

More US firms are providing faith-based support for employees

by [David Crary](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue



Karen Diefendorf, second right, director of Chaplain Services at Tyson Foods, talks with employees at the company's Berry St. poultry plant in Springdale, Ark. The company deploys a team of more than 90 chaplains to comfort and counsel employees at its plants and offices. The program began in 2000. (Logan Webster/Tyson Foods via AP)

It has become standard practice for US corporations to assure employees of support regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. There's now an intensifying push to ensure that companies are similarly supportive and inclusive when it comes to employees' religious beliefs.

One barometer: more than 20 percent of the Fortune 100 have established faith-based employee resource groups, according to an AP report, and a high-powered conference took place last month in Washington aimed at expanding those ranks.

“Corporate America is at a tipping point toward giving religion similar attention to that given the other major diversity categories,” said Brian Grim, founder and president of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation which cohosted the conference along with Catholic University of America’s Busch School of Business.

A few companies have long-established programs for faith in the workplace. One is Arkansas-based Tyson Foods, which deploys a team of more than 90 chaplains to comfort and counsel employees at its plants and offices. That program began in 2000.

However, Grim says most companies—over the past few decades—have given religion less attention in their diversity/inclusion programs than other categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

Grim is an associate scholar at the Religious Liberty Project at Georgetown University and a former senior researcher with the Pew Research Center. From 2015 to 2016, he served as chair of the World Economic Forum’s global agenda council on the role of faith.

Grim’s foundation, founded in 2014, recently completed a detailed analysis ranking the Fortune 100 companies on their commitment to religious inclusion as part of those programs.

The top ten in the rankings featured some of America’s best-known companies—Google’s parent company Alphabet, Intel, Tyson Foods, Target, Facebook, American Airlines, Apple, Dell, American Express, and Goldman Sachs.

Tyson won points for its chaplaincy program; most of the others have formed either a single interfaith employee resource group or separate groups for major religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Google’s interfaith group, the Inter Belief Network, has chapters for those faiths and for Buddhists, while Intel has a group for agnostics and atheists, as well as groups for major religious faiths.

One employer, the Internal Revenue Service, has a group specifically for Christian fundamentalists.

Grim says several other high-profile companies—including Walmart, the largest US employer—have recently decided to launch faith-based employee groups.

One of the fastest growing faith-based groups, called Faithforce, was launched by Salesforce in 2017. Its founder, Farah Siddiqui, says more than 2,600 employees have signed up since then, joining 17 regional hubs on five continents.

Siddiqui, a Muslim whose family is from Pakistan, said the group now includes Sikhs, Hindus, pagans, and humanists, as well as followers of America's largest faiths.

"We're a very inclusive group," she said. "If someone has something interesting to share, we share it. There is no proselytizing."

Siddiqui said Faithforce proved its value in somber fashion after a string of deadly attacks on houses of worship in far-flung parts of the world—notably the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, three Christian churches in Sri Lanka, and two mosques in New Zealand.

"We had healing circles after each of those tragedies," said Siddiqui, who recounted visits by a rabbi and a Muslim scholar.

"What we've done is support our employees of those faiths to show that the rest of us are here for them," she said.

Thus far, the faith in the workplace movement has mostly escaped harsh criticism. Brian Grim has taken pains to argue that faith-based employee resource groups are not a threat to LGBTQ employees and instead should be viewed as a sign of a corporation's overall commitment to diversity and inclusion.

American Airlines is evidence of that: its presence high atop the new religious freedom rankings come after many years of accolades for its strong support of LGBTQ employees.

"The perception out there is that religion is a dangerous topic, but some companies have found the opposite—that it reinforces the other things they care about," Grim said.

Nick Fish, president of American Atheists, said companies considering faith-based initiatives should strive to ensure they are inclusive.

"Creating a work environment that is exclusionary of nonreligious staff or members of religious minorities is a recipe for disaster," he said via email. "I'd urge any employer who is considering this sort of action to instead ensure that their

workplace is religiously neutral and welcoming to staff and customers of any religious belief or those who are nonreligious.” —Associated Press