

# Chaplain joins local construction company

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## Man at work

Team Elmer's company chaplain Tom Shelder visits workers at the company's various job sites for relationship-building activities, which can range from bringing water or having lunch to more mentor- or counselor-type services.

TRAVERSE CITY — Tom Shelder traded his collar for a hard hat.

The ordained minister and licensed family and marriage therapist is the first staff chaplain for Traverse City-based construction and transportation company Team Elmer's.

"I basically do what a pastor would do," said Shelder, a 1977 graduate of Traverse City Central High School and one of the area's only workplace chaplains. "It is somewhat unusual. I'm like a spiritual advisor-slash-mentor to our employees. I also take the place of the employee assistance program they had. Instead of farming it out, we can do it on site, which (Elmer's president) Troy Broad felt would be more effective with our guys."

Shelder started the full-time job in January and already conducted a memorial service for a truck driver. He'll officiate at a wedding this fall.

Meanwhile he'll visit employees and their family members in the hospital, lead Wednesday and Thursday morning men's and Bible studies, and counsel staff on everything from balancing family and work to attaining financial peace.

"Sometimes the jobs intermix," he said. "Sometimes I'll be talking to somebody about something and I'll end up praying with them before they leave my office. Sometimes I meet someone for counseling before they get to work. The other day I was meeting with a guy before 5 a.m."

Currently Shelder spends most of his time "relationship-building," which includes everything from driving out to job sites with Gatorade and water to picking up a shovel and pitching in.

He even rides along with truck drivers delivering asphalt and gravel.

"You have to have trust," said Shelder, who has an uncle who owned a paving company and another who worked with Team Elmer's. "When you're dealing with construction guys, you have to build a relationship with them."

Shelder studied at United Wesleyan College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and attended grad school at Dakota Wesleyan University near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He was a pastor in Buckley before starting his own counseling practice in Traverse City and Cadillac.

But he said he is careful in his employee relations to point out that "I'm not here to push anything on you."

"It's been pretty positive, even better than what I would have anticipated," he said, of his reception so far. "I would have anticipated some cold shoulders. I think it's the Gatorade and water."

Having a chaplain to shoulder some of the "compassionate" responsibilities helps relieve the family company's three owners, said Toni Hendricks, office manager at Team Elmer's corporate office in Traverse City.

"We've gotten so big," Hendricks said, adding that the company has grown to 430 employees in 13 offices across the state. "They try to make the funerals but it's nice that

we have one person we can designate. If we need someone to drive to Hillsdale, Tom can do that.”

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