

Church Training (August 1988)
WHEN THE FACTORY CLOSSES
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The nightly news tells us that Dow Jones averages are up. The news from Wall Street is positive. Our coastal cities brag of being revitalized. The newspapers in Nashville, Atlanta, and Charlotte speak glowingly of commercial development. But the shoe factory in Glenville, West Virginia, is closed. So is the giant tire plant in Miami, Oklahoma. Chemical plants up and down the Mississippi and around Donaldsonville, Louisiana, are shut down. Another company in Des Moines, Iowa, has cut back its work force. There is no fire in the open hearths of steel plant after steel plant along Interstate 20 through Birmingham, Alabama. The spindles sit idle in textile mills around Gastonia, North Carolina. Across the country in the past decade, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people have learned that the factory where they have worked for years has closed.

For some of us this can be taken philosophically. We see it as a part (perhaps a necessary part) of a massive economic revolution. We are told that our nation is joining other nations in a great world economy where each nation will produce what it can best produce and trade with other nations for what they produce best. As a consequence, many labor intensive industries have been shifted to Third World countries. Here in America these jobs have been replaced by new opportunities in information transfer and service industries.

But for the family of the steel worker, the auto maker, the textile worker, the sewer of shoes, the maker of tires—for this worker and his/her family, the closing of the factory presents serious life crises.

Change occupations.

Retrain.

Pull up roots.

Move the family.

Chase a rainbow.

Hope some other company will take over the plant.

Wait for some new industry to come to town.

Hoping it happens before benefits run out.

In Oklahoma, bivocational pastor Jerry Von Moss challenged his fellow former employees to help him build a new church building while they sought to sort out their response to their loss. In Weirton, West Virginia, the former employees bought the steel plant and are working now at getting their jobs back. So did the employees of a sewing factory in Melborne, Arkansas. In North Carolina,

Alcohol.

Suicide.

Faith.

Give up and drop out because one is untrainable.

Start a new business.

For most persons, none of these options, when first considered, is particularly attractive.

Have your church and community been impacted by this rash of factory closings? If so, what have you and your church done about it? A pious "Cheer up my brother" or "I'll pray for you" is not enough. Like many farmers and some persons in middle management, thousands upon thousands of factory workers have found their lives and their careers and their families disrupted in recent years. They need a word from God; they need our ministry.

How can we help? Begin by rereading the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10. It appears that Jesus sets forth three stages of ministry for those who have been hurt.

One is a ministry to their immediate physical needs. The Good Samaritan stopped and bound up the wounds of the hurt man.

Second is a ministry toward wholeness. The Good Samaritan took the man to the inn and arranged for him to be cared for until he was well.

And third, Jesus tells us that we have a responsibility to work for a public policy which sees all persons as neighbors wherever they live in this country or around the world. And He declares that we must love them as we love ourselves, as we love our God. And still further, He says that we should treat one another just like we would want to be treated (see Matt. 7:12).

Elsewhere Jesus, both by teaching and by practice, helps us understand that conversion takes place in the moments of life's change.

churches and associations have led out in the development of new industries and enterprises to provide jobs in depressed areas. In Atlanta, churches started a job bank to help people who had lost their jobs to find new career opportunities. And many urban Black Baptist churches have established vocational training programs in and through their churches, following the lead of Dr. Leon

Sullivan.

Consider the needs in the town or the community where your church ministers. Which of these three stages of ministry found in Luke 10 has your church supported? Which might still be needed? How might the Church Training program of your church provide training in ministry to those who are victimized by the economic revolution our nation and our world are now experiencing? Let me suggest some steps you and your church may wish to consider.

Step One. Bible study and prayer. Encourage your pastor to focus a series of Sunday night or Wednesday night Bible studies on passages that speak to persons having economic difficulty. Some passages that he may wish to consider are:

- Luke 1:46-55—Mary's song, which sets the agenda for the life of God's Son. This might be amplified by noting Luke 4:16-30, where Jesus announces the direction of His ministry.
- Luke 10:25-35—The application of this parable of the Good Samaritan has already been suggested.
- Jeremiah 22:13-17—This is only one of many passages in the prophets which declare that God is concerned for justice and for the well-being of poor people. A study of this passage might be supplemented with reference to James 1:27—2:26.
- Matthew 25:31-46—This passage challenges all Christians to be involved in personal ministry to other persons.
- The Psalms are full of passages which declare God's concern for and care of poor, economically victimized persons. For example, note Psalms 9:18; 18:27-28; 23:1-6; 34:18-19; 37:23-37; 41:1-2; 55:22; 72:4; and 82:1-8.

An integral part of this series must be serious, congregationally involved prayer for the economic plight of those in the community and the area who are out of work and who have serious economic needs.

Keep praying throughout the processes. And remember that ministry in times of crisis is often the key that unlocks the door to witnessing opportunities. As concerned as we are about the physical well-being. Gerald Dyer, the director of missions in Miami, Oklahoma, has shared that as the people of that community and of our churches there have gone through the process of dealing with the closing of a major employer, significant revival has occurred. People caught up in the materialism of our culture have responded to the crisis by turning back to God and to His church. And because of the ministry provided by the churches and their members, many who had no time for

Step Two. The Church Training program could sponsor an information meeting on community resources that are available to people in economic crisis. Many Southern Baptist congregations have within them one or more employees of the Department of Human Services for that county. These persons could speak or could arrange to have a speaker of address the whole church or Church Training group or some other group in the church explaining what resources are available. If the need is great and interest is high, this could be followed with a series of training meetings or workshops to help the people in the congregation not only know what resources are available, but also how to provide referral and some help. Check with the leadership of the Woman's Missionary Union in your church. They have excellent material on how to put together missions action projects that help all kinds of economic problems. In larger associations, there may be someone on the associational staff who is a specialist in this area who also can provide assistance with Step Two.

Step Three. Ascertain the "stage one" needs of persons in your community. Recall that "stage one" is ministering to the immediate physical needs of people for food, clothing, shelter, comfort. Assess whether or not these needs are being met by existing programs and facilities. Where they are not, it may be that your church or the leaders of the Church Training groups will want to provide leadership in seeing that these services are made available.

Step Four. Discover resources for "stage two" assistance—helping people back to wholeness. This might include personal, emotional and spiritual counseling—helping people deal with hurt and anger and grief and guilt. This may involve helping people get family relations straightened out. It certainly could involve job retraining and various kinds of technical assistance in helping people find or start some kind of economic enterprise on their own.

Step Five is applying the Golden Rule to public policy and personal practice. How do we turn around the materialistic values of our society that measure most everything in terms of "the bottom line?? How do we see to it that no one social class dominates the decision-making processes of the community or of the society?

God or the church have been converted and made Christ the Lord of their lives.

It seems that God always has a way of bringing triumph out of tragedy, but it happens best when God's people intentionally work with Him. Please consider what needs to be done by your church and by the Church Training groups if your community is among the many in our nation undergoing dramatic and hurtful economic change as the factory closes.

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