

Turning Jobs Into Good Work

by Fr. John S. Rausch

Don Peck, writing in *The Atlantic* (March, 2010) paints a dismal picture about the future of employment in America. The national economy lost 10 million jobs since the beginning of this recession and many of those jobs will return only slowly.

With population growth and new people entering the job market, Peck says our economy needs to add 1.5 million new jobs a year, roughly 125,000 per month, to avoid slipping back further. To grow from 10 percent unemployment to the 5 percent level we experienced before the recession would require creating 600,000 jobs per month, double the strong job creation rate of the mid-to-late 1990s, and even that would take about two years!

Employment is shifting. The construction and finance industries, absent the housing bubble, will probably not regain their former share of the economy, and employment in the auto industry will offer fewer opportunities. Manufacturing jobs are continuing to move offshore, but now they are joined by outsourcing many white collar jobs.

Economists see one bright spot about unemployment coming through innovation as some laid-off workers become entrepreneurs. A current Labor Department report identifies ten occupations that will add the most jobs by 2016, and hence offer the most creative business opportunities. These occupations include: orderlies and nursing-home aides, personal and home-care aides, registered nurses, retail salespersons, customer service representatives, food preparation and serving workers, general office clerks, accounting clerks, janitors and postsecondary teachers. Notice these types of service jobs cannot move offshore. However, aside from Rns and postsecondary teachers, most of these jobs currently pay too little to meet a small family's basic needs unless they are unionized.

While market resiliency will continue to produce more business opportunities, this will happen by requiring different skills. Many unemployed workers will need retraining, which means starting over in terms of seniority and earning level. Upward mobility for many seems stalled and high earnings for now appear more elusive.

For people of faith high unemployment triggers a serious pastoral concern for workers and their families. The unemployed face genuine spiritual, psychological and social problems besides their economic ones. Research shows the unemployed suffer more alcoholism and drug abuse, more spouse and child abuse, more cardiovascular problems and hypertension, and the children of the unemployed are sick more often and longer. Through compassion we must first minister to those with self-images shattered by job loss and design programs that affirm them as worthy and contributing members of society.

Unemployment also offers an opportunity to rethink our expectations about success and work. Many unemployed report they have become less materialistic and more financially responsible. Their emphasis for success has shifted from easy riches and frivolous purchases to family and relationships. Some avoid undue stress by revisioning their work life from aggressively "making money" to humbly "earning a livelihood."

With time on their hands many unemployed volunteer more and have discovered satisfaction in helping others through community projects. Herein might lie an important discovery from our national crisis.

Since the depth of the Great Recession came largely from the get-rich housing bubble and hocus-pocus financial transactions, business investment needs to shift more to innovation that strengthens community. Investment that preserves creation like retrofitting houses and developing green energy keeps employment local while giving workers a sense of purpose. Designing programs that support people like universal health care and continuing education build a safety net and offer a ladder up. This crisis ultimately offers a unique opportunity to change the uncritical cry for jobs to a demand for good work with a social purpose.