

Marketplace Ministries marks 20 years as God's ambassadors_110104

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Marketplace Ministries marks 20 years as God's ambassadors

By Ken Camp

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DALLAS—When Gil Stricklin resigned as youth evangelism consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas 20 years ago to launch a new ministry providing workplace chaplains to businesses, Evangelism Director Carlos McLeod promised to pray for him.

“You'll need it,” he said.

He did. The first five business leaders he approached to offer his services as a marketplace chaplain turned him down, and they were all fellow church members.

“The first person I visited told me: 'You're going to get a lot of people sued. You cannot mix religion and work,’” Stricklin recalled.

Gil Stricklin

Once he found a business that accepted his invitation, he spent more time the first couple of months "hanging around" at work, cutting grass, tagging items for sale and packing merchandise than offering spiritual counsel, he recalled.

Today, Marketplace Ministries has grown into an \$8.4 million nonprofit corporation, serving employees at 250 companies in 35 states. More than 1,600 chaplains work in 900 locations, offering broad-based pastoral care to about 337,000 employees and family members. And in two decades, no one has sued Marketplace Ministries or its employees.

Stricklin's experiences as an Army Reserve chaplain inspired him to begin the ministry. In the military, he preached funerals for soldiers' family members, made hospital visits, counseled couples before they married and visited incarcerated children of Army personnel.

"It helped me see clearly that most people don't have a pastor," he said.

Stricklin discovered 70 percent of the American workforce claims no relationship with a pastor, priest, rabbi or minister. And in 1983, only 28 Southern Baptist chaplains served in what was called "industrial chaplaincy."

Before he resigned his BGCT post, Stricklin discussed his vision for marketplace chaplains with his pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas, W.A. Criswell.

"If this is of God, you won't be able to get away from it," Criswell told him. "If not, it will go away."

The vision wouldn't go away. In fact, it became clearer to Stricklin. He became convinced he could not continue urging people to fulfill the Great Commission of making Christian disciples until he first provided a way for them to obey the Great Commandment—loving God supremely and loving

one's neighbor as oneself-where people spend most of their waking hours.

“Whether people come to know the Lord or not, they need to know God cares about them,” Stricklin said. “We are in the workplace to represent God.”

Marketplace Ministries contracts with businesses that offer chaplain services as an employee benefit. Stricklin's ministry, in turn, provides trained, carefully screened chaplains who are available at no cost to employees for a wide range of pastoral care services.

Three chaplains serve the 205 employees at Town North Bank in Dallas, walking alongside the staff and their families through surgeries, cancer treatments, times of bereavement and other crisis times, said John Reap, the bank's president and chief executive officer.

“They are thankful for the love and care exhibited through the chaplains,” Reap said.

Marketplace Ministries chaplains provide an unobtrusive pastoral presence in the workplace, Stricklin emphasized. If an employee wants to talk about spiritual matters, the employee initiates the conversation.

“Our chaplains are quietly and inconspicuously in the workplace, not playing 'Just As I Am' over the PA system,” he said. “We do not come in preaching, condemning or judging. We come in with my favorite four-letter words-care, help, hope and love.”

But if employees want to know how to find peace with God, chaplains are free to present the Christian plan of salvation to them. Of those employees who initiate a conversation with a chaplain about their salvation, 80 percent come to faith in Christ, Stricklin said. In 20 years, the chaplains have recorded more than 32,000 professions of faith.

“When you love people, when you represent the Lord Jesus with love and compassion, hearts will be opened to the gospel,” Stricklin said. “When you offer a gentle, winsome witness and offer care to people when they need it, then you can share the gospel.”

Many employers also find out having a chaplain in the workplace makes good business sense. They report greater loyalty and productivity, less turnover and a safer working environment.

“Employees are our most valuable asset,” said Ray Huffines of the Dallas-area Huffines Auto Group, which has four chaplains serving its employees. “We believe we are going to be successful or not based on our employees, and the things they are dealing with—the issues they face—affect their performance.”

Offering chaplain service as an employee benefit also sends an important message, he adds. “It makes a statement that we care about our people.”

While the workplace environment at the Huffines dealerships already was positive before the chaplains arrived, Stricklin points to a business in South Carolina that had been plagued by racial problems, even to the point of knife fights breaking out in the workplace.

“Our chaplain's been there for five years, and there have been no employee disputes on the floor in four years,” he said. “It's a whole different atmosphere. There's an undergirding moral and ethical undertone.”

Twenty years ago, Marketplace Ministries was unique. Since then, at least five similar organizations have been created, and Stricklin said he has done everything possible to encourage them.

“There's no competition,” he said. “We could have 10,000 companies like ours in America and not touch the hem of the garment.”

Through the years, Stricklin was granted an honorary doctorate from Dallas Baptist University, was named a distinguished alumnus of Baylor University and most recently received the Abner McCall Humanitarian Award from the Baylor Alumni Association.

But he remains convinced the greatest honor is being God's ambassador to the workplace—"representing the Lord Jesus Christ and Almighty God in kindness and through acts of service."

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