

The Overlooked Mission Field - Lynn Guillory

Ann sits very still in the same pew she has sat in almost every Sunday for 15 years. Her Bible is open and her pen poised over her notepad as usual. In the background she hears the voice of her pastor. He talks about the mission field and the responsibility of the Body of Christ to seize every opportunity to reach people with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But her mind starts to wander when he exhorts his approximately 1000-member congregation to reach people at their "point of need." She can't help but think about her husband Fred and his point of need. Their need.

She starts to reach for a prayer request card in the pew rack but stops. Fred specifically told her not to tell people that he was unemployed. She was to say that he was "doing consulting work while considering his options." Ann knows enough about depression to recognize the disturbing symptoms Fred is showing. She thinks, This is so much harder than two years ago when he was hospitalized for major surgery. The associate pastor and some of the men from church had visited him. (No one visits now.) I was so grateful and excited when Fred began attending church with me for several weeks after his hospitalization. But that was then. Things are different now. The only thing I can do now is pray.

Fred sits in the recliner in his living room several miles from the church. The television remote is in his hand, but he has no idea what is on or how many channels he has already flipped through. Once again he struggles to deal with the anger, frustration, and even shame he feels, but he doesn't know how. Fred is 56 and has been unemployed for five months. He is not a believer. Over the years he occasionally has attended church with his wife, but he won't go now. Too many people might ask him if he'd found work yet. Or, worse yet, they might stay away from him as if unemployment were contagious. He'd seen that happen before.

As Fred contemplates his situation, he can hardly believe it. Years ago he began his career with what he intended to be his one-and-only employer. He trusted in what some refer to as the "old implied employment agreement"—the idea that employment with the company was for a lifetime. Fred hadn't realized that in companies across the United States the "old implied employment agreement" was slowly and quietly being replaced by the "new implied employment agreement." An agreement that companies will do what they consider best for themselves and their shareholders, despite the fallout their decisions produce. Like millions of other American workers, Fred saw his employment end abruptly when a competitor acquired his company.

Across the aisle from Ann, filtered light from the stained glass window falls on Tom, a strong believer and active member of the church who has been unemployed for four months, since his employer was forced into liquidation. He has been very open about his job search and has reached out to some men in the church who had indicated that they would pray for him. Although Tom has been actively seeking employment, he lacks job search skills. And he finds conducting a Lone Ranger job search to be the most difficult challenge of his life.

Tom doesn't understand why God's other children aren't ministering to him. In the midst of a vibrant church family, he feels like a spiritual orphan. His wife is considering returning to the workforce after many years at home. He is glad she is willing to help put their two children through college, but he's concerned that she won't be able to earn enough. He jokingly refers to suffering from "mal-tuition," while secretly fearing that one day he may have to tell his sons that their college education must be interrupted.

The Unmet Point of Need

In churches throughout America--on any given Sunday--approximately 4%-5% of the membership are unemployed while perhaps another 15%-20% are under-employed. The statistics are the same for the secular world. Christians become unemployed at exactly the same rate as non-Christians. If this were not the case, people might seek to join churches simply to avoid unemployment. God's Word says in James 1:2 "whenever you face trials" not "if you face trials." In the Christian life we have trials, such as unemployment. However, God has promised that we can overcome these trials. As a bonus, the process of overcoming our difficulties often produces spiritual maturity and character.

Given the fact that 4%-5% of every church's membership is unemployed at any given time, it is difficult to understand why only one in every 20 churches has recognized this as a point of need for its members. Likewise only one in every 20 churches has discovered that the unemployed/unchurched make up one of the most overlooked mission fields in the community.

There is a need in every church in America today for a viable, effective faith-based Career/Employment Transition Ministry to meet the needs of both its unemployed members and the unemployed/unchurched of its community. An effective Career/Employment Transition Ministry provides more than just job search information and instruction. It also provides spiritual support to individuals and spouses during their time of transition. And, as an outreach ministry, an Employment or Career Transition Ministry can be one of the most effective methods of reaching out to the lost of a community in a practical, positive manner. It can help them find, not simply a new living, but a new life in Christ.

SIDEBAR: Offering Assistance

Churches often plan their ministries based not only upon perceived needs but upon budgetary restraints. While every church can't meet every need, many churches ignore the problems that unemployment causes their members to their own detriment. The effects of unemployment eventually show up in the offering plate. When 5% of its membership is unemployed, therefore unable to tithe or give support to ongoing ministries, a church's budget is affected.

Consider the following example of lost tithes and offerings: A local church of 1,000 members has 5% of its membership unemployed. Say that these 50 members earn an average of \$50,000 per year. Of the consistent givers: 15 of the 50 tithe their annual income, 10 of the 50 contribute 5%, and 5 give 3% of their income. Due to unemployment, this church is missing out on more than \$100,000 per year of income that could be invested in the ongoing work of the kingdom.

Now consider that there are more than 10,500 churches in America with memberships of more than 1,000. Each losing \$100,000 in potential tithes and offerings due to unemployment brings the total loss to more than \$1 billion a year. Even if this sample 50 members contribute only 3% of their income normally, as some recent surveys indicate, that still amounts to \$75,000 of lost tithes and offerings for one church and \$787 million that the 10,500 similar size churches lose each year.

The church that chooses to minister to its unemployed members will not only help them, it will help itself.

Career Transition Ministries Network (CTM) www.ctmnetwork.org has been formed to equip local churches in ministering to its under-employed and unemployed members as well as the unemployed/unchurched of the community. CTM, which is based in Dallas, Texas, is a non-profit 501(c)(3) parachurch ministry offering workshops (usually a Saturday all-day format) to a church or a coalition of churches in a community. The workshops will teach the latest "how-to" job search skills to jobseekers. A clear presentation of the Gospel is included in each workshop presentation.

R. Lynn Guillory has worked in Human Resources for 38 years and has been involved in faith-based Career/Employment Transition Ministry work for the past sixteen years. He and his wife Cheryl live in the Dallas, Texas area where they worship and serve at Denton Bible Church. He leads a ministry team who ministers to Job Seekers every Tuesday evening at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, TX. (Career Transitions @ Prestonwood). He is Founder & Executive Director of Career Transition Ministries Network, a non-profit 501 (c)3 parachurch ministry that conducts free workshops for Job Seekers in churches throughout Texas. Churches can contact Lynn at (972) 307-2080 or by e-mail at lynnguillory@gmail.com or visit the Career Transition Ministries Network website at www.ctmnetwork.org