



## Employment Plus!

Sitting on the beaches of Australia's Sunshine Coast—as I have been for the past week—it's pretty hard to get enthusiastic about work!

But work has actually been on my mind quite a lot.

I'm here in Australia because the Army gave me the opportunity to be a speaker at its Public Questions Boards conference. (The "Public Questions Boards" are responsible for advising the territorial leadership on Position Statements and official responses to government policy and legislation.) It just seemed to make sense to do some other speaking as well, "while I was in the neighborhood," as it were. So in the course of two weeks, I conducted ethics seminars in five of the country's six states, and gave more radio interviews than I would in a year at home.

I've been working hard. But that's not why work has been on my mind.

The reason for that is my discovery that The Salvation Army in Australia runs the largest employment service in the country. Operating under the name of Employment Plus, this service/ministry has placed more than 80,000 people in jobs in the three years it has been in existence. That would be impressive by any measure, but especially so in a country whose total population is about the same as the population of Southern California!

Add to this that the Employment Plus pool of job seekers is made up of the "long term unemployed." Their clients are not highly-sought-after professionals who would like

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a change of scenery. The Employment Plus literature boldly says, “[Our clients] need someone who believes in them. They need someone who never gives up. We are not prepared to accept that people are unemployable.”

This captures the important ethical rationale behind Employment Plus. If we care about our neighbor, as we ought to ethically, we must be troubled when the neighbor lacks a sense of self-worth. Having a job is not the only way of feeling valued, but in our culture it’s one very important way. Certainly I myself know that my job is more than simply a way of putting food on the table—it’s a way in which I can feel connected with the vitality of the larger community. If Employment Plus can give people the skills to become job-ready and help them secure employment, it may be building them up as whole persons, not just workers.

The ethical motivation of care professed by The Salvation Army may not be everyone’s motivation, however. I don’t know the politics here in Australia, but I’ve heard people raise the question as to why the government would out-source this service to the Army. Is the government’s prime interest in getting people “off the dole”?

Suppose it was. Would that be bad?

As far back as the early days of the church, the Apostle Paul had to deal with a work challenge that he hadn’t anticipated. It seems that at least one man (perhaps using the excuse that Paul had said that the Lord would be returning very soon anyway) was drawing on the church’s food bank but doing nothing to replenish the supplies. This must have flabbergasted Paul, who tended to be a workaholic himself, earning money as a tentmaker while he pastored the new church so that he wouldn’t be a financial burden on them. In

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any case, Paul clearly understood the man's behavior to be free-loading. Having no patience for that kind of exploitation of others, he reminded the Thessalonians that he had said, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." (2 Thess. 3:10)

What I am told is that situations are not always as clear cut as that. It's not always a matter of either working at a job or being a free-loader, much as it sometimes seems that that's what the rule-makers would like. And that fact provokes questions as to whether the Army's motivation and the government's expectations can work together.

A recent report in one of Australia's national newspapers says, "The Salvation Army is among leading performers in the Howard Government's \$3 billion Job Network. But success has come at a cost. To compete in the network, the Salvation Army's Employment Plus must 'breach' [i.e., report] jobless who do not meet mutual obligations set down by the Howard Government."

The ethical challenges of "breaching" clearly trouble some of the Army's staff. It's not just that few people like being a snitch; sometimes "breaching" itself seems unfair. At one of my seminars, an Employment Plus supervisor said, "We had trained a single mom in a skill and then helped her get a full-time job. That's good, right? But then we learned that she had not reported this fact and was still drawing welfare. That's contrary to the rules, and the government expects us to inform on her. But we also know that she won't be able to make ends meet on the money she makes from the job. What should we do?"

I said something in reply, but it's his *question* that is sticking with me. What's also sticking with me is the fact that the Army in this country sees the task of training masses of

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people for employment and then helping them find it as a key part of its own God-given work.

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