

Catholic groups help the unemployed

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Rob DiCarlo remembers a Sunday Mass at Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary Parish more than a year ago during which his pastor, Father Timothy Horan, talked about the need to help unemployed parishioners. Afterwards, DiCarlo, assistant director of the Office of Career Services at SUNY Brockport, began looking for a way to use his expertise to help his fellow parishioners.

He later approached Father Horan with the idea of starting St. Margaret Mary Job Club, a place where the unemployed could go to talk to others in their situation and gain skills to help them secure employment. The club began with weekly meetings during which participants could have their resumes critiqued or engage in informal discussions about the issues they were facing, such as financial planning and the loss of health insurance. By the spring of 2004, many of the original participants had found employment, so the club's format changed. In May it hosted a series of career workshops covering such topics as resume writing, interviewing skills and job-search strategies.

Sixty people attended the workshops that month, and another series

is being planned for this fall, DiCarlo said. He and club cofacilitator Clare Velepec, vice president of human resources for MPower, make themselves available for consultation with people who call and ask for help.

"Job loss doesn't just mean a loss of income," said Marianne Antczak, pastoral associate and the parish's staff representative to the job club. "It involves loss of relationships, experience, position, pension investments and more. It's important for the church to be there for people, to provide support as it can through prayer and practical means."

Jim Mittiga belongs to Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral Parish but began attending St. Margaret Mary when the cathedral closed in 2003 for renovation. At that point he had been laid off and was looking for work. He said participating in the club helped him network and made him aware of his options.

"Making contact with people that were in the same situation you're in, even if it's not the best situation, keeps you energized," said Mittiga, who has since found employment as a contractor.

Joe Meli, a member of St. Cecilia's

Parish in Irondequoit, also believes in the power of networking. He is facilitator of St. Cecilia's Network, which meets every other week at the parish. At each meeting, members share their experiences and job leads.

Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration offers similar services to parishioners through its Employment Network. The network began in 1990 when many parishioners were faced with unemployment, said parishioner and network member Pat Piles. Although area unemployment rates have fluctuated since then, the network has remained stable, drawing to meetings as many as 30 people from as far away as Corning and Buffalo.

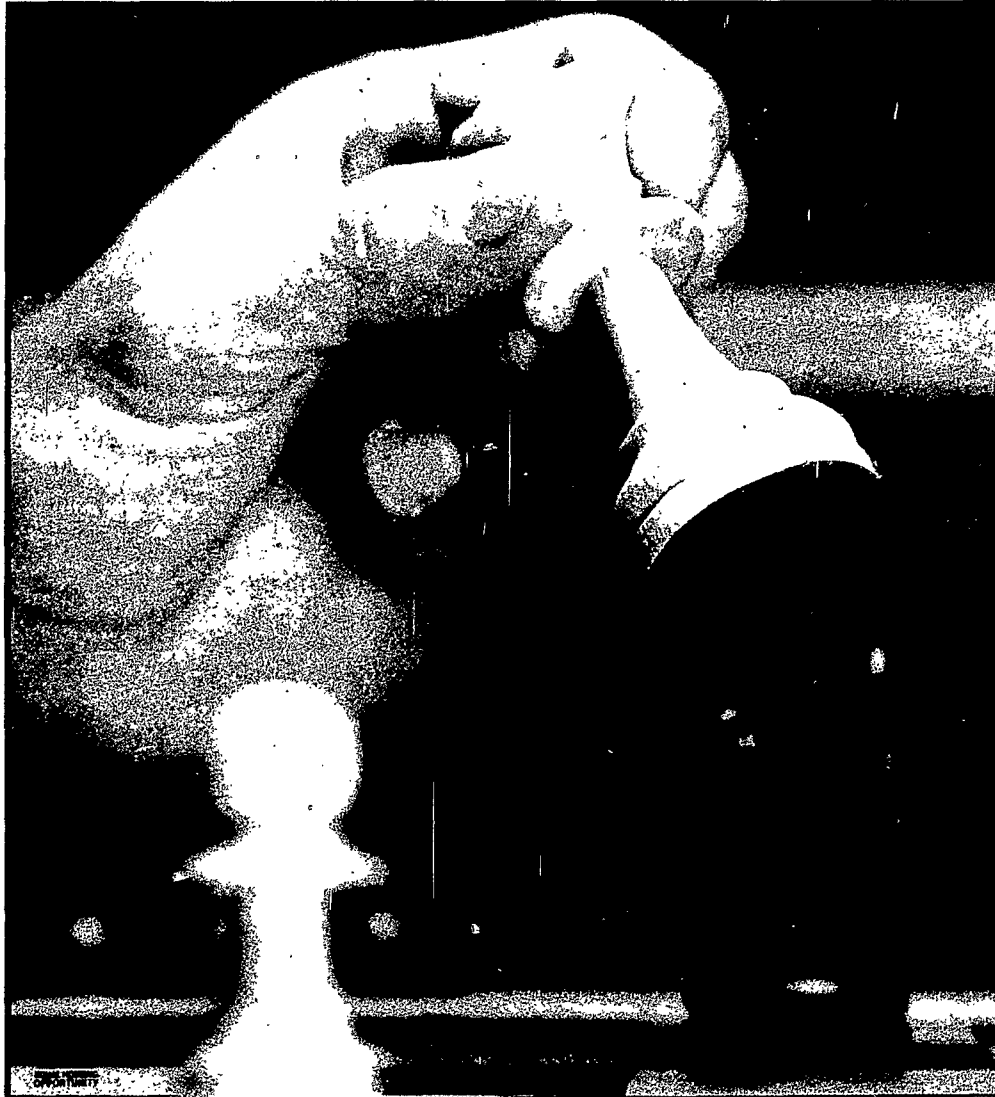
The Pittsford group also offers guest speakers and career-related workshops and recently teamed up with St. Louis Parish in Pittsford and St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Mendon. The parishes now take turns hosting meetings.

"It's a place for people to be resources for each other," said Piles, noting that the network is able to minister to people and help them heal rather than simply placing them in jobs.

A quick placement in a job might not be the best thing for some unemployed people, said Tom McKellop, who facilitates employment groups and provides employment counseling for Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes in Auburn. Some people might benefit from taking some time to make a career plan or go back to school, he said.

Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier recently awarded a Catholic Campaign for Human Development grant to the Southern Tier Labor-Religion Coalition for an unemployment ministry. The grant will be used to help faith communities provide spiritual, emotional and physical support for unemployed workers and advocate for better support for all workers, according to Cindy Hale, coordinator of the Southern Tier Labor-Religion Coalition.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on these groups, contact St. Margaret Mary at 585/342-1000; St. Cecilia at 585/467-4286; Church of the Transfiguration at 585/248-2427; Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes at 315/789-2686; or Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier at 607/734-9784.



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