

Progressive Church creates connections at job fair

Written by Ray Richardson (Photos courtesy of Progressive Community Job and Career Fair, Photographer Ozzie Johnson)

Friday, 02 August 2013 16:22



Bringing a job fair to faith-based communities turned out to be a unique, yet successful combination.

And based on the results and feedback, there will likely be more such collaborations to help fight unemployment among African-Americans in the Twin Cities.

An estimated 300 people from diverse communities and ages attended the job and career fair on July 23 at Progressive Baptist Church in St. Paul – a debut event that attracted 24 employers, schools and agencies around the Twin Cities. Several participants landed jobs on the spot or were scheduled for immediate follow-up interviews.

“When we founded Progressive 21 years ago, we founded it with the desire to not just be a traditional Baptist church,” said the Rev. Earl Miller, senior pastor at Progressive. “Our goal was to make a difference in the lives of our people and address major issues. Unemployment and education are major issues in our community, and as a predominantly African-American church, we need to be involved in dealing with those concerns.”

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Miller said when the idea of a job and career fair at his church was presented to him, he and his staff was very receptive and “jumped at it.”

The job and career fair was developed by Deborah Watts, a member of Progressive Church and co-founder of the Emmett Till Legacy Foundation (ETLF). ETLF, along with members of Progressive, Ramsey County Commissioners Toni Carter and Jim McDonough, community leaders and faith-based organizations, partnered with several agencies to coordinate the job and career fair, including Ramsey County, Twin Cities RISE! and the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP.

Among the employers that participated in the fair were Wells Fargo, Health Partners, Ramsey County, City of St. Paul, Assurant, Minnesota Department of Corrections, HMS Host , Summit Academy OIC, UCare, St. Paul Public Schools and Job Connect.

“Kudos to Progressive Baptist Church for their pro-active stance in combating joblessness in our community,” said Carter. “The job fair is a significant step toward building a new community network, activated by people of faith. We need to help people find their way to, or back to work.”

The response from job seekers and employers has led to discussions of more similar job and career fairs in the future. Jeff Martin, president of the NAACP St. Paul branch, said he welcomes a move to rotate a fair to different churches in Minneapolis and St. Paul, perhaps on a quarterly basis.

“There’s been talk of doing another one in late fall,” said Martin. “There’s nothing wrong with getting more people into church. Sometimes people feel more uncomfortable talking to employers at other venues. In a church, there’s less pressure. It seems like there should be a common link between the church and business community.”

Making things even more comfortable for job seekers at Progressive was the presence of what Martin called a “triage” to help with appearance or grooming needs. A “dress for success” suite was set up in the church to assist participants who needed to enhance their appearances with clothing items such as dress shirts, ties, blouses, dresses and other accessories.

Sherrie Pugh, a local business owner with a clothing line, discussed with job seekers examples of professional attire that can be worn for work or to an interview. Members of various organizations donated clothing items for participants to wear. Progressive member Lenora Braxton, a licensed cosmetologist and educator, provided hair and makeup services for those in need of such services.

“I felt it was extremely valuable for a church to get involved in helping remove the unemployment gap in our community,” said Shereese Turner, director of recruitment and internships for Twin Cities RISE, a career development agency in Minneapolis and St. Paul. “With Progressive hosting this fair, it definitely impacted their congregation and the community in a positive way. I look forward to participating and supporting more of these events in the future.”

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Statistics indicate that job and career fairs geared toward African-Americans, whether in the church or other venues, are a vital option to battle unemployment concerns.

Based on reports in the Quarterly Economic Pulse, Minnesota Compass and Economic Policy Institute released at the end of 2012, African-Americans represented 25.4 percent of the unemployment rate in Minnesota – compared to a combined 6.6 percent of all other nationalities in the state.

The percentage of unemployed African-Americans in Minnesota at the end of 2012 was higher than Michigan (22.0 percent) and California (20.4 percent).

“It is proof that when we pull our resources together, we can make a difference,” Watts said. “Some job seekers walked out with second interviews, good leads and actual jobs. We are confident in knowing that the answers to most of our problems are not beyond our reach. My hope is that we continue to confront the challenges we face in employment, the achievement gap in education, health disparities, violence in our communities and other issues together.”