

Job Loss

A Guidebook for Pastors



North Carolina Council of Churches
Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

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Acknowledgments

This *Job Loss Guide* is a lasting legacy of the NC Council of Churches’ Economic Justice Committee. Originally published in 2003, its contents remain relevant in today’s uncertain and difficult economic times.

Because of the continued popularity of the original guide, the Council decided that it was time for an update. All the links and information have been updated for this revised version. However, nothing in this guide should be taken as legal advice. This guide is simply a starting place for those directly affected by unemployment.

Special thanks to Duke Divinity School intern Lee Foster, whose research provided the backbone of this updated version.

This document was edited and formatted by Chris Liu-Beers, with additional editing by Aleta Payne and George Reed.

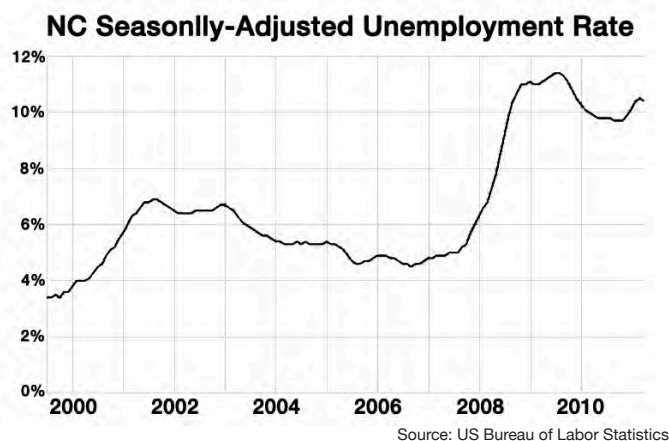
Cover photo by Flickr member Adria Richards (*adria.richards*).



Photo by Flickr member: hang_in_there

Introduction

In March 2007 the seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate in North Carolina was 4.5%. By March 2010 this rate had shot up to 11.3%. At the end of 2011, this rate was hovering around 10%. In addition, the earnings gap between those in stable professions and those who serve in jobs such as health aides and childcare workers, farmworkers and landscapers, is widening every year. Add to this a recession and wars, tobacco's demise, flood and hurricane destruction, and a state budget crisis, and we've ended up with too many individuals and families in stress and pain due to economic hardship.



Scripture brings us the notion of “Jubilee Economics.” This is the Hebrew tradition found in Leviticus, where the natural human tendencies for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer were systematically and regularly repaired. Remedies like freeing slaves, letting the land lie fallow, and forgiving debt were said to be God’s plan to make sure that the

economic habits of the times did not leave people in dire straits for too long.

**“If one part suffers,
every part suffers
with it.”**

-I Corinthians 12:26

We hope you will find this guidebook useful as you minister to and care for those in your congregation or neighborhood who find themselves out of work.

This guide is designed for pastors but also serves those in community agencies and many service areas as well as individuals who have lost jobs themselves.

The chapters give explanations and contacts so unemployed workers can obtain needed information, emergency services, entitled benefits, and job retraining. There are sources for help in starting a business instead of looking for another place of employment. We describe a model support group ministry. And at the end, you will find some reflection on our biblical mandate to seek justice.

By informing ourselves about opportunities to change unfair trade policies, wage laws, and benefit practices, we can more powerfully live into our biblical prophetic tradition.

Originally published in August 2003 by:

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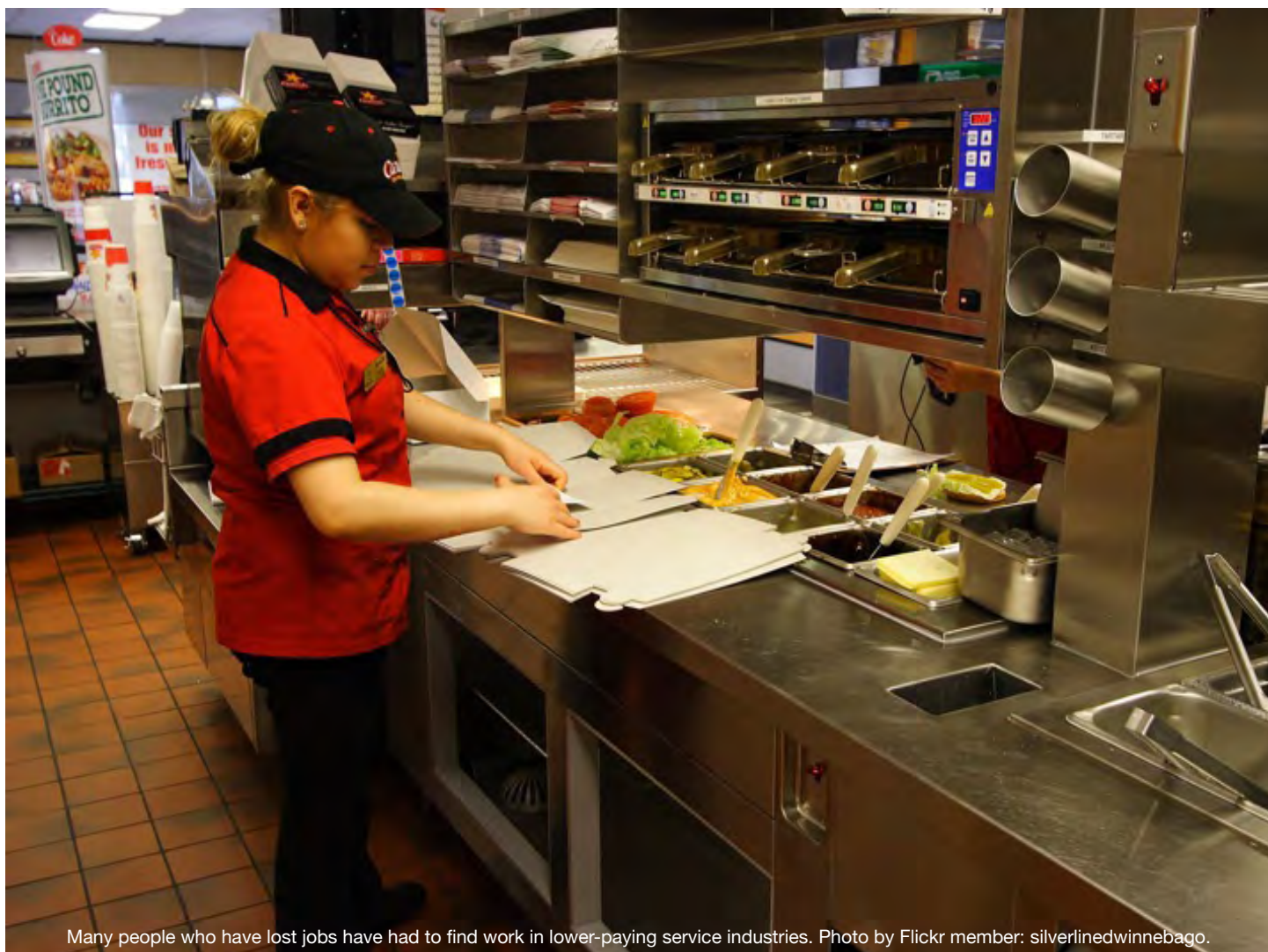
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Many people who have lost jobs have had to find work in lower-paying service industries. Photo by Flickr member: silverlinedwinnebago.

Increase the Minimum Wage to Spur Economic Growth

By Robert Reich, Guest Opinion
The Herald News (Fall River, MA)
February 11, 2011

Available online at: www.heraldnews.com/opinions/columnists/x163790296/GUEST-OPINION-Increase-the-minimum-wage-to-spur-economic-growth.

While debates about how to promote jobs and economic growth while tackling the deficit have dominated the political conversation for the past year, an effective strategy for boosting the economy without increasing government spending or adding a dime to the debt has been largely ignored: raising the minimum wage.

Raising wages for the nation's lowest-paid workers puts money into the hands of people who spend their incomes at the highest rates, boosting demand for goods and services. A home health aide who gets a modest bump in her salary can buy another gallon of milk, a new coat for winter, and get the haircut she's been putting off for months.

Some will argue that we cannot raise the minimum wage now because it would lead to further job losses. But the best academic research shows otherwise. While the simplistic theoretical model of supply and demand suggests that raising wages reduces the number of jobs employers offer, the reality of how the labor market functions is much more complex.

A comprehensive new body of research that I have carried out with economists from across the country examines increases in minimum wages over the past two decades. These and other new studies considerably improve upon and validate more than 15 years of economic research that had previously shown that wage increases do not result in job loss.

In a paper published last month by the prominent Review of Economics and Statistics, Arindrajit Dube of the University of Massachusetts, William Lester of the University of North Carolina, and I examine every pair of neighboring counties in the United States that straddle a state border and that had different minimum wages at any time between 1990 and 2006.

For example, we compared employment in Middlesex County with neighboring Hillsborough County, N.H., to determine if the higher minimum wage in Massachusetts from 1997-2006 led to job loss. We then repeat that calculation for every such county pair and wage difference on the Massachusetts

border and across the United States over a 16-year period, creating a national estimate that controls for other critical economic factors. We find that these minimum wage increases do not cause job loss in the counties with higher minimum wages than their neighbors across the state border.

In another study with Dube and Sylvia Allegretto of the University of California, we examine the impact of minimum wage increases specifically during the three recessions of the past two decades. We find that even the minimum wage increases during the Great Recession of 2007-2009 did not cause job loss.

Why don't minimum wage increases reduce employment? Low-wage employers typically experience very high rates of employee turnover and struggle constantly to fill their job vacancies. A higher wage makes it easier for employers to attract and retain workers and is likely to reduce the costs of absenteeism, while giving employers the productivity benefits of more experienced workers.

At a time when families are struggling, helping workers keep a job and put more money in their pockets makes sense. A minimum wage earner in this state working full-time, year-round, makes just over \$15,000 — hardly enough to keep afloat. The Chamber of Commerce and lobbyists for the fast food and restaurant industry will likely say — yet again — that we can't raise wages without cutting jobs. But the best scientific research tells us otherwise.

Wall Street has recovered quite nicely from this recession, taking home salary increases and six-figure bonuses. But if our economy is to truly rebound, all Americans — many more of whom are now part of the low-wage economy — must get a boost. Press accounts tell us that even people with years of experience in middle class occupations are re-entering the workforce in minimum wage jobs.

Our economy is crying out for a large infusion of public spending to get people back to work. But while Democrats and Republicans battle on Capitol Hill, Massachusetts can step up and help residents weather this crisis by increasing its minimum wage.

Reich is former U.S. Secretary of Labor and current director of the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment and professor of economics at the University of California at Berkeley.

The Role of Congregations in a Changing Economy

Scene in the pastor's office:

Woman in tears: "Pastor, I just lost my job. In fact, we all got pink slips today and they say our plant is moving offshore. I just don't know how we're gonna make it."

Inside the pastor's mind:

"Oh, poor Renita. What a mess. I know she is worried about the medical costs for her little girl, and now she's losing insurance along with her job. Hmmm, I wonder what we can do...And then, oh my gosh, if she has to move to get another job, we are out one good Children's Choir Director and tither! That shouldn't matter—but...well, let's see what we can figure out."

Is this a familiar scene to you?

Maybe it is Renita and others in your congregation if the local computer manufacturing plant suddenly moves to Mexico after being the main employer in town for years. Maybe it is James who thought his high-tech skills and long history as a programmer would keep his family safe forever; he just got downsized.

As a pastor, you face the challenge of helping individuals and families who lose work, tending to their discouragement and actual financial crises. You wonder how their loss will affect congregational life. You deal with an economy now fragile after earlier years of relative strength.

This probably means less money into the church coffers and more emergency need. And in preaching, you are called upon to make sense of our changing culture and economy, a world increasingly insecure.

A 2011 publication from the NC Justice Center in Raleigh paints a bleak picture for our state's working families. Of the families with children in our state, over a third live below the Living Income Standard. This is a county-based measure of what it takes to pay for a bare bones budget—with no savings, car payments, loans, trips—just the basics of rent and essentials.

In North Carolina, the average Living Income Standard for a parent with one child is \$14.94/hour or \$31,067/year. This is over fifty percent more than the federal poverty level for a family of two. And re-

member this is still a very low measure, an income level that does not allow for many real-life necessities.

To learn more about the Living Income Standard and to check out a report by the NC Council of Churches on living wages, visit:

www.nccouncilofchurches.org/2011/08/workers-are-worth-their-keep.

In the face of an economy where hard work often does not pay, where the manufacturing and farming sectors are losing out to low-wage service jobs, and where in many counties the jobs are simply going away, pastors and congregations can help on two fronts:

- 1) Be knowledgeable about public and private resources to help individuals cope financially and otherwise with job loss and moving on to the next stage.
- 2) Be more aware of how our economy works and how we can exercise our faith values to bring about better wages and benefits and public policies that enhance family and community life.



Social Services

People who lose jobs may need to think about accepting some of the government-funded social services for which they have paid with their tax dollars. While it can feel humiliating to go to the Social Services office and give personal information to obtain benefits, these services are there to be used by those who truly need them. People who lose jobs should not be ashamed to receive benefits.

We as Americans have said that families and children should not suffer extremely when we experience hardships often beyond our own control. Job loss is one of those situations. The benefits we offer in America are skimpy compared to the public welfare allotments given by most other industrialized nations; however, they may make all the difference for someone between jobs. It is good to encourage those who lose jobs to check into which benefits they may qualify to receive while they are out of work.

The list on the next page shows some of the many benefits and services covered by local county departments of Social Services. These offerings are paid for by a combination of federal, state, and local tax dollars. Most pastors are in communication with their local DSS offices. Still, sometimes it is a surprise to find out all they do. You may see in the list on the next page some services that could be of use to both jobless and employed members of your congregation and community.

Many programs are “means tested,” which means that the amount of income or assets you may have and still be allowed to apply for assistance varies by program and sometimes by county. Call your local Social Services office if you want to find out if someone you know fits the eligibility requirements for a particular program.

A person can receive Unemployment Benefits or Workers Compensation (or be employed) and still qualify for food stamps, Medicaid, and other benefits. The qualifying decision is based on total family earnings and the number of persons in the family.

Be prepared when you visit the Social Services offices (tips for applicants):

Many offices do not have areas for children to play, and you may have to wait a while.

To determine eligibility for programs, the office asks for lots of paperwork. It is best to call ahead and see what is required—generally birth certificate and Social Security card (DSS can help you obtain these if you do not already have them), former pay stubs, electrical and rent receipts, etc.

Generally you do not receive a benefit right away—there are processing times. Find out what they are.

You have rights. If you feel you have been treated unfairly, appeal to the county Director of Social Services or the local DSS Board. In many areas, congregational advocates along with benefit-recipients have asked for and won improvements in services.

For further explanations of these services—what they offer and what it takes to qualify—call your local Department of Social Services. You also can obtain flyers and fact sheets from the department to keep in your congregation or pass around in the community. Social Services staff members are often available to come to your congregation or community forum to explain services and benefits. You may have DSS staff in your congregation who would be glad to do so.

For a list of all the 100 NC County Department of Social Services office locations and contact information: www.ncdhhs.gov/residents/index.htm

Social Services (cont.)

Economic Services

Medicaid

The comprehensive health care program for people who are poor, blind, or disabled. One must qualify by having low enough income and assets (“means tested”).

NC Health Choice for Children

Full coverage, like Medicaid, for uninsured children above Medicaid-eligibility levels.

Work First

The “welfare check” (Work First Family Assistance) and Employment Services. This is part of the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program. This is also a means-tested program.

Emergency Assistance

Includes limited assistance to pay for utility and housing bills, food, prescription medicines, burial expenses, travelers’ aid, etc.

Child Day Care Subsidies

Grants for part or all of a family’s child care expenses; these apply to parents in the Work First program and also those who earn below certain income levels.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

A means-tested program allocating credit for food purchases. Many necessary, non-food items cannot be purchased through SNAP.

Social Work Services

Protective Services

A legally mandated program, in which reports of child abuse, dependency (the child has no responsible adult to care for him or her), and/or neglect are received, evaluated, and investigated. Protective services are established for the child and his/her caregivers if a need is identified.

Adolescent Parenting Program

Provides supportive services to first-time pregnant and parenting teens 17 and under, with special emphasis on completion of high school and delaying the second pregnancy.

Child Placement and Supportive Services

Better known as foster care and adoption, this area provides services to children, their families, kinship care networks, and adoptive and foster parents when it is necessary to separate a child from his or her caretakers if the parents or caretakers are unable or unwilling to provide adequate protection and care.

Child Support Enforcement

Promotes parental responsibility by locating non-custodial parents, establishing paternity, providing support and medical obligations, enforcing existing child support orders, arranging for collection of child support, and assisting non-custodial parents in becoming self-sufficient.

Adult Protective Services

As with children, identifies abuse and neglect of adults and finds adequate protection in cases when abuse or neglect are identified.

Counseling and arranging for services for disabled adults:

- Adult day care
- Services for the blind
- In-home aide services

Unemployment Insurance

What is unemployment insurance?

The unemployment insurance program in North Carolina is part of a national system designed to provide temporary economic benefits to eligible workers. The Social Security Act of 1935 and Chapter 96 of the General Statutes of North Carolina (the Employment Security Law) provide the basic framework for administering the unemployment insurance program in North Carolina.

Eligible workers are individuals who (1) lost their jobs through no fault of their own, (2) worked during a specified time period and received a minimum amount of wages during that time period, (3) are able and available for work, and (4) are actively seeking new employment. All benefits and administrative costs of this program are come from employer payments mandated by the State Unemployment Tax Act and the Federal Unemployment Tax Act. No money is withheld from workers' checks to pay for unemployment benefits.

Eligibility:

To be eligible for unemployment insurance, you must have become unemployed through no fault of your own. You must (a) register for work with the Employment Security Commission (ESC); (b) file a claim for each calendar week of benefits you request, and (c) actively seek work during any week for which you claim unemployment benefits. Actively seeking work means doing those things that an unemployed person who wants to work would normally do. Unless otherwise instructed, you must seek work in person on two different days with at least two different employers and must keep a written record of all work search contacts for periodic review by Commission staff. If you are enrolled in Approved Commission Training, you may be exempted from these work search requirements. You can file online.

The week when you apply is the "waiting week." Weeks are computed from Sunday-Saturday, and pay starts the second week after you apply. If you receive severance pay or vacation pay when your job ends, you cannot get unemployment insurance until those monies are no longer being distributed. You are considered employed if you receive severance or vacation pay, even after the job itself ends.

An unemployment insurance claim is valid for one year from the date it is established. If you establish a claim, return to work, and then become unemployed again during that one-year period, you may reopen an existing claim.

Benefit amounts:

Maximum Weekly Benefit (as of June 2011): \$505

How much money can I receive from unemployment?

Your weekly benefit amount and the number of weeks of entitlement to benefits are based on the wages you were paid and amount of time you worked during your base period. The exact amount of benefits and the duration of those benefits cannot be determined until you actually file your claim for benefits.

What is the "Base Period"?

"Base period" is the term for the time frame used as the basis for determining whether or not you will be monetarily eligible for unemployment. It is normally the first four of the last five calendar quarters. You must have wages in two of the base period quarters to be monetarily eligible. Laws can change regarding waiting periods and the length of time you can receive benefits. Your local ESC should give you the latest updates on that.

This information came from the website of the NC Employment Security Commission. For more details, check that site or call them at 919-733-2900. You can find your nearest ESC office by checking the web site www.ncesc.com/locator.locatormain.asp.

Workers' Compensation

Some workers lose jobs not due to trade agreements and factory shut-downs or business constriction, but because they are injured on the job. Workers who are injured on the job may be able to collect payment for their loss of income and health. This is very general information and is not, nor is it intended to be, legal advice—just a guide for pastors and families as they decide how to proceed if there is a workplace injury.

North Carolina General Statutes §97-1 et seq require that most employers with three or more employees cover them with insurance for on-the-job injuries - those that arise out of and in the course of employment. The Workers' Compensation Act also covers occupational diseases. The rates employers pay are based on the risk factors involved in their work. For example, roofers or carpenters would have higher risk factors than would receptionists or sales persons. Employers may purchase this coverage from a licensed property and casualty insurance agent. Some very large companies self-insure for this coverage.

The North Carolina Workers' Compensation Act requires an injured worker to provide immediate written notice of the injury or as soon as it is practical to do so to the employer. The written notice must be provided within 30 days of the accident. There are several exceptions to the requirement for a written notice, including, but not limited to, if the employer knew about the accident. If no written notice has been provided to the employer within 30 days, it is the burden of the injured worker to prove that the employer had knowledge of the accident.

The North Carolina Workers' Compensation Act also requires an injured worker who is seeking compensation to file a claim within two years of the accident or within two years of the last payment of medical treatment when no other type of compensation has been paid. Failure to do, in most cases, will bar the worker from seeking benefits for that injury in the future.

A simple way to accomplish both goals (provide written notice and file a claim) is to file a Form 18 with the North Carolina Industrial Commission and provide a copy of the Form 18 to your employer. The Form 18 is found at www.ic.nc.gov/forms.

Filing the Form 18 preserves your rights to later pursue compensation.

If you have an on-the-job injury or accident, the hospital should ask you about insurance or if this was a job-related accident. The hospital might be able to file a claim for you with the insurance company, but you will still be obligated to report the injury to your employer and the Industrial Commission.

If you are filing for a claim yourself, there is a report of injury form (Form 19) that your employer must turn in to the insurance company and also submit to the NC Industrial Commission if the injury results in more than \$2,000 in medical expenses or more than one day lost from work.

The NC Industrial Commission is like a court. A panel of appointed judges looks at disputed workers' compensation cases and decides if the worker deserves an award. If your employer does not have workers' compensation insurance, you should contact a lawyer about what action you need to take in order to be compensated for your injuries. You can also go to the Commission if your employer's workers' compensation insurance denies your claim and you still think it is legitimate.

If you as a worker think that you have been denied benefits unjustly, or if your employer did not have workers' compensation insurance, you may want to ask a lawyer for legal help.

Tips for pastors and congregational leaders:

If you are hiring contractors to do something for your congregation—such as build a building, mow the lawn, put on a new roof or fix the heating system—make sure the contractor provides you with a certificate of insurance furnished by their insurance agent. You don't want one of their workers, who might get hurt at your location, to sue you if their boss does not have this coverage. You also want to be sure that your property is covered with liability insurance in the event that a worker is injured as a result of the congregation's negligence.

Trade Adjustment Assistance

The federal government has pools of funding to help people who lose jobs when factories move to Mexico or other offshore sites, or when plants lay off workers or close because cheap imported goods make our factories unprofitable. At this time, for example, an influx of inexpensive products from China is making American-manufactured products less in demand.

People who lose jobs because of these negative effects of our country's free trade policies (North American Free Trade Agreement, etc.) may be entitled to an array of benefits. These programs include:

1. North American Free Trade Agreement—Transitional Adjustment Assistance (NAFTA-TAA);
2. Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA);
3. Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA).

These benefits may include funds for:

- A weekly allowance after unemployment benefits have run out.
- Job training (a maximum of 78 weeks).
- Searching for a job outside your normal commuting area (50 miles).
- Relocation to get a new job (90 percent of what it costs your family to move).

This is a complicated body of information. Your local Employment Security Office is the place to find out the details. To find the nearest ESC office, see their web site at www.ncesc.com/locator/locator-main.asp.

Someone must file for group eligibility for workers from each particular plant, to enable its workers to apply for assistance. This is a petition to the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Trade Adjustment Assistance of the Employment and Training Administration. It can be filed by a group of three or more workers, their union or authorized representative, or a company official. Check to find out if this petition has been filed by the local plant that closed or reduced its workforce.

If the petition has been filed, the local Employment Security Office should be able to assist individuals who are affected. If it has not been filed, petitions can be obtained from the US Department of Labor (www.doleta.gov) or from the NC Employment Security Commission Workforce Development Unit (919-733-6745).

For general information on trade adjustment assistance, visit: www.doleta.gov/tradeact.



Retraining

JobLink is a service of the NC Department of Commerce. At your local JobLink Career Center, workforce development professionals from diverse partner agencies work together under one roof to provide numerous job-related services, including job retraining.

Visit JobLink online at: www.nccommerce.com/workforce/job-seekers/joblink-career-centers.

Additional Links

Training assistance:

www.nccommerce.com/workforce/job-seekers/joblink-career-centers/support-services

Your closest community/technical college:

www.ncccs.cc.nc.us

Your county Department of Social Services:

www.ncdhhs.gov

Employment Security Commission:

www.ncesc.com

Community Development Corporations:

www.ncacdc.org

These are local nonprofit organizations, often springing from churches, to enhance lives in economically distressed areas. They often develop affordable housing and many times also have education and training programs.

NC STARS system

www.ncstars.org

NC STARS allows the public to see training providers (by county) that are “eligible training providers” through the Workforce Investment Act.

Faith Partnerships, Inc.

www.faithpartnerships.org

Congregational-based job training programs.

Opportunities Industrialization Centers

Community-based organizations that focus specifically on workforce development. Currently, there are four in the state (Rocky Mount, Wilson, Kinston, Elizabeth City).

NC REAL Enterprises

www.ncreal.org

This is a system of entrepreneurship education/training offered through educational institutions (elemen-

tary schools through community colleges/universities), and community-based organizations. NC REAL has worked on short-term entrepreneurship training for dislocated workers, offered through community colleges and other organizations.

Some community colleges and colleges and universities offer a service that includes testing, where people can learn their skills and aptitudes as they relate to professions and work. Sometimes people who have worked in one field for years can find they have aptitudes in an entirely different area, and can successfully switch careers.

* * *

One caution about retraining. While it is always good to gain new skills and certifications, there is no guarantee that jobs fitting the new skills will actually be available in your area. The largest growth sector is in low-paying service jobs. The loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs, and now even tech jobs, due to globalization is a national issue requiring national policy change. Many religious leaders are calling for a greater emphasis on local sustainable economic development.

One thing that people often do not know is that we as citizens can help shape the kind of training programs that exist.

If you do not see what you need available locally, talk with your JobLink representatives, the community college training people, your elected representatives, etc., and ask for what you want and need. Programs can be developed based on what best works for people. These organizations and services need to hear from people about what is most appropriate and helpful for them. We have the power to influence how programs are designed—we just need to ask and tell.

For instance, in one NC county, a local Family Resource Center got the community college trainers to come to their community-based site and hold their Human Resource Development class there. Mothers could then bring their babies to the comfortable center, whereas they were not allowed to bring them to this class at the college. This simple change made the program more accessible to the parents who desired training but for whom the logistics of childcare were a problem.

Starting a Business Instead of Retraining

The hard truth is that sometimes we can be retrained, we can retool our skill set, but the jobs are still not there.

One option to consider in areas where jobs are scarce, or anywhere when one wants to avoid the insecurities of being an employee, is starting a business of your own. This is not an easy road, but may be just the ticket for some people. The great majority of jobs in America are in small businesses, not in the large industrial firms that our state woos through “incentives”—tax breaks and giveaways that often demand little accountability from the companies regarding staying in a locality or paying fair wages and benefits.

A fascinating book called *Ripples from the Zambezi* (Ernesto Sirotli, 1999) describes how the author helped people in the most remote and desolate areas of Australia, Africa, and the United States develop their dreams into thriving small businesses that responded to local needs and built on local assets. This inspiring book is well worth reading.

Below you’ll find additional resources on starting a business:

Good Work

www.goodwork.org

Good Work helps strengthen the economic lives of working people and build community through participatory business skills training, financial and community education, and ongoing support. In addition, Good Work offers trainings on economic justice, community financial literacy, and culturally appropriate development.

NC Institute of Minority Economic Development

www.ncimed.com

The North Carolina Institute of Minority Economic Development is a statewide nonprofit organization representing the interest of underdeveloped and underutilized sectors of the state’s economic base. The Institute’s working philosophy is that information and business development are critical to wealth creation and to building the asset base among low-wealth sectors of the population.

NC Rural Economic Development Center

www.ncruralcenter.org/business-programs/microenterprise.html

The Rural Center has a microenterprise loan program to help individuals start small businesses.

NC Small Business and Technology Development Center, NC Department of Commerce

www.sbtcdc.org

U.S. Small Business Administration

www.sba.gov

A Congregational Support Group for Unemployed Workers

St. Mike's Career Transition Group was formed at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church (Cary, NC) when the information technology field bottomed out in the late 1990s.

A staff person at St. Michael's, a large suburban church, pulled together a few people who had lost jobs for regular Tuesday morning mutual-support gatherings. One information technology Marketing Director who had lost his job after about 20 years in that field began to attend. Nick had received out-placement services from his past employer, and had a lot of good information and ideas to share. He thought the group needed more structure, and so he invested a lot of time to build the group as he simultaneously looked for new employment. He led it for a year and a half and then after finding employment (two jobs that in total pay 45% of what he formerly made), passed the leadership on to others. Here are the basics about how their Career Transition Group works. It is an example from an area of high population and resources, but aspects of the plan may be useful for any area.

Purpose: It's about hope and encouragement, mostly, and information exchange.

Losing a job, especially after many years of stability, is like a death, with the same sense of loss, grief, confusion, and paralysis. So one of the main purposes of a job loss support group is to help people feel less alone, to boost confidence, and to help participants move through the grief onto their next stage. People who lose work can be so depressed that they just sit inside for months. A group like this can draw them back into the world. And this kind of group can be a means to exchange tips on where the jobs are, to develop skills for obtaining work, and for all the practicalities that can come with job loss, such as refinancing one's home or budgeting differently.

Structure: It takes a dedicated leader, planning, and communication.

Nick thought it ideal for the group to be led by a team: (1) an unemployed person, who had the deep empathy with what others in the group were going through, and (2) a retired person or someone with time to offer. If that person were a retired executive or company leader, all the better. And it would be most helpful to have a core group to lead—one to run the listserv, one to conduct meetings, one to arrange speakers, etc.

The St. Mike's group had two functions: a weekly support group and an e-mail listserv. The listserv is through Yahoo and is free of charge. On the listserv, which has from 150-200 active members, people exchange job opening tips and employment ideas. That meets certain needs. But Nick stressed that the personal time together was especially important; when out of work, it's too easy to stay home and hide.

Communication about the two functions came by word of mouth, two newspaper articles on the program, and by continuing notices within the congregation. Each Sunday, the church bulletin contains an ongoing ad about the group. Since many people do not want to attend something that is just a talk session, the ads feature the next several upcoming speakers at the group meetings.

People without jobs are far more likely to come to hear a speaker with helpful ideas than to come just for conversation. This ministry was intended not only for the congregation's members but for the whole community. Nick says that about one-half of participants are from the parish, and the other half are from outside and are of "every race, religion, and job background."

A Congregational Support Group for Unemployed Workers (cont.)

A sample support group meeting:

Opening prayer, best if in wording that is welcoming to all traditions.

Go around the room, for each person's 30-second "elevator speech."

Formal presentation—guest speaker, often by members of the congregation who have expertise in certain areas:

- Resume writing
- Elevator speeches
- How to refinance your home
- Health care options
- Unemployment benefits
- Budgeting
- Assessing your skills for different kinds of work

Wrap-up.

Observations from Nick...

People who lose work are generally very reluctant to admit to themselves that they may never be able to work again at the kind of job they have had for years. Helping people re-envision what they can do is important. Unemployed workers may need to go back and remember what they did years ago and pick up that line of endeavor; Nick went back to his biology degrees and is breaking into the biotech industry now. Those without formal education or training may need to think about hobbies, talents or interest areas they might turn into paid work. It's a major step to "get out of the box," he said, and imagine different focus from your long-time skill area.

What is an "elevator speech" or "personal infomercial"?

If you had to describe yourself quickly to a person in an elevator, what would you say?

When making a first impression on a prospective employer, it's critical to be able to give a positive and accurate self-portrayal.

Many who lose jobs, especially after years of steady work, have never had to "sell" themselves and are extremely uncomfortable talking about themselves.

Learning to create your "elevator speech" or "personal infomercial" builds confidence and helps people win jobs. See the next page for more info.

This chapter's information was kindly given by Nick Verna, Apex, NC, member of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Cary, NC.



Your Personal Infomercial

30 Seconds to Tell About Yourself

1. Who are you?

"I am a (functional area) with expertise in (areas of strength)."

2. Background

"Most recently I have been...my background, education, expertise is in... (Describe work experience. Be brief.)"

3. Current / recent position

"My current/most recent position is/was (functional title) and I was responsible for... (time frame + 1 key accomplishment.)"

4. What type of job are you looking for?

"I'm currently looking for... (Paint a picture of the kind of work you want to do.)"

5. What's in it for the hiring company? "I can help your company ... (Tell them what your value will be. How will you affect their bottom line?)"

Examples

"I am a cook with three years of experience in food service with hotels. With slower business, there were layoffs. But while I was working, I received two raises and an award for dependable performance. I trained four new cooks and enjoy supervising. Right now, I want to continue in food service and supervision. I can bring stability and a strong work ethic to your business."

"I am a marketing communications professional with over 20 years of expertise delivering everything from collateral to trade shows to totally integrated marketing campaigns. My most recent position was a marketing manager at a telecommunications company where I was responsible for the delivery of all marketing communications and public relations. I'm currently looking for a full-time position as a marketing manager where I can use my experience in both large companies and startups to develop integrated marketing plans that can help a company increase its sales from both existing and new customers."



Coping with Unemployment

After the denial and disbelief wear off from being downsized, depression follows quickly. Most people are used to getting up every morning, fighting traffic on the way to work, and arriving at a workplace that may contain ten or hundreds of other people. However, individuals who have been recently laid off are suddenly on their own.

What do I do now? This can easily lead to depression. Fighting depression is one of the most difficult aspects of downsizing that anyone ever has to deal with. What can you do to make yourself feel better, which will ultimately help you get a job? Let's explore 15 steps to fighting the rollercoaster emotions of unemployment.

Don't be Ashamed

During a recession, a large number of highly qualified people are laid off. Being downsized has nothing to do with you, it's purely economics. People will not think any less of you because you've been resized.

Talk to Your Family

A common reaction by many downsized individuals is to bottle up their emotions and not tell their family how they are feeling. You may want to protect them or keep them from getting depressed. The problem is that you are eliminating one of your best emotional outlets. By sharing how things are going with your family, including your kids, you can vent your frustrations and tell your family how to deal with you.

Talk to Friends and Former Coworkers

It's critical to talk to friends and former coworkers. They provide you with feedback, contacts and reassurance that is critical throughout the job search. They're the best source of networking contacts you have. It's important to sit down face to face with them to help them jog their memories about people they may know. They may not even understand what you do.

Stick To Your New Job

When you get downsized, your job is to get a job. The sooner you realize this, the better off you will be. Your working hours should be devoted to finding your next employment opportunity, not fixing everything in the house.

Consult

If you are capable, offer your services on a consulting basis. This will provide you with some income as well as a challenge. It will also help you network and possibly find a permanent job.

Ignore the Silence

A job published on Monster.com or any other on-line job board can produce as many as 2,000 resumes. A posting on a company's web site can produce as many as 400 resumes in just 48 hours. Because of this overwhelming avalanche of responses, HR personnel no longer have the time needed to respond to every resume they receive. You should not expect to receive a response when you submit a resume. You should feel lucky if you do. It has nothing to do with your qualifications.

Make a Schedule and Keep to It

Don't fall into the trap of sleeping late and taking each day as it comes. Set up a schedule that resembles the work schedule you recently left. If you used to start work at 8:00 AM, get up at 7:00, have some breakfast and be ready to start your job search at 8:00 AM. Plan your daily schedule. This may include time to search help wanted sites, make networking calls, or have lunch with former colleagues and friends. Make sure that you schedule in some exercise and prayer or meditation.

Network

Experts agree that most jobs are landed through the use of networking. This may mean attending job networking meetings on a weekly basis or just calling people you used to work with. This will help you expand upon the limited availability of jobs through newspapers and job boards. It also gets you out of the house.

Make New Friends

When you suddenly find yourself without the regular companionship that accompanies the work environment, seize the opportunity to make some new friends. One of the benefits of networking is that you meet a lot of new people. Look for people with similar interests for both friendship and help in the job search process. Joining a friend for a cup of coffee to discuss your latest success or tragedy gets you out of the house and gives you the ability to develop a friendship that you may have not had if you were working.

Coping with Unemployment (cont.)

Get a Job Buddy

We all need feedback in our lives. We need people who will give us honest feedback on our performance. When you are looking for a job, feedback is more important than ever. Find a friend, relative or fellow job seeker that you trust and will “tell you the truth.” This job buddy can help you prepare for an interview, write a resume, or help you decide on which companies to target. The most important thing that a job buddy can do, however, is keep you on track and makes you accountable for your job search.

Exercise

Depression is often caused by a change in hormone levels in the body. Exercise not only helps us feel physically fit, but it also produces endorphins which help you “feel good.” Fifteen to thirty minutes of exercise a day can really help you get through the tough times. It doesn’t have to cost you any money either. Something as simple as a brisk walk or running are ideal forms of exercise. Check with your doctor before beginning any exercise regimen.

Volunteer

It is important to keep your skills sharp and to expand your capabilities. Volunteering may be a way for you to practice your craft or learn something new.

Ignore Your Severance

If you were lucky enough to receive a severance package, don’t wait until you use up the money before you start to look for a job. Start looking for a job immediately.

Don’t Drink

Alcohol is a depressant. Drinking will do nothing but drag you down.

Prayer and Meditation

If you ever wish that you could just get away from it all, prayer and meditation are just around the corner. Prayer and meditation give you the ability to stop, listen, and spend a few moments in silence. It gives you a way to find inner peace and tranquility amidst chaos and disappointment. So if you’ve never prayed or meditated before, now is a good time to start. If you are already doing it, now is your opportunity to spend more time with yourself.



Volunteering can be a good way to use your time.
Photo by Flickr member: ministryofstories.

Band-Aids and Biblical Justice

People out of work want a new job or livelihood, a band-aid for their current unemployment wound. But what if the band-aid is too small? What if the job pays too little or has no benefits?

Most people agree that everyone deserves a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. What is fair? This could be defined as sufficient pay and benefits to cover basic needs. Fairness would mean a society where executives don't get huge raises or golden parachutes while they lay off hundreds of workers or move jobs to Mexico. We might call this vision: "economic justice." That vision is biblical.

The Jubilee Year as described in Leviticus 25 called for, among other things, freeing the slaves. In those days, you could get to be a slave by being unable to pay your debts—merely by being poor. The Israelites knew God did not want entrenched systems that kept people poor, so the jubilee protocols every 50 years aimed to undo the economic forces that enriched some and ruined others. Prophets reminded the Israelite people that they needed to challenge the wealthy, the leaders and decision-makers who did not treat the community well. Malachi spoke for God in chapter 3:4, saying, "I will be quick to testify against...those who defraud laborers of their wages." The priestly writer in Deuteronomy 23:14 warned employers: "You shall not oppress hired servants who are poor and needy."

Jesus faced off with the "free market" when he plowed through the moneychangers at the temple (John 2:13-16). In his debut speech (Luke 4:18-19), Jesus updated the words of Isaiah 61:1-4 to say that his ministry was about bringing good news to the poor. To the poor—not only those of us who are spiritually poor, but primarily the concretely struggling people with whom he spent most of his time. We are bringers of this good news when we live by the value system Jesus named in the Beatitudes, in Matthew 5:1-11. The theme of the Beatitudes is about turning the world's value system upside down. Those who are blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek and merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This definition of "blessed" is diametrically opposite of the one used by the friends of Job in Hebrew scriptures. When he lost his possessions and became covered with sores, they told him he received

those afflictions because he must be doing something wrong. They subscribed to what theologians call the doctrine of merits and retribution—that is, we get what we deserve. Many of us, somewhere deep down, still have some suspicion that our bad luck is punishment for our misdeeds and our good luck or wealth is a result of our worthiness. Much of our American economic and social policy is based on this idea that wealthy individuals deserve all they have gotten, and that only the "deserving poor" should receive government or other assistance. This is not Jesus' notion. With Jesus, all are worthy, and those of us who suffer are especially cherished by God.

What is the American value system regarding work and wages? Is it righteous?

Capitalism is based on returning financial rewards to those who invest money, or "capital," to launch or maintain businesses. These people are considered the risk-takers who deserve high rewards, while the workers who may risk life and limb or mental health or financial viability in the workplace are not considered worthy of similar levels of reward. While many companies avoid these pitfalls, in corporate America the goal of creating a financial return for investors often comes before these priorities:

- Wages that can sustain a family.
- Work schedules that allow time for caring for children and being active in community life.
- Employment stability, companies remaining in localities and not moving offshore.
- Provision of benefits like health insurance and retirement.

If you asked all the members of your congregation whether they thought their workplaces reflected the values they saw in the Bible—kingdom values of respect for all God's children, sharing so all have enough—what do you think they would say?

Commenting on how the church and government leaders ignore the many kinds of unfairness and oppression in the American workplace, a mental hospital worker spoke up at a Spring 2003 Town Meeting in Warsaw in eastern NC, where the NC Legislative Black Caucus was listening to local concerns. "We visit people in prison. But we don't go into the workplace."

Band-Aids and Biblical Justice (cont.)

Churches faithful to the full biblical mandate will both help unemployed individuals with our mercy ministries, our band-aids, and engage in ministries of justice, advocating for fairness in the world of work and employment.

Let's look at the difference between band-aids and biblical justice as it applies to some of the remedies for people out of work, and what all workers need.

Band-Aids: Individual Help for the Unemployed	Biblical Justice: A Kingdom Context for Workers
Public benefits like Unemployment Insurance, Workers Compensation, and Social Services assistance.	A minimum wage that actually does what it was intended to do when started in 1938—allow a family to make ends meet. This level is called a Living Wage.
Financial aid from family, friends, church, etc.	Health care for all people, not dependent on which job you have. This is called Universal Health Care.
Private charitable organizations—crisis assistance.	The right to join a union and collectively bargain, to have a say in decisions about work policies.
Support groups.	Hours and schedules that allow for family and community life and mental health.
Schooling/training to upgrade skills or start a business.	Companies that benefit from tax breaks and incentives also have responsibilities to the community, such as guaranteed living wages and an exit fee paid to the locality if they move out of the country.

In leading the church to be a full-Bible church, moving toward justice as well as mercy and charity, we can be guided by these principals, rooted in scripture and captured in the 1986 Roman Catholic statement, *Economic Justice For All*.

- The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.
- All economic life should be shaped by moral principles. Economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and the dignity of the human person, support the family, and serve the common good.

- A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.
- All people have the right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security).
- All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize associations and join unions.
- Society has the moral obligation, including government action where necessary, to assume opportunity, meet basic human needs, and pursue justice in economic life.

These lofty ideals can in fact be put into practice, if the church lends its moral voice to the public debate about wages, work, and our economy. The church has been said to be the conscience of the state. Make it so.

The beloved community vision of social and economic relationships that affirm the dignity, worth and potential of everyone is not just a vision for the government, employers, and workers to negotiate. This vision is a *community* vision of economic justice that needs the faith community's involvement and leadership.

Many North Carolina organizations are ready to provide congregations with information about current legislation and community organizing for a Living Wage/Income, fair corporate practices, and other work-related policies. Most of these groups can provide speakers for your congregation or denomination. More and more congregations and religious bodies are signing resolutions and petitions, speaking to legislators, and standing on scripture to become prophetic leaders in the quest for economic justice right here in North Carolina. The next chapter in this guidebook highlights some of these contacts and resources.

Advocacy for a Living Income

Working Hard Is Not Enough

We touched on North Carolina's Living Income Standard back on page 6. According to this measure—which gives a more realistic estimate than the federal poverty level of the wage level necessary to meet subsistence needs—one-third of North Carolina's working families do not earn enough to reach the Living Income Standard for their counties.

The average LIS for a parent with one child is \$14.94/hour or 151.8% of the poverty level. For a parent with two children, this increases to \$18.03/hour or 183.3% of the poverty level. Remember, earning at the LIS level still does not include money for car loans, college loans, savings, gifts, or consumer luxuries—just enough to not need welfare assistance. The wages needed to save, avoid large indebtedness, and have any extras greatly exceed the LIS.

Minimum wage in North Carolina is the same as the federal minimum wage, \$7.25/hour. The majority of minimum wage workers are adults, not teens in part-time jobs. In order for the single parent with one child to reach the LIS, he or she would need to work more than two full-time minimum wage jobs just to achieve subsistence level. In other words, the minimum wage is far below the poverty level. The minimum wage is not indexed to the rising cost of living, either, which means that the minimum wage remains static even as the cost of living increases every year.

In addition to low wages among our workers (they are low in part because NC is the least unionized state in the country), we do not offer health care coverage to all citizens here. Europe, Canada, and most of the industrialized world consider access to basic health care a human right, not a privilege. We attach insurance to (some) jobs—most countries don't. Debates rage about the annual hikes in health insurance rates and reduced benefit contributions by employers.

To summarize, even when people work hard, leave the welfare system, and do all the right things, many families cannot make ends meet. Pastors see all the family stress and resulting problems that follow the inability to survive financially without major consumer debt.

Scripture calls for more than individual mercy to those who suffer. It calls for justice, governmental and social systems that are fair.

A policy statement on Living Income, adopted by the statewide House of Delegates of the NC Council of Churches in November 2000, gives theological reasoning for the church to support higher wages and suggests action steps. The statement follows this chapter.

What We Can Do So That Working Hard IS Enough

Here are some resources for your congregation to learn and do more about creating a policy landscape that fits our faith values of justice. There are many others that advocate for hundreds of action areas, but these are some of the key research and organizing groups focusing on families, workers, poverty, and living incomes.

The organizations or sources below have materials useful for preaching and education. They can provide guest speakers and workshops and/or can send you action alerts about participating in our General Assembly to support family-friendly policies you want.

Raleigh Report by the NC Council of Churches
www.nccouncilofchurches.org/category/raleigh-report

Rev. George Reed, Executive Director of the NC Council of Churches, covers several issues with short summaries of what's happening and action alerts for your input at the right time. Available online and also by email.

NC Budget and Tax Center
www.ncjustice.org/?q=node/26

These newsletters break down our state's budget in terms regular people can understand, from the perspective of how line items affect working-class and poor North Carolinians. Available online and by email.

Covenant With North Carolina's Children
www.nccovenant.org

This very broad coalition of organizations (e.g., United Way, NC Child Advocacy Institute) develops its own legislative agenda and monitors public policy

Advocacy for a Living Income (cont.)

to benefit children, particularly from low-income families. Weekly email Legislative Updates and action alerts, by topic area you choose, are available during the legislative season to Covenant members and others.

NC Housing Coalition

www.nchousing.org

This advocacy group works on expanding the stock of affordable housing in NC and on homelessness reduction. They lobby to expand our Housing Trust Fund, a program that enjoys success in promoting the building and repair of inexpensive housing. They offer information on housing advocacy and programs and occasional action alerts.

NC Fair Share

www.ncfairshare.org

This is a statewide multi-racial advocacy, education, and leadership development organization dedicated to working with poor and working poor North Carolinians on grassroots issues related to poverty—environmental justice, and health care especially.

Democracy NC

www.democracy-nc.org

This organization tracks money in politics and organizes for clean elections, publicly financed campaigns, disclosure of campaign contributions, enforced election ethics laws, ballot access for third parties, and other reforms to make our political system accountable to voters and representative of common people, not major donors.

NC Health Access Coalition

www.ncjustice.org/?q=node/114

Also based in the NC Justice Center, this collaborative is led by Adam Searing. His action alerts and information updates focus on managed care, access to affordable health care, Medicaid and Medicare, and all state and legislative issues relating to health.

Institute for Southern Studies

www.southernstudies.org

Supports regional social justice organizing through research, report writing, publications, and forums. “Facing South” is an email bulletin with information briefs often not found in mainstream media. “Southern Exposure” is an investigative journalism magazine.

UE #150

www.ue150.org

NC’s public service workers union. They seek community support for their Workers Fairness Campaign. The campaign seeks adequate state funding to ensure that those in state hospitals and institutions receive good care and that state workers are not working for wages near the poverty level.

Other Resources

Here are a few other items that members of the Economic Justice Committee of the Council thought you may want to know about:

The Citizens Trade Campaign (CTC)

www.citizen.org

A national coalition of environmental, labor, consumer, family farm, religious, and other civil society groups founded in 1992 during the fight over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). CTC believes that international trade and investment are not ends unto themselves but instead must be viewed as a means for achieving other societal goals such as economic justice, human rights, healthy communities, and a sound environment.

National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC), Inc.

www.nfcc.org

NFCC Members, often known as Consumer Credit Counseling Service (CCCS) or other names, can be identified by the NFCC Member seal. This seal signifies high standards for agency accreditation, counselor certification and policies that ensure free or low-cost confidential services.

Interfaith Worker Justice

www.iwj.org

A network of people of faith that calls upon our religious values in order to educate, organize and mobilize the religious community in the United States on issues and campaigns that will improve wages, benefits and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers.

Advocacy for a Living Income (cont.)

An Idea for Your Congregation

Jesus calls us to abundant life, and scripture reminds us to not be afraid of the powers and principalities but to “do justice.” Here is one way to do that. Find a few members of your congregation who have a calling to help make society more fair and just.

Form a Faith and Fairness Ministry:

- Each member gets on the mailing or email list of one or more of the organizations listed in this chapter. They receive updates and information and action ideas.

- Members inform the congregation about NC facts and needs and how the congregation’s people can become active participants in civic action (not partisan politics, but basic democracy as citizens) to achieve policies and programs that enable hard-working families to make ends meet and thrive.
- When several congregations in a community do this together and speak out in unity to elected officials for needed change, the effect is even more powerful.

If in each NC congregation, a group of members became links to these organizations, think of how the voice of the church might be magnified to create a more hospitable climate for workers and families in North Carolina.



A Living Wage - Policy Statement (2000)

A Policy Statement Adopted by the NC Council of Churches' House of Delegates -- November 9, 2000

OVERVIEW

From the shadows of banking towers of Charlotte and Raleigh to the small towns and hamlets far away from the bustling Piedmont, the much-ballyhooed economy has not lifted all boats. Many people are working hard but are not earning enough to make ends meet in today's economy. For this reason, a "living wage" movement is gaining momentum around the nation. This movement seeks to educate policymakers and the community about the true costs of making ends meet and to require that local governments and their contractors pay a living wage to their employees.

Over 40 cities and counties across the nation, including the city of Durham, have adopted living wage ordinances. Greensboro, Charlotte, Asheville, and Raleigh may also see campaigns for living wage ordinances.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MINIMUM WAGE AND LIVING WAGE

The minimum wage is currently \$5.15 an hour. *[In March 2012 the minimum wage was \$7.25 an hour. Alongside many allies, the North Carolina Council of Churches advocated for this increase.]* Congress has been debating whether to increase it to \$6.15 an hour. Such an increase would:

- help the 70 percent of minimum wage earners who are adults.
- benefit the 46 percent of minimum wage earners who work full time.
- increase the 54 percent of family income that minimum wage workers contribute.

It would affect approximately one out of every five North Carolina workers.

But even a full-time minimum wage earner could not lift a family out of poverty. Moreover, earning a minimum wage is not enough to pay the bills – for housing, for food, for child care. A worker who works 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year, takes no vacation, and misses no work because of sickness would have a gross income of \$10,712. If that

worker has one child, the family falls more than \$500 below the federal poverty line for a family of two--\$11,250.

And the federal poverty figures, based on the cost of a "thrifty" diet more than thirty years ago, are widely conceded to be inadequate in today's world. So how much does it cost to live? In recent years, several respected North Carolina groups have calculated the costs:

In 1997, NC Equity released a "self-sufficiency standard" for each of North Carolina's 100 counties. This standard factored in costs of housing, child care, food, etc., and showed that the federal poverty guidelines were not high enough to reflect the true cost of living. The standard described how much money various configurations of families would have to earn to make ends meet without government assistance. In high-cost areas like the Triangle, the amounts reached almost \$14 an hour.

In September 2000, the NC Low-Income Housing Coalition released a study about the growing trend of unaffordable housing in North Carolina. The Coalition estimated that a full-time wage earner would have to make \$10.15 an hour to rent a two-bedroom apartment without spending an unaffordable share of his or her income. Increases in costs for shelter, especially in the Triangle and Wilmington areas, have been among the highest in the nation, far outpacing the growth in wages.

Also in September, the Common Sense Foundation, a Raleigh-based research and advocacy organization, released its State of the Worker report. The Foundation urged an increase in the state minimum wage to \$8.50 an hour, about enough to move a family of four above the poverty line. More than one-fourth of North Carolina jobs are at or below this amount.

In November, the NC Justice Center will release an update similar to the self-sufficiency standard. The "Living Income Standard" will likely show that families even in rural areas have to earn at least \$8 an hour to live. Costs in urban areas, especially for housing, will be higher.

A Living Wage - Policy Statement (2000)

IS HARD WORK ENOUGH?

Many Americans still believe that hard work is enough to support a family. But is it? The information in the previous section would suggest that it is not. And, in fact, over three-quarters of North Carolina families living in poverty include a worker. For them, work simply isn't enough to provide basic necessities.

A disturbing trend contributing to the problem is that income is being distributed more unequally. Since 1979, family income (adjusted for inflation) has:

- declined by 0.6 percent for the lowest-income families.
- increased by 5.6 percent for middle-income families.
- increased by 29.9 percent for the wealthiest families.

This unequal distribution of income, a mirror of opportunity, makes it more difficult to sustain a democratic society, to say nothing of a just society. As a result, many are working more just to keep pace. Married-couple middle-income families now work almost 600 hours more (or 20 percent) annually than they did in 1979. Families at all income levels work at least 14 percent more than their peers did two decades ago. However, there has been little change in North Carolina's poverty rate in the last decade, despite low unemployment and much job growth.

While it is clear that families have tried to keep pace by having more of their members work outside the home and by working more hours, it is also clear that this trend can injure families. Spouses have less time for each other; parents have less time for their children. People are living to work, not working to live.

WHY SHOULD PEOPLE OF FAITH SUPPORT A LIVING WAGE?

We live in a radically different world, with radically different economic systems, from that in which the Bible was written. Still, the Bible contains teachings which are relevant. Consider these three points:

1. Workers were to be paid fairly and quickly (Leviticus 19:13; James 5:4). In a society in which people

lived from day to day and from hand to mouth, to withhold a worker's wages, even for a day, was unjust.

2. Justice required assistance for the most vulnerable in society. In Hebrew law, these were the widows, orphans, and immigrants, and there were special protections built into the law (e.g., Deuteronomy 24:17-22). For Jesus, it was "the least of these," and "all the nations" were to be rewarded or punished based on whether or not they had helped (Matthew 25:31-46).

3. Wealth was to be distributed with some sense of equity. The Jubilee Year provided that the ownership of land (economic capital in that day) was to revert to its original owners every fifty years (Leviticus 25:8-17). The New Testament records that members of the early church shared whatever they had to help fellow believers in need (Acts 2:44-47). While there is nothing to indicate that the Jubilee Year was widely honored or that this extraordinary sharing existed for long periods of time in the First Century, the message of these passages should not be too quickly dismissed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Advocacy steps fall into two broad categories: increasing workers' wages and reducing their out-of-pocket costs.

1. Strategies for improving wages include:

Modeling good behavior. Faith-based organizations (of which we are members) should pay living wages and provide adequate benefits to their employees. Governments (of which we are citizens) should pay their employees a living wage plus benefits, should require their contractors to do so as well, and should require businesses benefiting from tax incentives to pay living wages and benefits.

Increase the state minimum wage. The state minimum wage is currently \$5.15 an hour. More than ten states have increased their minimum wage above the level required by the federal government, in part to recognize that the minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation or the cost of living in general. These increases have had little or no harmful effect on employment.

A Living Wage - Policy Statement (2000)

2. Families spend the majority of their money on housing, child care, food, transportation, health care and taxes. To reduce the impact of these costs, we advocate:

Affordable Housing Construction through a state-wide bond issue and dedicated sources of revenue for the Housing Trust Fund, the only source of state dollars for affordable housing.

Continued Support for Child Care. While the amount of subsidies for those needing child care has increased in recent years, there are still families on waiting lists for subsidies in many North Carolina counties.

Health Insurance. While the state has been very successful at enrolling children in public health insurance programs, such as Medicaid and Health Choice, there are still many working North Carolina adults without health insurance.

Many employers don't provide it, and workers can't afford to buy it for themselves. The state should extend the Medicaid program to help these adults gain access to health care.

State Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Nearly 625,000 North Carolina working families with children benefit from the federal Earned Income Tax Credit. The EITC was created to lower the federal tax burden and supplement wages for low- and moderate-income workers. It lifts more people out of poverty than any other program except Social Security. Fifteen states have created their own versions of the EITC. *[North Carolina has since implemented an EITC. Alongside many allies, the North Carolina Council of Churches advocated for this legislation.]*

The Bible teaches that the worker is worthy of his or her hire (Matthew 10:10). Full-time workers should be able to provide basic support for their families. North Carolina should take these recommended steps to reward work and to support working families.

