the study of religion, lived religion, cultural studies, and the intersection of religion and the marketplace in 20th and 21st century North America. He is the author of Spirituality, Corporate Culture, and American Business: The Neoliberal Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capital (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), which explores how American spirituality has shaped and been shaped by neoliberal capitalism.

References


