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Churches put job-seekers to work for each other

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Job-hunting doesn't have to be a solo mission.

And in a time of widespread layoffs, anemic hiring and the worst labor market in decades, some of the most active Atlanta networks are faith-based.

Combining religious values and the techniques of staffing companies offers both assistance and reassurance, said Peter Bourke, founder of the C3G – for Christ-centered career groups – at North Point Community Church in Alpharetta.

“The biggest problem in the job transition is that you go from being part of a team to being ‘me against the world,’” said Bourke.

The world of hiring has looked pretty harsh of late.

Metro Atlanta has shed about a quarter-of-a-million jobs since late 2007, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. While the government reported Friday that the national jobless rate broke into double digits last month, the Georgia and metro Atlanta rates have been above 10 percent since June..

More than in many previous recessions, this downturn has pounded professionals and mid-career workers. They make up many of C3G's roughly 500 active members. As the meetings filled, “subgroups” were created for separate sectors.

Tony Tedesco of Alpharetta, who runs C3G's real estate subgroup, lost his job in real estate management at a major mall about two years ago. At first, it seemed like a welcome chance to travel. He's over that.

“Now, I really need to get back to work doing something,” Tedesco said.

He has had some job interviews and is often told that he is overqualified, he said. “Most of the jobs I end up looking at, the pay is not even close to what I used to have. But I think, it may be a \$55,000 job, but it's like getting a \$55,000 raise.”

Experts have long maintained that networking is key to a successful job search – meeting people, meeting people who know other people: The wider the net cast, the more likely it will catch something.

“People think they can just go online and apply for jobs, and they can, but they are not going to get one,” said Elizabeth Gill, owner of Express Employment Professionals, a Buckhead staffing agency.

There is strength in numbers, she said. “People need more than just interviewing help. They need coaching, direction, guidance, and they need to commiserate.”

If networking has a negative, it is the danger of getting too cozy with the group, said Julie Charlop, executive coach for business and career advancement with PotentialMatters in Atlanta.

“You can get into a comfort zone where you are hanging out with the same people for too long. Some folks check in and get stuck. You have to make sure you are always bringing in new connections.”

Faith-based groups should be empowering, she said.

“They provide a safe and secure place to practice practical spirituality. You need huge amounts of positive reinforcement to geo and market yourself. In the best of times, that can take all your energy.”

And it does sometimes lead to a job: in the past three weeks, 31 C3G members have gone back to work, Bourke said.

Membership in C3G is free. And as critical as religion is to the group, the program does not include proselytizing. Prayers are sometimes said, but there is no concerted effort to move members to a different level of practice. Moreover, a C3G member does not need to join North Point Community Church.

Yet faith does tint the picture.

At C3G, jobseekers are asked to think first of helping other members, Bourke said.

“The faster way to find a job is to find five friends or 500 friends and start helping each other. And when you get a job, you come back and you share with the group – where you are going to work, what you have learned.”

Women are separated from men on the assumption that they will be more honest with each other – and with themselves. Their needs are different, said Nancy Dybowski, who headed the women’s section after she and her husband closed down their consulting business a year ago.

She is now in Memphis, where her husband has landed a consulting job with an indefinite contract. She is still looking, both there and here.

She still sometimes attends C3G meetings, she said.

“When you lose a job, you go through grieving. You can find so much strength in other people who are going through the same thing you are.”

The religious aspect is both irrelevant and crucial.

“You have to have faith that things will work out,” she said. “I don’t care what your faith is -- You are meant to be here.”

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