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**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Past experience not necessary

By Robert C. Blezard

“Give a man a fish,” the old saying goes, “and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Congregations that provide people with work experience and marketable job skills help put them on a pathway for independence and sustainability. This approach complements well our church’s efforts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless.

Exercise 1: Help up

Many congregations participate in feeding programs, food pantries, clothing banks and other ministries that do a wonderful job in answering our Lord’s call to meet the daily needs of people in poverty. Job training and education ministries take things a step further.

- In what ministries does your congregation participate to help with food, clothing, housing and other needs for the poor? What programs exist in your community?
- Why is it important and valuable that churches work to feed, clothe and care for people who are needy? What Bible verses support the imperative for God’s people to care for the least among us?
- Why is it helpful when ministries work to help needy people to become self-sufficient through job training, education and other efforts? In what ministries does your congregation participate that help bring folks to self-sufficiency?
- What opportunities might there be to begin or deepen your congregation’s involvement in such ministries? Why would that be a natural “next step” for your congregation’s commitment to help the needy?

Exercise 2: Your skills

For most of us who have jobs and have held them for years, job skills and work habits are things we can take for granted. But think about it: How did we learn those skills in the first place? Discuss:

- What is your job? How did you learn the skills necessary for your job, and how long did it take? If no one taught you, how would, or how did, you learn? What would your life be like if you had not learned the skills you need for your job?
- How do each of these means help provide job training and work experience to people in your community: public schools, colleges, trade associations, employers? What does it take to access these means? What



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kind of jobs do they prepare people for?

- Imagine you didn't have a job history, didn't have skills and lacked good workplace habits. How could you manage? Where could you go for help? How might your congregation assist you?
- Given what you know about jobs and work, how could you help coach a person who is trying to enter the workforce?

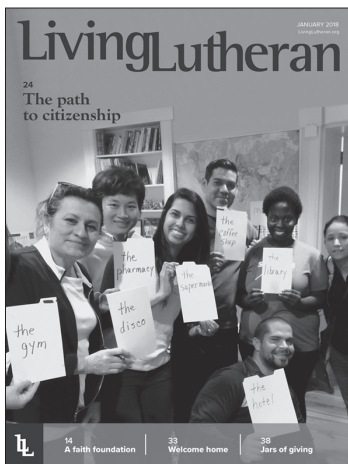
Exercise 3: Your congregation

- How would you describe the difference between unemployment and underemployment? Which one is a bigger problem in your community?
- What programs or institutions are there to help your community cope with the problem? How could your congregation help?
- What businesses could your congregation acquire or partner with in order to help people with the job skills they need to advance to employment or greater employment?
- Does your congregation have a ministry that could be turned into a job-training endeavor? For instance, a sewing or quilting ministry could be transformed into one that teaches people how to mend or make clothing.
- Are there business owners or entrepreneurs in your congregation who could work with the church to offer entry-level training to promising needy candidates?
- What skill-sets are there among the membership of your community that could be used to help craft a ministry? For instance, a computer graphic artist could work with a schoolteacher to put together a course.

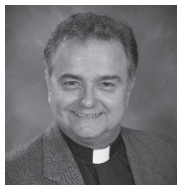
Exercise 4: Barriers to employment

Lack of specific job skills is only one of the many barriers to employment that people in poverty face every day. Discuss the situations of the people in each of the following hypothetical scenarios.

- **Homelessness:** "Couch surfing" with friends, staying in shelters or wherever she can, Sarah has no reliable permanent address to put down on a job application and no phone number for prospective employers to call. Moreover, it's hard for her to keep a schedule or find enough food to stay healthy. *Why are these issues problems? How could your congregation help?*
- **Criminal record:** Dave has made mistakes and "paid his debt to society." Even so, for the rest of his life he has to disclose his criminal



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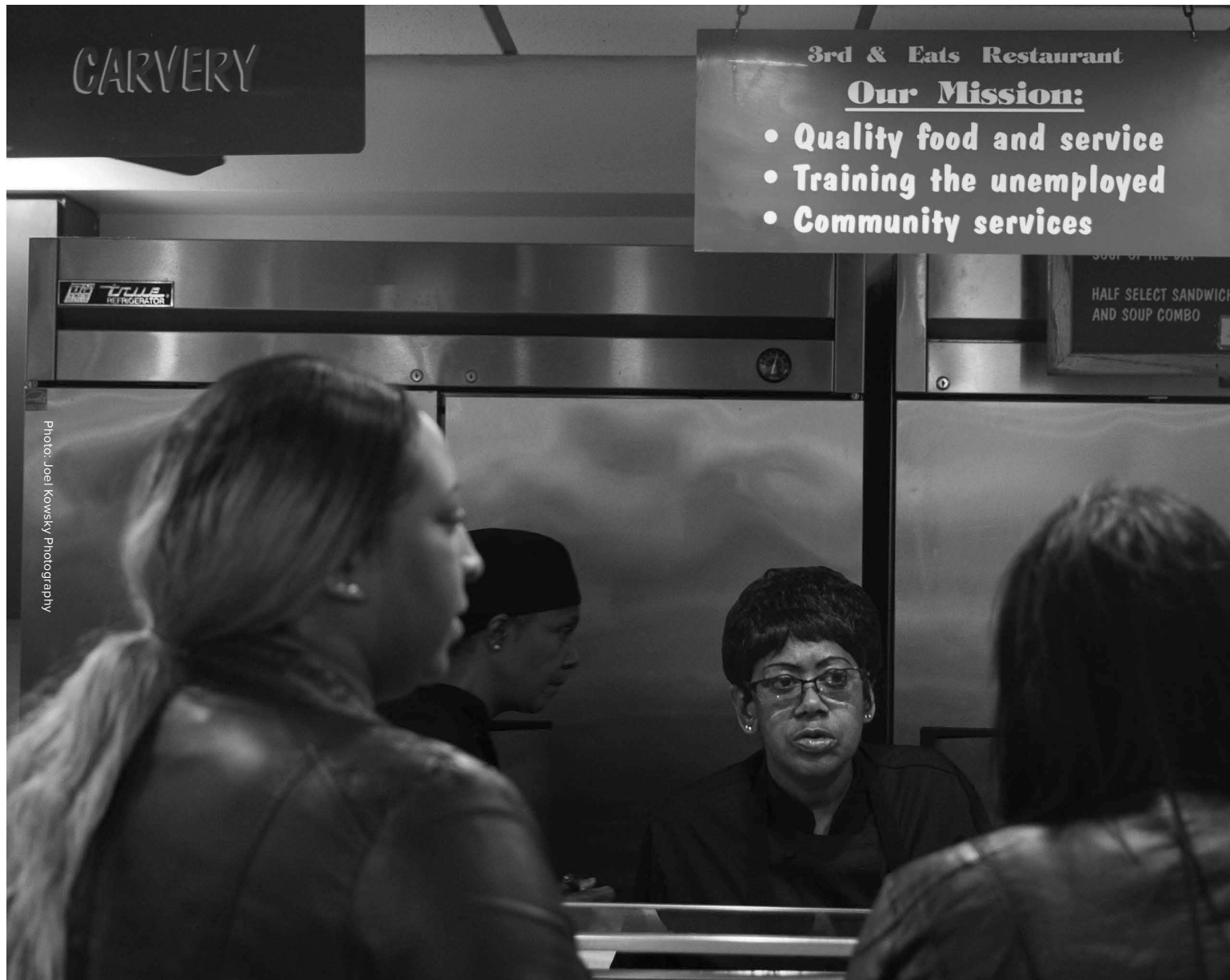


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record on a job application or be accused of putting false data on the form if it's found out. Isn't Dave still paying that debt? *Why are these real problems? How could your congregation help?*

- **Transportation:** Melanie lives in the city and can't afford a car. The good jobs are in the suburbs, but in a cost-cutting move the county eliminated the buses that used to run beyond the city. Taxis are too expensive. *Why is transportation a problem for the poor? How could your congregation help?*
- **Clothing:** Rick was offered a job in retail, but the store's dress code forbids jeans, sweatshirts and sneakers. But those are pretty much all he has to wear. The store's required khaki slacks, button-down shirts and loafers are beyond his budget. *How is the lack of acceptable work clothing a problem for people living in poverty? How could your congregation help?*
- **Child care:** Tiffany would love to go back to work full time, but with no nearby relatives to watch her two toddlers it's impossible. The cost of child care for two would take almost her whole paycheck. *For poor people, why is child care such a barrier to employment? How could your congregation help?*
- **Education:** Several years after the fact, Jimmy deeply regrets dropping out of school at 16, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Jimmy never felt he was learning much, and he can barely read. Now he finds that no employer is willing to give him a chance. *Why are lack of a high-school diploma and illiteracy problems for someone to get a job? How could your congregation help?*
- **Work habits:** Shelly keeps getting fired for reasons she really can't understand. Plenty of people work at that place, so why do they make such a big deal out of not showing up once in a while? Or if she's running late a couple times a week? Employers are just unreasonable and unfair. *How is the lack of basic work habits a problem for gaining employment? How could your congregation help?*



Over the past 16 years, First Trinity Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C., has trained more than 400 people through its job-training ministry, New Course Restaurant and Catering. Demetra Bullock (center), a trainee, serves customers one morning at the restaurant.

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Congregations host job-training ministries

By Wendy Healy

For the past 16 years, First Trinity Lutheran in Washington, D.C., a congregation of about 75 to 80 Sunday worshipers, has run a business next door to its building near Judiciary Square. Much more than a place to get an omelet, a sandwich or bowl of soup, New Course Restaurant and Catering is a free job-training ministry that prepares people for positions in the food industry.

“We train poor, low-income and homeless people to be chefs, kitchen helpers, and to do catering at weddings, bar mitzvahs and corporate events,” said Tom Knoll, who has been the pastor of First Trinity for 35 years.

He recalled how the ministry was humbly founded with grants and loans, growing to almost half-a-million dollars in sales per year by catering



Photo: Joel Kowsky Photography

Catrina Cardenan cooks breakfast at New Course one morning. Cardenan is a trainee in the job-training program that prepares people for positions in the food industry.

events and serving breakfast and lunch. Starting as a sandwich shop, the ministry has trained more than 400 people, Knoll said, and 85 percent of them have gotten jobs.

“We wanted to do something that wasn’t just charity, such as teaching people to fish rather than giving them something to eat,” he said.

Today, New Course is managed by an outside company and is self-sustaining, but the congregation is still involved, with Knoll helping with the bookkeeping and serving on the ministry’s board.

First Trinity’s ministry is inspiring other congregations to think out of the box too. Its partner church, St. Matthew Lutheran near the D.C. waterfront, recently broke ground for a coffee shop. The Sacred Grounds Coffee Shop: Coffee with a Purpose will also be a job-training ministry, said Phil Huber, pastor of St. Matthew.

Stitching a future

Last fall, Unity Lutheran Church in Hickory, N.C., started a sewing ministry called Sew Much Good. With a small grant from the North Carolina Synod, crowdsourcing and support from the congregation,

Unity is teaching women to sew well enough to get a job or start a small home business.

“We’re getting an incredible response,” said Kate Crecelius, pastor of Unity. “Both the congregation and the community are behind us.”

When Crecelius took the call at Unity last January, she found a struggling congregation with 35 people in church on Sunday who were seeking new ways to be the church.

She brought the idea of a sewing ministry, which she’d launched at another church, to Unity’s council. With the congregation on board, the synod grant of almost \$2,000 was used to buy 12 sewing machines. Fabrics, notions and other supplies were donated by the congregation, Safe Harbor Rescue Mission and the Greater Hickory Cooperative Christian Ministry.

Taught by Dawn Price, a retired family and consumer science teacher, the eight-week sewing course last fall was attended by two young mothers and several retirees. With differing backgrounds, all the women were looking to learn a skill and for a way to connect with others, Crecelius said.

“If they can demonstrate a mastery of skills, they earn that sewing machine to take home and use for income, home decor, crafting or whatever,” she



Sew Much Good, a ministry started last fall by Unity Lutheran Church in Hickory, N.C., trains people in sewing skills and helps them prepare for jobs by providing tips on résumé-writing and interviews.

added. Mastery of skills includes attending classes, completing a project—making a backpack for people who are homeless—and writing a résumé. Job-search skill training and mock interviews are conducted by a church member with a human resources background.

Retiree Amelia Williamson took the course to brush up on her skills: “I hadn’t sewn in years and I’d like to sew again. I needed a refresher course because the machines have changed.”

Williamson also likes the camaraderie. “I really enjoy the women,” she added. “They’re all so nice and friendly. I’m making friends and learning to sew. It has been a wonderful thing.”


Rachael Ray, a mother of a 5- and 6-year-old, agreed: “I’m learning a new skill and can do something with it.”

Ray said it’s heartwarming to know that the church is providing this course solely to help people. “They’re out there to help people and not in it for money like most places are,” she said. “I’d recommend it to others because everyone deserves the right to enjoy something they want to do or learn something they want to learn.”

Ann Kanipe, a member of Unity for about 10

years, showed her support for the new ministry by donating fabric. “I had some fabric that I’d gotten when I was working in upholstery. It was just small pieces, but pieces that I thought could be used,” she said. “I hope the people who are taking the [classes] will get something out of it and it will mean something to them. I hope they can take it further and do something in life with it.”

Crecelius said Sew Much Good is helping the congregation see hope and new possibilities in a future.

“It’s helping them see that God is up to something,” she said. “God always shows up and is always present. God always provides. If the women [in the classes] feel confident and empowered and found something in themselves that they didn’t know was there, then we will have succeeded.” 

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Wendy Healy is a freelance writer and member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, N.Y.