

# Churches offer 'Soul Food,' encouragement to the unemployed

August 26, 2011

When people are in trouble following natural disasters, churches usually respond rapidly and generously.

The disaster of chronic unemployment creates a different set of challenges, but some churches across the country provide models of ministry to people affected by economic instability by meeting immediate needs for food and shelter.



Volunteers at First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo., serve a community meal, primarily to benefit the unemployed and underemployed.

[First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga.](#), wants to concentrate on assisting its community, instead of focusing on its own survival. "We're looking at ways to expand our footprint," Pastor Bill Ireland explained.

First Baptist began its Soul Food ministry in 2008 after the economic

downturn hit the construction industry. "There were people in the church who became concerned about the homeless and the working poor," Ireland said.

Often called the "Carpet Capital of the World," Dalton was hit especially hard, and unemployment remains higher than the national average.

Through Soul Food, the church provides a meal two or three times each month. This year, the congregation expanded its ministry to include special events for children and plans to start a choir.

The church is considering some other possibilities of ministry to adults. The church has called a recent seminary graduate as minister of community ministries and missions.

"We may not be able to do everything, but we want someone who wakes up every morning thinking about ways to minister," Ireland said.

Other churches across the country, such as [First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo.](#), provide community meals, as well. The Jefferson City church also is considering other long-term ministries.

Several, such as [First Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.](#), collect special offerings to assist with rent and utility bills.



Volunteers (left to right) Sandra Blackwell, Cindy Petway and Drake Barger serve hot dogs to participants at an end-of-school party sponsored by the Soul Food ministry at First Baptist Church in Dalton, Ga.

First Baptist in Decatur also has helped the unemployed through its Jobless, Not Faithless program. In the past, the ministry provided regular group meetings to encourage and pray with those who had lost jobs.

As the economy improved for a while in the area, attendance began to decline. Although no longer offered for groups, the ministry is available one-on-one to individuals looking for jobs.

Some churches that have provided job-search assistance—including interview, search and resume skills—have tapped into programs available through not-for-profits or government.

First Baptist in Decatur uses a ministry package available from Internet-based [Crossroads Career Network](#), Christian employment support. According to its website, the network of member churches uses a six-step process of career exploration and job-search techniques.

In North Texas, [First Baptist Church of Lewisville](#) has participated in Career Connection, an organization that serves the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The Lewisville church served as a satellite location, open to church members and the community.

First Baptist member Steve Smith helped begin the site when he was without a job. The group stopped meeting a couple of months ago as its numbers declined.

"It did help a lot of people," he said. "But the economy has improved in North Texas, and some gave up looking for work. Some had been out of work for so long that they lost interest."

He suspects the need may arise again since the economic recovery faltered recently.

[First Baptist Church in Georgetown](#) offered Careers in Transition at one

time but currently sends people to the Georgetown Job Café, a local networking opportunity, and to services offered by the Texas Workforce Commission.