

A prayer for the jobless, while moving our feet

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

- Frederick Douglass

As the Martin Luther King holiday approaches, I wonder what he would say and do about the social ills of our times. For example, the fact that millions of Americans cannot find work while other Americans hold billions of dollars in their bank accounts is a moral issue. Where are our religious leaders on this moral question? Dr. King would surely be calling on us to focus attention on the many persons without work to support themselves and their families.

Where is the demand for jobs? Where is the Shakespearean outrage, of the 1963 March on Washington, themed “For Jobs and Freedom?” I’ve often noted, many remember MLK’s “I have a dream” speech but few recall the reason for the demonstration - to demand that the nation provide jobs for black Americans, most of whom were wallowing in poverty at that time.

A couple of years ago, I was struck by the fact that unemployment for blacks during the Great Depression ran astoundingly between 50 and 60 percent, while at its peak, in 1933, it was an alarming 25 percent for the general population. In September 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics placed overall unemployment at 9.6 percent, where it has stubbornly remained. During that time, 12.6 percent of black women and 17.6 percent of black men were unemployed. And while unemployment for teenagers overall was 26 percent, it was 23.4 percent for white teens and a Great Depression-like 49 percent for black teens.

Behind the numbers is the pain of not being able to make ends meet, not being able to provide for children and facing them, not knowing if the lights and heat will stay on and having the frustration of applying with no responses or at best a rare interview filled with self-doubt, condescending questions and then not being able to get someone on the phone for a clue as to why one didn't get hired. There is great pain in being jobless for a long time. That's why the jobless deserve our prayers and our help.

Once again, in the spirit of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, St. Frances Academy Community Center will host a job fair on the birthday of Martin Luther King. The all-day event will take place Jan. 17, at 501 E. Chase St. Added to the afternoon job fair, there are morning refresher classes in resume writing, interviewing and successful workplace attitudes and behavior. There is breakfast for early attendees and lunch for everyone, preceded by brief prayers. One can donate blood in MLK's honor from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when the Red Cross will conduct a blood drive in the SFA cafeteria, sponsored by the Office of African American Catholic Ministries.

Volunteers are needed to help job-seekers attain an e-mail address and with resume writing, job-searching and applying online. Help is also needed with serving meals, setting up rooms, voter registration, getting petitions signed and general matters.

Each year we've sponsored a workshop on a topic of interest to the unemployed and their supporters. In years past we've held a discussion of how to get records expunged, how to start a business using micro-financing, the future of green jobs, mentoring a job seeker and goal setting.

This year, the plan is to invite community organizers and job-seekers to strategize on how to create the demand for jobs in the face of today's political and economic situation. We will begin our conversation in the morning and have it run the length of the day.

The MLK Job Fair is free and open to the public. For questions or to volunteer, call 410-539-5794.

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