

How churches can support the unemployed

One has to be in serious denial (or a fat cat politician, government official or disconnected pastor) to not be alarmed at the jobless crisis in Nelson Mandela Bay.

Auctions of equipment from companies forced into liquidation now regularly feature in newspapers, shops are closing, and people are leaving town. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), the metro's workforce dropped by 4%, or 13 000 year-on-year in the second quarter.

Despite this, the number of unemployed increased by 6.1%.

The grass is not greener on the other side – South Africa's unemployment rate is at its worst since 2008.

During the second quarter, joblessness rose to 29%. Strip out the statistics and you find 455 000 more families did not know where their next meal would come from.

Scarily, national unemployment at 6.7 million is roughly the population of the Eastern Cape.

Look around you. Gaze into the mirror. If you are in the Eastern Cape then everyone you see or have seen today represents an unemployed South African – and that does not count the 2.9 million people who have simply given up looking for work.

The message is clear – the mission field is here and now.

Let's start with the discouraged workers. Steve Murata, a leader of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church's Career Actions Ministry in the United States points out that, unlike secular agencies, the church can help people see their true worth in Christ, give them a new sense of purpose for their work lives, and re-energise them for the job search process.

Here is a list of other ways the church can help the unemployed:

- Share what you are doing – a number of churches in the metro are doing fantastic work. Let others learn from you, or partner with you. But first you must be found – list your project on the TCN database.
- Provide encouragement and support. Job-hunting gets harder with each rejection letter, and it becomes more difficult to believe that God has a plan.
- Pray for them and with them.
- Be practical - help people to update their CVs – and to mail them to prospective employers, after proof-reading the covering letter.
- Prepare them for the interview through role-play, and then giving them the right clothes and a haircut (plus make-up for women). And don't forget the taxi fare to get to the interview.
- Set up a bank of computers for people to look for jobs or use for online training.
- Make church buildings and resources available for training or the running of businesses, such as catering, woodwork, welding or online teaching.
- Form a church job network: This is as easy as putting up a bulletin board with a "Jobs" sign at the top. One column for job seekers, and another for those offering employment.
- Host workshops. Topics can be job-hunting skills, resume readiness, interview advice, using online job boards and entrepreneurship. Source presenters from the church network.
- Start a relief fund for those in real need.
- Create opportunities – even if they are voluntary or part-time. Employers will select those who have kept themselves busy during periods of unemployment over those who seem to have done nothing.
- Provide emotional and practical support for the families – every job supports around 10 other people. Marriages are tested. Children lose opportunities to study, and grandparents are left to raise the children while the parents join the 13 000 looking for jobs elsewhere.

No congregation needs to take on all these responsibilities single-handed. In fact, it would be counter-productive because it would lead to further divisions between the well-resourced and poor church communities.

A church-wide programme to help the unemployed would be a way to unify the Christians of Nelson Mandela Bay.

This united church would then have the muscle and hopefully the will it needs to tackle the source of unemployment – the self-centredness of the majority of our local politicians and business leaders. They are directly responsible for the fact that hundreds of our children go to bed hungry, and without hope for the future.

In this we are not alone. Writing for ShareFaith magazine Christian author Daniel Threlfall states: “Some of the systemic problems of unemployment can be traced back to local government. Don’t back down from getting involved in community petitions, town hall meetings, or even governmental positions. Do you want to be a positive influence in your area? Then do what you can to create a business-friendly community with more job opportunities”.

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