

“I’ve Got a Job for You”

Helping People Through the Grief Experience of Job Loss

James Moore

‘Tis sweet to hear ‘I love you’
Beneath a giggling moon;
‘Tis fun to hear ‘You dance well’
To a lilting, swinging tune;
‘Tis great to be proposed to
And whisper low, ‘I do;’
But the sweetest words in all the world,
‘I’ve got a job for you.’¹

—Margaret Deeney, “Proud Words”

The light words of that poem have a heavier meaning these days in this world, in this economy, in this job market (especially where I live in Houston, Texas).

Many talented, committed people (through no fault of their own) have lost their jobs. Some have become suddenly unemployed; others feel woefully underemployed. Some are sad, some are scared, some are anxious, some are

embarrassed, some are depressed, some are emotionally wounded, some are going through an identity crisis—all are going through an agonizing grief process.

And, this is where the church comes in. Our job is to continue

- the ministry of Jesus Christ;
- the ministry of preaching, teaching, helping, healing;

- the ministry of faith, hope and love;
- the ministry of “being there” for people in the spirit of Christ ; and
- the ministry of encouragement.

The word “encouragement” in French means literally “to put the heart in” while “to discourage” means to tear the heart out. Our job as the disciples of Jesus (and as the servants of his Church) is to put the heart back into people—and one of the moments that ministry is most needed is when someone has lost her or his job.

Have you ever lost a job? It’s a terrible experience. It’s frightening and grievous. Our calling as the church is to help people to move creatively, productively and redemptively through that dark valley of grief to the mountaintop on the other side.

Some years ago when I was younger in age and younger in the ministry, I decided to do some research on the grief process. Many helpful new resources were coming out. In the church where I was serving at the time, we had a number of deaths and I thought if I could understand the grief experience better, I could help our church family minister to grieving people more effectively.

The first thing I discovered was that I had at the time a very shallow understanding of grief. I thought grief was the pain we feel when someone we love dies. That, of course, is grievous indeed. As a matter of fact, while I was in the midst of that research project, I got a call one morning telling me that our mother had just died in a car wreck, and I was thrust personally and traumatically into grief. I quickly realized, that all of these materials about grieving I had been studying were precisely on target. I was suddenly going through the stages of grief that I had been reading about.

RE-DEFINING GRIEF

But, I also learned that the loss of a loved one to death is not the only grief experience, so I had to re-define the word. My new definition was broader and more encompassing. It read like this:

“Grief is the pain we feel anytime we lose something that once was precious to us.”

- It can be loss of a loved one through death, divorce or separation.
- It can be loss of a friend through

estrangement or alienation or geographical distance.

- It can be loss of a home or a region of the country.
- It can be loss of face,
 - loss of morality
 - loss of health
 - ... or LOSS OF A JOB.

All of these are grievous. They all break our hearts and shake our self-identity, and they all carry with them some fairly predictable stages:

- **Numbness.** This is a rather intriguing mixture of shock and strength—almost as if God anesthetizes us to get us through those first difficult hours and days.
- **Expressed Emotions.** We need to cry it out, work it out, talk it out, pray it out, worship it out.
- **Existential (extremely personal) Loneliness.** “No one feels it quite like I do.” No one can do it for us. We must walk the valley alone – and yet not alone, for God is with us.
- **Questioning.** “Why did this have to happen?” we ask. Why did this happen to me? Why didn’t God save me from this?
- **Guilt.** “Did I do all I could do? Did I do my best?”
- **Return to Reality.** This is when we finally gain the strength to pick up and go on with life. The mark of faith and victory is the ability to go on with God as our Helper.

Grief is a journey that takes time. As we move through the valley, God anoints us in his own time, and in his own special way, with the balm of healing.

JOBCARE

To help people move through the grief process that accompanies a job loss, our church created a ministry called JobCare. JobCare came into being in the 1980s during the infamous Houston oil crunch and has been continuously operating ever since.

In that time of economic stress in our city, many people lost their jobs suddenly. We reached out to help them and discovered that their needs were many.

Some had physical needs. They needed a telephone or a computer or a desk or an office to use in their new job search.

Some had emotional needs. They had lost their self-identity; they felt hurt and rejected and lonely.

Some had spiritual needs. How could their faith resources help? How could their church family help them make a new start with their lives? How could God help?

Out of these kinds of hurts and needs and grief experiences, JobCare was born. JobCare has helped many people over the years and has been featured recently in the *Houston Chronicle* as well as in *Time* magazine.

Reverend Kevin Otto, who heads up Caring Ministries in our church, sums it up like this: “JobCare provides support, help, hope, belonging, information, accountability and inspiration to people who are unemployed or underemployed. Our mission is to help people who are hurting and who are in a situation where they need in a special way the supportive love of the church family.”

What Is JobCare? It is a group of people drawn from the congregation of St. Luke’s United Methodist Church and the greater Houston community who want to help and encourage those navigating the job search process... and dealing with the pain of job loss.

What does JobCare do? We seek to provide a community of hope and a network of support and accountability in which people who are seeking employment can find:

- job search tips
- job leads
- new ideas
- encouragement (After the Enron collapse, we immediately called every member of our church who worked at Enron to offer hope and help.)
- letters of recommendation, and
- specific practical information on matters such as how to write a resume or prepare for a job interview.

Where and when does the JobCare Community meet? We meet each Monday night in a room in our church, with people coming from all over the city to participate. Some are members of our church, many are not; some are United Methodists; many are not. We started with the problem of the oil bust of the 80’s and now are dealing with the recent corporate calamities that have shaken our city and caused so many people to lose their jobs.

What do we do in our meetings? Our standard format is to begin at 6:30 p.m. with a welcome, prayer, announcements and introductions of job seekers and volunteers. At 7:00 p.m. we introduce the “content program,” for the evening. It could be a lecture, or seminar, or discussion of one particular aspect of the job search. For Example:

- How to begin a job search
- Where to find help
- How to be sure the job seeker has healthcare coverage
- How to deal spiritually with job-loss grief
- How to use the office provided to conduct your job search.

At 8:00 p.m., we wrap up with further questions and/or networking. Seekers will often network informally until 9:00 p.m. or later.

On the third Monday of each month, we convene JobCare in “roundtable” discussion groups and provide attendees with issues to discuss and an opportunity for formal networking and the celebration of victories.

Who can help? The JobCare ministry needs people who are encouragers, visionaries, speakers, speaker recruiters, industry experts, human resource professionals, persons with skills in public relations, grief counselors and general helpers with willing hands and compassionate hearts.

At the beginning of this article, I suggested that some of the greatest words we can ever hear are the words, “I’ve got a job for you.” Well, the good news of our faith is that God has a job for us! He wants us to reach out to people in the Spirit of Christ, to be there for them in their joys and sorrows from the cradle to the grave. □

¹ “Proud Words” by Margaret Deeney in *Leaves of Gold*, p. 163 (Fortworth, Texas: Brownlow Publishing Company, 1948). Used with permission of the publisher.



James Moore is pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. He is the author of several books, including *When Grief Breaks Your Heart* and *At the End of the Day* (Abingdon Press).