

Help! I'm Redundant

Pastor. You can all blame George for this meeting! I received his phone call mid-morning some weeks ago telling me that he had just been made redundant. He was packing up his tools, clearing his locker and would be home in half an hour; could he call in for a few minutes? I think I was nearly as shattered as George was . . .

George. I doubt it!

Pastor. Perhaps not, but I'd never known you working for any other company. Maybe we all needed that kind of shock to make us stop and realise what was happening. I did a quick check on how many members of our church are out of work and came up with a pretty alarming score. Anyway, it seemed high-time we got a few of you together to see how we could help each other. So, here we are, and as I say you can all blame George.

George. Thanks!

Pastor. Let's start by reminding one another what we have been doing. Tell us about your job and how long you were in work and then how you felt when you first knew your job was on the line. George, you kick off for us.

George. I'd been working in my firm for twenty-five years. When I left school I tried a few jobs, got myself a trade and then came to this company. I started at the bottom and worked up to section foreman. Then this happened. How did I feel? Shocked, stunned and helpless. Of course we all knew it was coming. Being a large workforce there had been plenty of warning and lots of discussions and press coverage, but on the last day I nearly cried. Some of the other blokes did - men I never thought would cry about anything except when Manchester United lost the cup final! I walked back down the corridor from the personnel office trying to keep a clear head. Packing my tools and emptying my locker was one of the most miserable half-hours of my life. Then we had to check out with security and I felt like some kind of criminal. I don't want to go through that again.

Pastor. Tony you've only been living for as long as George has been working, so did that mean it was easier for you?

Tony. No, just different I suppose. I was already on my third job since leaving college and each move had been a career climb, so I didn't have the same sense of company loyalty or belonging as I expect George had.

Pastor. But how did you feel when the end came?

Tony. To be perfectly honest, I felt humiliated. I thought that what I could offer the company was important to them and suddenly they were saying: 'We don't want you.' I felt cut down. How could I face my friends? What would I tell them? Worst of all I kept wondering what they would think about me. I was just embarrassed at the thought of their reaction.

Pastor. What about the practical side of things - finance for example?

Tony. With a wife and baby, the thought of my massive mortgage hit me before I got to the car. If humiliation and embarrassment were my first reactions, panic followed soon afterwards.

Pastor. Your turn John. You were doing well in your profession when the chop came. As a cool, calm businessman I suppose you handled it well?

John. There was a sense of relief that all the uncertainty was over, but it seemed so unreal and I had to keep saying to myself: 'Yes John, this is really happening to you.' I suppose my first reaction was: 'What have I done wrong? Why me?' You see, in my case the firm was being selective. Unlike George's firm where almost everyone went, my firm were just cost-cutting. I was one of the last to join, and my section of work had been particularly badly hit by the recession. It was obvious that however good I was at my job, I was a prime candidate for redundancy.

Pastor. Did that help you to cope when the end came?

John. Not really! I know it now and I knew it then, but at the time I couldn't persuade myself that it wasn't because I had done something wrong. I felt a failure; I really believed I had done something badly wrong and that they would not tell me what it was. It took weeks before I could convince myself that that was not true. Anyway, I phoned my wife from the office and she was marvellous. There was one thing I did that I'm especially glad about now. I made up my mind that I would not leave a bad Christian testimony behind me however hurt or angry I felt. So I tidied my desk, put all my files in order, and carefully explained any outstanding items to my director. I went and chatted to my staff and thanked them for their support and wished them well in the future. I'm glad I did because weeks later after I left people were still talking about what I had done.

Pastor. That was a good witness for Christ, John, and it couldn't have been easy for you. Peter, your situation is very different from John's isn't it?

Peter. I suppose so. Unfortunately I've got no trade and no qualifications so I've only ever had casual work since I left school. I often got no warning at all. The boss would just come down and tell us there would be no work for tomorrow. All the work I used to do has dried up and for people like me the future is pretty bleak. For nearly a year I couldn't even get an interview.

Pastor. How do you cope?

Peter. I don't! The Council pay the rent for my room, but I can't really manage on my unemployment money. Families invite me in for meals and that helps a lot, but I've got no savings left now and I sold my motorbike a couple of months back.

Pastor. I really meant, how are you coping in yourself?

Peter. Oh that. I have bad days and worse days and the occasional good day. A good day is when I go for a job, but that's usually followed by a worse day and two bad ones!

John. I think we can all more or less identify with that.

Peter. It can't be as bad for you John. You've got degrees and things.

John. They're not doing me much good at the moment Peter. Believe me, I know all about your bad, worse and good days.

Pastor. Sorry to leave the lady until last. Mary, what was your work?

Mary. I was a sales assistant in a large store for five years. So far all my working life has been in the retail trade; I don't really know anything else. Money worry is not my main problem because I still live at home with my parents, and they are very understanding.

Pastor. But it must have affected you when the store pushed you out?

Mary. Of course it did. They decided to cut out my department and they couldn't spread us around so there was little or no redeployment. I felt like the rest of you - not wanted and useless. Like Tony I was embarrassed as to what my friends would think. At first I even worried that my Mum and Dad would think I must have had my hand in the till or something. Whether we like to admit it or not, a lot of people still think you are somehow 'second rate' if you've been made redundant. All other things being equal, if two people apply for the same job, the one already in employment stands the best chance. I even had someone tell me that I should have seen it coming and done something about it. I feel sure others think I'm not trying hard enough to get work. You only need one person to get a job quickly and people think everyone could get back to work if they wanted to. Perhaps I'm just too sensitive but I really do feel there's a stigma, a sort of shame, about being unemployed.

Pastor. Even though it's so commonplace today?

Mary. Yes, because there are still many more people in work than out of work.

Pastor. What was the worst experience you all had after surviving the first day?

Mary. As I say, telling my friends that I had no job, and knowing that they were all right because they were still in work. But I made up my mind not to keep it a secret so I told my parents and friends at once. It wasn't easy, but it was the best thing I could have done. They were all marvellous.

Tony. For me the worst thing was waking up at the usual time the next morning, getting out of bed and suddenly realising I had nothing to do and nowhere to go.

George. The worst thing for me was signing on. I waited for what seemed like hours in the queue with everybody grumbling and people getting angry. When eventually I got to the front, I found I had been in the wrong queue all the time! Finally, I got to the right person but I felt so small; the official was very young and clearly didn't understand how I was feeling. He asked the standard questions and just didn't

appear interested in the answers. It was awful. It was something I didn't want to do and a place I didn't want to be.

Pastor. Would it have helped to have a friend with you?

George. Oh yes. Looking back it would have been great to sit there chatting with someone who cared. But I had no idea what it was going to be like.

Pastor. Perhaps some of us in the church should have thought of that and suggested it.

John. My experience was different. The woman who interviewed me really seemed to understand. I think the worst thing for me was the feeling that I had failed Christine and the children. For the first few days I couldn't look my family in the face because I was sure they must be thinking that I wasn't much of a husband or father.

Mary. And were they?

John. Of course not - and Christine tried to make that clear. She was very supportive and it brought us closer together, but it took me a long time to convince myself of it.

Peter. You do surprise me. I always thought of you as the cool confident type who takes everything in his stride.

John. Don't you believe it Peter. I might have been like that in business, and I guess that's why I got where I was, but redundancy brings out the coward in us all.

Peter. I suppose I've got more experience of the dole queue than any of you; it's about the only thing I am experienced in. I've watched some pretty aggressive people and some pretty ugly scenes because the Giro hasn't arrived and so on. But the worst thing for me is being lumped with everyone else. I really wanted a job, but I'm sometimes made to feel as if I'm scrounging and half the time I think they don't believe me. They ask if I've done any work and when I say I haven't, I just know what they're thinking.

Tony. Which is . . . ?

Peter. Oh they think I'm moonlighting like so many of the other blokes there. Trouble is the system doesn't make it easy for me. At present they pay my rent and give me unemployment benefit. I had the possibility of a job recently, but the pay was so poor I wouldn't have had enough money to keep my bed-sit, so I had to turn it down. Then I felt guilty.

Tony. You shouldn't feel guilty about that Peter, you've got to earn enough to keep a roof over your head. We have to be flexible and consider moving away from the job we have been used to, but being out of work doesn't mean we have to take anything that's going. I've got to earn enough to keep my family, and I do want something that will use my skills in some way. But talking about feeling guilty; some people have said to me that one good thing about being out of work is that I can get done a lot of

those jobs around the house and garden. But whenever I'm doing these things I feel guilty because I feel I should be at work - proper work. I suppose one disadvantage of being a Christian and believing that God intends us to work is that we feel guilty if we can't.

Pastor. I understand what you mean, but surely what you are doing at home or in the garden is in fact 'proper work' for you at the present time? You ought also to look at your job searching as 'proper work' and let the family know this.

Tony. I hadn't thought of it like that, but I often wonder if people in employment really understand. I certainly didn't.

John. I know the feeling. People say to Christine: 'It must be nice having John around all day; I wish I could see a bit more of my husband - he's gone at seven and doesn't get back until seven or eight at night.' Christine feels like screaming at them; and when she says: 'Of course it's not nice having him around all day when he hasn't got a job', they think we are arguing all the time and having problems in our marriage.

George. My Margaret has a little part-time job and I feel guilty because we're living off her income, but the fact is that I've made her redundant at home.

Peter. How do you mean?

George. Well, I do all the things at home that Margaret used to do, and some of them are things she enjoyed doing, like cooking the meals.

Mary. You really are domesticated. But I bet Margaret appreciates all you do. In fact I know she does because she's told me so.

Peter. I wouldn't mind having a wife to cook for!

Pastor. Are you saying there are special problems of being unemployed and single, Peter?

Peter. Yes. Having no one to share the frustration with when you lose a job you really wanted, and being alone when you just long for someone to say you're worth something to them. Then again, it's hard to keep in with your friends when they have money and you don't. They go for a Big Mac and a few Cokes or they plan a day out at Theme Park or an evening at the Leisure Centre or cinema, and you have to slide out quietly.

Pastor. You mean people just don't think?

Peter. Well, I suppose that's it. But I'm not criticising.

Pastor. I know you're not, but we ought to be more careful about each other. Anything else Peter?

Peter. Just having no one to push you along when you get lazy and give up job hunting and lie in bed all morning.

Pastor. Let's focus on that search for a job because I know you all want to be back in work as soon as possible. How do you go about it?

Mary. I hope nobody does what I did. I was so determined to get a job that I went mad for the first week applying for all kinds of things. I worked at it morning, afternoon and evening and I became so confused and disappointed that I spent the next three weeks in a kind of lethargic daze and didn't do anything. Not very clever.

John. Fortunately somebody warned me of that danger so after a day or two I worked out a routine. I had been told that ninety per cent of jobs are never advertised but are found by word of mouth. So I opened a file and spend the mornings ringing round any contacts I can think of. Of course I read the local and professional papers as well. In the first two or three months I made cold-contact with over fifty organisations. It only brought me three interviews and no job, but at least I was doing something constructive. I didn't keep up that pace because I ran out of ideas and contacts, but I still keep to the same routine. I spend mornings only on the job search. It's too depressing to spend all day on it.

Pastor. That's an important point. How many of you plan the day?

Peter. Not me. I drift.

Mary. Same here, though my parents are pretty good at planning my day for me!

Tony. I'm beginning to be a little better organised, but I'm not very successful at it. The idea you suggested earlier of looking at my job searching as 'proper work' may help me to be more disciplined.

George. Margaret and I work out a weekly plan and review it daily. Like John, I look for work in the mornings and spend the afternoon doing things at home or at the church. The evenings always have been pretty full with my Christian work anyway.

Pastor. Clearly a planned day is best. That way you actually achieve most and you are less likely to feel you are wasting your time. If you plan each day you can justify all that you do.

Peter. But how do you plan a day?

Pastor. Take a notebook and each day write a list of things you are going to do and how long you expect to take doing each job. George said he gets involved in day-time work at the church and there's nothing wrong with that. So long as you are genuinely looking for work, the Government doesn't expect you to be at it for eight hours a day. George helps in practical ways on the fabric, John gives him a hand and also does some visiting with Christine - both in hospitals and homes. Anyway, plan your day in a notebook. Also, keep a daily record of the jobs you have applied for. By the way, although you shouldn't go mad at the job searching, like Mary did,

try to keep something 'on the go' or else you can get stale. You need the stimulus of writing letters, making phone calls and going for interviews.

John. I have to admit that it takes a lot of time and effort to prepare for an interview or fill out an application; and I am constantly altering my CV, so that it best fits the particular job I am applying for.

Peter. What's a CV?

Pastor. It stands for 'curriculum vitae', a Latin phrase meaning 'details of life'. Employers often want a CV to read about your important details like age, address, education, previous work, interests and job expectations. Short, to the point, and neat is the order of the day. You should prepare one even if no one asks for it Peter, because it helps you to focus on what you're after - which is good interview preparation. Keep your CV by the telephone so if a prospective employer rings you, you have your 'prompt' all ready. Don't forget to keep a pencil and notepad by the phone. If someone rings you to arrange an interview it doesn't make a good impression if you have to ask them to wait while you wander all over the house looking for something to write with.

Peter. I wouldn't know what to write in my CV because I haven't done very much, and anyway my handwriting is terrible - they would never bother to read it.

John. Why don't you come over one evening and I'll help you work out a CV. We can put it on my computer and that will give you a really smart copy.

Peter. That would be great - but there's not much about me to impress an employer.

John. That's nonsense Peter. We'll make the most of the jobs you have done and tell them about your work with the children in the church and among the disabled - it all helps.

Mary. A good character reference from the pastor may help as well.

Pastor. Maybe. Anyway, let's move on to something else. You are all committed Christians and I've been impressed by your honesty, even admitting your fear and panic and so on. How has your Christian faith helped you during this time?

Tony. You remember I said that one of my first reactions was panic. I really felt sick with worry for a few days. We have such a big mortgage. Then Brenda and I read Philippians 4:4-7 one morning and I felt ashamed of myself as a Christian. We made a list of all the good things we had and thanked God for them all one by one. Then we told God that we trusted him for the future. I really believe he has a plan for us and whenever I go for a job we remind ourselves that he is in charge. So far it hasn't got me a job, but it's saved me from falling to pieces. Those verses at the end of Habakkuk have been a great encouragement; you know, where the prophet says that even though the vine and olive trees fail and there's famine in the land and no animals left for food, he will rejoice in the Lord. We've often read that passage together.

John. As I said earlier, I was so ashamed and felt such a failure that for a few days I couldn't even look my family in the face. Then someone sent me a note to encourage me; it was on one of those cards with a beautiful scene of just where we couldn't afford to go on holiday. But the card had a text from Isaiah 43:1 on it that read, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.' That phrase 'you are mine' seemed to jump out at me and I understood in a way I had never understood before that I mattered a great deal to God. People may have written me off but God has written me in, and I belong to him because he wants me.

Peter. That's a great thought because I often feel like you did. Sometimes I think I'm at the bottom of the pile when it comes to jobs.

Mary. But none of us is Peter; if we are Christians we are redeemed, and that means Christ loved us enough to die for us. I keep reminding myself that God loves me and has plans for me and the proof of this is the cross where Christ died for me.

John. Following on from that lesson about my value to God, I learnt to see that it was the job that was redundant, not me.

George. That's a good point. Someone encouraged me to remember that I wasn't the failure, the firm was. Margaret and I have found Romans 8:28 a great help. I know it's a familiar verse but we often don't understand it properly. Recently I heard a sermon on it, and the preacher said that what Paul actually says is that all things God works together 'for the good'; and 'the good' is defined in the next verse as being 'conformed to the likeness of his Son'. Even in redundancy God is testing and training us to be more Christ-like. So it's not all a meaningless waste of time.

Tony. If this whole experience has taught me one thing it is that the things of this world, however important they are, are not all-important. My first panic was the fear of losing my possessions, but I'm learning that as a Christian I have possessions that no employer or Building Society can take away from me. Perhaps you need to be threatened with losing your home, car, holidays and spending power to realise that salvation, friendship with God, and the promise of heaven are far more important.

Peter. I haven't got either a car or spending power, but I agree with what you say. I often wonder how on earth I would cope if I didn't have God to trust.

Mary. One thing I've learnt is the value of friends who care. I didn't need to worry about what my Christian friends would think; they were all terrific in their understanding. Just knowing that people are praying for me is a tremendous help.

Pastor. Do you sometimes wish people wouldn't keep asking you whether you've got a job yet?

Mary. I know what you mean, but it's good to be asked and I'd rather be bored telling people that I've no job yet than be longing for someone to show an interest. But I suppose it depends on the kind of person you are.

Tony. True, and finding a job takes time and people must be patient with us. Some people express surprise that I'm taking so long getting a job; they just have no idea

of the job market today. One job I went after, had over five hundred applicants - and I've heard of worse than that. After the first shock and panic I began to think of the excitement of a new challenge and a new start, but I had no idea how hard it was going to be to get work.

George. I agree with what Mary said about people caring and praying. Margaret and I have experienced much kindness. Even the occasional phone call or card means a lot.

Tony. That's true for us as well, and even when people have been thoughtless in what they said or how they responded, I know they didn't mean it. It's really hard for someone who has never been out of work to understand what is involved.

Mary. It's a bit like bereavement I suppose. Only when someone you love has died can you understand what it's like.

George. Actually that's a pretty good description of how I felt when I walked out of the factory gates for the last time. I remember thinking that I was leaving part of my life behind me. Friendships built up over years disappeared overnight; the bond of working in a section together was broken; the security of a job I knew and routine I was used to - they all went. A major part of my life had gone.

Pastor. George has brought us full circle. However, there is one other area that we have not yet touched on. I think you all know that the Bible has a lot to say about how well we should do our work as employees - for example Colossians 3:23 tells us that we should work as if we were working for the Lord and not men. But in this matter of redundancy, as in all areas of employment, we need to remember that God places an important responsibility upon the employer also. I know the New Testament is set in a master and slave context, but the same principles apply today. In Colossians 4:1 employers are reminded that they are answerable to God and must therefore provide what is 'right and fair' for their employees.

George. That's interesting. You mean that employers have a duty towards their employees to make sure they are not put out of work unnecessarily, and that if redundancy is unavoidable they should do everything possible to help them?

Pastor. Yes, and it is quite proper that we have laws to protect workers from an unscrupulous boss. You have the right, both in law and according to the Bible, to be treated fairly. If you are in any doubt then you should contact your union, or the appropriate professional body, or the Citizens' Advice Bureau. Mind you, you should always make sure that any job you accept has a proper contract of employment. Now, before we have another coffee, let me ask each of you what you've learnt that you would pass on to someone else who is facing redundancy. Then I have a plan to offer you. Peter, what have you learnt?

Peter. I suppose it has to be to rely on Christ and his plans rather than on myself alone. If I didn't believe he knew what he was doing with my life I don't know where I would be. So I would say: Trust Christ, he never messes up our lives.

Tony. That's what I would recommend as well and I would add this: each day stop and count up how good God has been to you, and thank him for it. That stops you getting too discouraged and just feeling sorry for yourself.

Mary. I learnt the value of Christian friends who care and who can be counted on. I would encourage anyone not to be too proud to talk things over with wise friends who care.

John. I'm still learning to be self-disciplined and flexible. By self-disciplined I mean that I have found it essential to get up at a regular time - the same time I used to when I was at work - plan my day carefully and spend time with God and my Bible before each day gets going. By flexible I mean that I am having to widen my choices in the search for work. A lot of people today are finding that not only have they lost their job, but they have lost their trade or profession as well. It can be very discouraging when you loved your work and your heart was really in it to discover that nobody wants people with your training and experience any more. I, for one, may never get back to my profession and may have to take a big side-step. Those two things: discipline and flexibility are what I would recommend.

Pastor. What about you George? You're unusually quiet.

George. There are really so many things I would recommend that I would need time to chat them through. Margaret and I found friction developing between us because we got in each other's way and I tried to take over the home just to keep busy. Having said that, I want to say how well Margaret handled the situation right from the start. She never appeared anxious, was always supportive and encouraging and seemed really to understand how I was feeling. I think a wife's response is crucial especially in the early days. There have also been times when I only read the Bible in a negative way. For example I once read 2 Thessalonians 3:10, 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat' and I went into a nose dive for days until I realised Paul was laying emphasis upon '*will* not'. If I had been talking with someone regularly I'm sure I could have got out of that quicker. I know I have grown spiritually during this time because I have been thrown back on the Lord and have been forced to ask myself who I am really trusting. I suppose for the first time I began to ask God to show me what he wanted me to do; before, I had just taken whatever job appealed to me.

John. That's a thought. Perhaps we ought to be thinking whether or not God wants us to do some sort of full-time Christian work. When you've been made redundant would seem to be a good opportunity to make that kind of move.

Pastor. Not necessarily John. In a time of recession and high unemployment a lot of Christians think like that, but to be perfectly honest, mission organisations are far more interested in the Christian who is prepared to give up a good job in order to do full-time Christian work than in the one who has just been made redundant. It's a bit too easy to 'feel called' at a time like this.

John. Yes, I can see what you are getting at. Perhaps if we 'feel called', as you put it, we should go and find a job and then see if we feel the same way.

Pastor. That's not a bad idea. Anyway, I'm grateful to you all for your frank discussion on this issue. George's phone call to me when he heard he was redundant made me think seriously, and listening to your conversation now I realise we should have been more supportive of you all especially in the early days of redundancy. After all, if the New Testament encouragement to care for one another means anything, then those of you who are unemployed must be one of our first concerns. My suggestion is that we start a support link for those out of work so that we meet together regularly once a week, say at nine in the morning to give us all one regular morning appointment.

Tony. That sounds like a good discipline for us.

Pastor. It's meant to be. But the main purpose in the meeting would be to spend a while studying what the Bible says relevant to our situation, sharing our news, encouraging one another, and of course having a coffee. The whole thing would last about an hour and a half.

Mary. Sounds a brilliant idea to me. We could even keep one another up to the mark in planning our days and keeping our records.

Pastor. Yes, but the intention is not to hold a heavy inquisition. It would be to help and encourage each other. It's only this evening that we discovered Peter has difficulty with preparing a CV and John is able to help him with that. We have other men in the church with experience in finance who could advise any of us in particular need. Maybe Tony and Peter would value some help in this area. It's all too easy to fall into the debt-trap during a time of unemployment and I can't advise you too strongly to get the help of a wise adviser very early on - don't wait until you are in a real money mess. Other things would also come to our attention. I would gladly commit myself to you all in a regular meeting like this, and there may be Christians in some of the churches around us that we could help. What do you think?

George. I can see everyone has a positive reaction to that. Perhaps we could also help each other discuss possible contacts and retraining. It appears that there are a lot of government retraining schemes available, but it's taken me weeks to find out anything about them.

Mary. Maybe we could go out for an afternoon together occasionally - with your families as well of course. It would be good to spend time with each other for encouragement.

Peter. Yes, and to cheer each other up when we feel very down.

John. I agree with all that's been said and think your support link idea is excellent, but Peter is grinning as if he thought of it first. Is that right?

Peter. Not at all, but I do think it's a good idea. The only thing is that it's too late for me.

Pastor. Why is that?

Peter. Because I got a job this morning.

Mary. You've been holding out on us all the evening. You rogue!

Peter. Well, it's not much. I start on Monday and I'll only be unloading lorries at the superstore. But it's a start.

Pastor. There you go again, downgrading yourself. It's a job, Peter, and you will do well at it. We're all glad you won't be able to join our support link group and we hope never to see you there.

Peter. Thanks! I read Jeremiah 29:11 in my Bible this morning and it fits so well that I decided to learn it - I think I've got it right: "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."