



# *Parish Heartbeats: Stories of Faith In Action*

## **Transition between jobs can be constructive.**

Many parishioners are familiar with Al Gustafson as a frequent speaker at our adult formation programs, as a spiritual director, and as a long-time parishioner along with his wife Patti and children Ian, Bridget and Michael (deceased.) What you may not know about Al is that he has a special concern for the long term unemployed.

The average time of unemployment for a professional in the current economy is seven months, and when age and salary level increases, so does the time it takes to find new work. This transition can be very painful. As Al points out, "We often treat transition as an enemy because it turns our world upside down and creates a lot pain."

In the early 1990s, the economy was struggling; unemployment was on the high side and Al's work in Chicago began to address the struggles of those in transition. As Al recalls, "I was facilitating a bi-weekly job club at Old St. Patrick's Church. There were other faith communities in the downtown area that had similar programs. Knowing they could do together what was not possible alone, five churches chose to redirect their energy and resources away from their own program to a collaborative effort at serving people in job transition. The collaboration advanced in stages, but by 1997 the Career Transitions Center (CTC) was a 501(c)(3) organization. CTC provides professional, emotional and spiritual support to those seeking a job, looking for meaningful work, or otherwise undergoing a career transition."

One of the lessons Al has learned through his work with the CTC is that the experience of transition between jobs can be constructive rather than destructive. "Easier said than done," Al points out, "but it is through the experience of transition that we become all that life created us to be."

Al points out that during these times of transition it is important to take care of yourself, "When I am out of work, I am the one who has to guard against loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. I am the one who has to manage my energy so I can be at my best when opportunity knocks. Nobody else is going

to do that for me. In other words, a person in job transition needs to do everything she can to take care of herself and there is no need to apologize for being more self-focused than normal."

Many clients at CTC discover that those who typically serve as their support system when life is stable are often not helpful when one is in transition. The reason they are sometimes not helpful is because they are often experiencing the same stress and anxiety as the person in transition. For example, spouses share similar anxiety about financial security and the future, and often unknowingly transfer that anxiety on to the spouse out of work.



Al thinks it is important for supporting friends and family to make the distinction between "curing" and "caring." As Al has learned, "We can treat the unemployed person as a problem to be fixed or a puzzle to be solved. In other words, we look to cure the unemployed and get them out of their pain for reasons not the least of which is their pain makes us uncomfortable. This is not to say we don't offer practical help, just recognize the situation calls for more than practical help. The pain and confusion that accompany transition have a purpose...it is difficult to let go of the

old in order to allow the new to come. It is a painful process to become free of what used to be comfortable and life giving for us. Transition can profoundly impact us on the emotional and spiritual level. This is when we need family and friends to care for us. Listen to us. Help us to feel OK even though we are confused and struggling. Caring for the unemployed is giving them permission and the space to grieve their loss."

If you would like to learn more about the work of the Career Transitions Center or learn how you can support their work, go to their website at <http://www.ctcchicago.org/>

- by Tom Cordaro

**Parish Heartbeats is an occasional bulletin column that celebrates the ways St. Margaret Mary parishioners make a difference in the lives of others.**