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Staff Chaplain Sets a Restaurant Chain Apart

By Samuel G. Freedman

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ORANGE PARK, Fla.

Midway through the dinner rush at the Loop Pizza Grill on a November night, the Rev. Becci Curtis, graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., pulled a disposable glove onto her right hand and plunged it into a container of shredded romaine. Her mission, at the moment, was to assemble a Gorgonzola salad.

As she worked, adding the croutons and cheese, Ms. Curtis chatted with the waitress beside her, April Mechler. They talked about the Thanksgiving just past, about how Ms. Mechler's homemade mac-and-cheese had turned out. Then they talked about Ms. Mechler's dream of becoming a journalist and her application for a summer internship at The Florida Times-Union, the daily paper in nearby Jacksonville.

Ms. Mechler stepped away from the salad station to deliver an order, and Ms. Curtis walked through the swinging door into the kitchen, spotting Richard Calalang amid the grills and deep fryers. She knew his dream, too: to move to California and work for a catering company that serviced film studios and even the Playboy Mansion. She also knew his private worry about fitting in on the West Coast: He did not know how to surf.

It was all part of Ms. Curtis's job, the conversing and the confiding and the salad-making, too. A lifetime as an observant Christian and a top-rank education in divinity had led her, improbably or providentially or both, to being the spiritual leader of a pizza joint. She worked four hours a week for \$10 an hour, plus the occasional tip, and on her flowered blouse she wore a name tag that identified her official position: chaplain.

Ms. Curtis is, in fact, one of about 10 chaplains on the paid staff of the Loop Pizza Grill's 26 restaurants throughout the Southeast. The chain's co-founder and chief executive, Mike Schneider, came up with the idea several years ago as a way of combining his decades in the food industry with his more recent embrace of Christianity.

"In the New Testament," Mr. Schneider said, watching Ms. Curtis work the counter, "Jesus overturns the tables, he's so upset that the temple has been turned into a place of

doing business. Becci's doing ministry in the business. She is doing what I would call God's work."

In a secular workplace in a polyglot country, this form of God's work involves both an open hand and a light touch. Ms. Curtis's role is to be emotionally available for a young, often transient work force one that includes Muslims, Jews and atheists, as well as Christians not to proselytize it.

"I'm here to earn their trust, to be in the trenches with them, to give an example of helping out without complaining," Ms. Curtis said, sounding rather like a military chaplain. "I tell the employees, 'My primary responsibility is to be there to care for you guys.'"

Sometimes the conversations end up being very surface-y. There's one employee, pretty much all we talk about is the Seattle Mariners. But I see that as valuable, because if he ever does have a problem, he'd feel the trust in sharing it with me. And if I do know about deeper issues — deaths in the family, frustrations with parents or siblings — I will seek opportunities to hear them out and offer advice."

At 31, Ms. Curtis retains enough coltish ebullience to mesh easily among the teenagers and young adults who do the cooking, serving and busing. Yet as someone with a master's degree and a full-time job as associate pastor of a local church, she also has no difficulty in telling a co-worker who might be struggling with parents or a romance: "You want to know what I have to say? Because you may not like it."

And there is undeniably an underlying sense of Christian purpose to her work. During one of her recent sermons at the Orange Park Presbyterian Church, Ms. Curtis spoke on Martin Luther in a personal way:

"Luther coined the phrase 'the priesthood of all believers,' which is a doctrine that simply means that each and every believer, every Christ-follower, is to function as a priest to one another."

Mr. Schneider makes a similar argument to those franchise owners who are Christians in trying to persuade them to hire chaplains. For the other franchisees, who include a Hindu with the Loop Restaurant near Birmingham, Ala., he addresses the bottom line.

"I say there's nothing more important to demonstrate to your employees than that you value them, you love them," he said. "It improves the chemistry of the restaurant, gives us better guest-focus and problem-resolution. I can't provide empirical evidence, but the restaurants with chaplains have lower turnover rates, less absenteeism. I can point to the profit-loss statement."

As the November night proceeded, Ms. Curtis gave one customer the extra salad dressing she requested, replaced the barbecue sauce that another had spilled, intercepted a fish order that had fries instead of chips on the side. She talked with one

counter girl about eggnog latte and another about a medical condition and a third about her sister's honeymoon plans.

By Mr. Schneider's rule, all the conversations, from the innocuous to the intimate, remained between employee and chaplain. Only indirectly could the franchise manager, Phil Parandes, reckon the effects. "It helps their morale knowing there's someone here," Mr. Parandes said. "Becci's an upbeat person, and that radiates out."

Nearby the Loop Pizza Grill, all sorts of similar franchises went about their business in their own way. Zaxby's, Pizza Hut, Chick-fil-A, Ruby Tuesday, McDonald's and Mac's Southwest Grill stood within sight of the Rev. Becci Curtis's de facto church of pizza. And inside it, as the dinner rush slowed, Richard Calalang in the kitchen started to sing.

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