

Economic Downturn Provides Opportunities - Lynn Guillory

"Everything changed after September 11, 2001," many have said. After the tragic events of that day, an existing economic downturn gave way to a free fall. The meteoric dot.com industry had already hurtled downward at the speed of light. (Dot.com had become dot.gone.) Suddenly the majority of companies, including even those in traditionally stable industries, took a fearful look at their bottom line and began restructuring. Their rightsizing and downsizing translated into slashed employee populations. Men and women lost their jobs at a rate not seen since the mid-1980s. First-time applicants for unemployment benefits increased to more than 400,000 per week, the largest first-time unemployment rate in more than ten years. (In autumn 2001, more than 3 million workers are out of work with the national unemployment rate reaching almost 6%).

Translate these statistics to the local church level and what do we see? In almost every church, 5% of the members, one in every 20, are unemployed. Another 15% to 20% are under-employed (working beneath their skill, education or salary capacity). Add to those figures the approximately 20% who are employed but unfulfilled in their jobs and ignorant of how to change their situation. Taken together, these figures show that almost half of the men and women in any local church are in need of and could benefit from a viable career ministry.

Equal Opportunity

While today's economic downturn and pending recession can seem depressing, it once again has given the local church a tremendous opportunity for ministry. The secular world has many categories to describe the types of people who suffer job loss, but from God's perspective there are only two types: believers and nonbelievers. An effective biblically faith-based Employment Transition Ministry can minister to both. It is an in-reach to help and encourage the believer, modeling Galatians 6:10:

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." It is also an evangelistic outreach to the nonbeliever in the local community.

Nonbelievers who lose their jobs may or may not have been attending church, but they may have been worshipping--at the career or corporate altar. Suddenly they find they have been worshipping a false god, a Dagon that has fallen at their feet unable to help them or itself (cf. 1 Sam. 5:3). Those who have seen their jobs eliminated for the first time (or even the second or third time) feel frustrated and angry at corporate America. They may be seeking answers in places they would never have looked before.

It is very likely that God has allowed this time of employment instability to soften their hearts to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and to be reconciled to the God who loves them and has a plan for their lives. "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you" (Jeremiah 29:11-12). Our experience in Career Transition Ministry has shown that a biblically faith-based ministry that expresses unconditional love and shares cutting-edge job search advice with job seekers will also have the opportunity to introduce to them Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The other opportunity that a biblically faith-based Career Transition Ministry has is to the believer. Job loss is nondiscriminatory, and believers lose their jobs at exactly the same rate as nonbelievers. Rather than looking at it as a disaster, the perspective of faith is that it is a trial: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3). God never promised employment stability, but in the midst of unemployment testing, the believer can be assured that He is Jehovah Jireh (The Lord Who Provides). When believers lose their jobs, one of the most disconcerting aftershocks is they sense that fellow believers avoid them or feel uncomfortable around them. This happens because fellow believers simply do not know how to respond to the unemployed. Believers who lose their jobs have a great need for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to come alongside them, to pray for them daily, to meet with them weekly, and to know for certain that they will walk this valley of job search with them until the job seeker has secured another job. Fellow believers are made aware of their opportunities to live out the helpful admonition of Galatians 6:10 in a church that has an ongoing Career Transition Ministry.

Now More Than Ever

An effective biblically faith-based ministry to the job seeker is needed during any economic period, but never more than now. Despite the obvious need, less than 5% of the churches in America today have any meaningful ministry to the job seeker. Even more disturbing, the majority of churches that have any kind of ministry to the job seeker concentrate on resume development and interview preparation. The spiritual aspect is downplayed or ignored: they don't open and close with prayer, share biblical truth concerning work, or introduce Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to job seekers. These politically correct ministries are merely community workshops held under the roof of a church. While they may be somewhat helpful in assisting the job seeker in finding their next employer relationship, they fail in the more important task of sharing with the job seeker the Good News about an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ that is offered to them freely.

For any career transition ministry to the job seeker to be effective, it must offer both cutting-edge job search advice/training and biblical truth concerning God's will for the job seeker. This is part of the job description of a God-honoring, God-glorifying ministry. This present economic downturn has presented the local church with a unique opportunity to effectively minister in this way. Indeed, the "fields are white unto harvest." And the job seekers who need help are many.

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