

Milwaukee pastor leads ministry linking inner-city workers with jobs outside the city

Jerome Smith Sr. runs the Joseph Project, an effort to address two big problems: high urban unemployment and the distance between where the jobless live and where jobs are.

by [Richard Mertens](#) in the [December 20, 2017](#) issue



Jerome Smith Sr. (left) with a Joseph Project van helping Milwaukee workers get to jobs outside the city. Photo by Rick Wood / *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) On a drizzly morning, a line formed early at the back of Greater Praise Church of God in Christ, a storefront church on Milwaukee's northwest side. Soon it stretched out the door as the pastor, Jerome Smith Sr., greeted visitors among the pews.

"Good morning, sir! How are you?" he says. "What's going on, girl?" A short, stocky man in his mid-forties with close-cropped hair, he shifts easily to pastoral sternness. "Fellas!" he exclaims. "Take your hat off in the sanctuary. Please!"

They have come here seeking not salvation but employment. And Smith, who would resist such a strict distinction, is eager to help them. For two years the pastor has run the Joseph Project, a program to connect inner-city workers, mostly African Americans, with jobs outside the city. The program not only helps them find work but also runs a van service to get them there.

The Joseph Project is a small effort to address two big problems: high urban unemployment and a growing geographical divide between where the jobless live and where the jobs are. These problems afflict many cities but have grown acute in Milwaukee. A forthcoming study estimates that nearly half of all working-age black men in Milwaukee are jobless. Meanwhile, companies outside the city complain they can't find enough workers.

"Milwaukee has far more people than it has great-paying jobs, and some of our outskirts have great-paying jobs but don't have people," Smith said. "This was a good match."

More than 150 people have found jobs through the Joseph Project. They work at large manufacturing and food processing companies in places such as Sheboygan, New Berlin, and Horicon, Wisconsin. They man assembly and packaging lines in plants that make sausages, car parts, and roofing materials. Most work the second and third shifts. From one van a year ago, the transportation fleet has grown to five. Vans leave the church as early as 3:45 a.m. and as late as 9:50 p.m., bound for destinations north and west of the city.

For many people, the trip is worth the trouble. The jobs are mostly entry-level, paying \$12 to \$18.50 an hour. Smith said that's better than most work available in Milwaukee, which includes retail and fast-food jobs and short-term work through temp agencies. Plus, the jobs outside the city have benefits that many workers in Milwaukee can only dream of.

"They're getting 401(k)s," Smith said. "Some are getting profit sharing. Health care, vision care, dental. Man, it's unbelievable."

Every Wednesday morning, Smith opens Greater Praise Church for an orientation. He selects the most promising candidates for a week of training in soft skills such as interviewing and financial planning.

This Wednesday's orientation has attracted an unusually large number: 41 candidates line up to fill out applications, then sit for the hourlong orientation. They include Gerry Brumfield Jr., who has come with his father. "This is my opportunity to start something new," Brumfield said. In his early thirties, married, and the father of two children, he has worked at a dollar store and for a security company, but is now unemployed. Like many in the Joseph Project, he has a criminal record.

"A lot of people give up or go back to their old way of life," he said. "I can't. I can't give up on myself."

One obstacle is that a lot of companies require a high school diploma or GED certificate regardless of the work. A criminal record is no bar to employment, Smith said, though not every company is willing to overlook one.

"If you're honest about what's happened in the past, and done what you had to do and learned from it, in most cases people can get around that," he said.

One company's experience

Johnsonville, which makes sausages and other processed meat, was one of the first companies to join the Joseph Project. Headquartered in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, Johnsonville has struggled to find workers, said Heather Martin, a personnel executive. She said the social and spiritual aims of the Joseph Project appealed to the company.

"Once we understood the program and the power of the program," she said, "Johnsonville was all in."

The company has hired 14 workers from the Joseph Project. Nine are still working for Johnsonville. Five were dismissed for reasons it would not disclose. Four have been at Johnsonville more than a year. "We're pleased with that," Martin said.

The Joseph Project is part of a much larger effort to help Milwaukeeans find work. Other programs offer longer training, hoping to get workers into better-paying jobs in the trades. Some specialize in reentry for people coming out of prison. Construction projects that receive aid from the city are required to hire local workers. But few programs transport workers to jobs beyond the city.

Unlike other efforts, the Joseph Project is explicitly religious. Participants must promise to attend services at a church—any church—at least twice a month. "If

you're going to change a man's life, you're going to need God," Smith said.

The pastor's story

Smith grew up in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, once the largest public housing development in the United States. When he was 12, his mother moved him and his sister to Milwaukee. He fathered a child, dropped out of high school, and went to work as a dishwasher at a pancake house.

Later he started a janitorial company, bought real estate, and became a mortgage broker. In 1997, during a time of marital distress, he attempted suicide. The bullet from his .45 semiautomatic knocked him out and burned his chest but otherwise left him unharmed.

He was in church the next Sunday. He became a deacon, then a minister. In 2014, he started his own church.

"Sometimes he amazes me, considering the background we came from," said Sean Milan, a cousin who is close to Smith. "We came from nothing. Our families were born with nothing. We just made do. He was able to get a job and become something."

Marc Levine, a labor expert at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, says the Joseph Project is a "noble effort" to address the growing mismatch between where the workers are and where the work is: "We should have more voluntary efforts like that." But he notes that urban unemployment is a big problem with many causes, including segregation and the decline in manufacturing, and that transporting workers outside the city simply isn't enough to solve the problem. "The notion that you're going to make a dent in unemployment in Milwaukee by matching people with jobs in Sheboygan is fanciful," he said.

Smith admits that the reach of the Joseph Project is limited. "We're not trying to change the world overnight," he said. But he hopes to expand. Already he's helped start a Joseph Project in Madison, Wisconsin. And he's working with people in other states.

The pastor is friendly but strict. On Wednesdays the church door is locked at 10 a.m. "If you can't get to orientation on time, you won't get to work on time," he said. The orientation is about more than imparting information; it's Smith's first chance to size up candidates. The mumbling young man in blue jeans, the wiseguy who doesn't

hear instructions—these candidates are unlikely to be invited back.

Dressing the part helps. “Turn around. Look at him, guys,” Smith said of a young man in a jacket and tie and freshly shined shoes. “That’s the way I roll when I’m looking for a job!”

Later that day, Michael Ewing, 60, stands outside the church in a hooded jacket and knit cap, waiting for an afternoon ride to Nemak, an auto parts manufacturer in Sheboygan. Before the Joseph Project, he said, he worked through a temp agency at jobs offering low pay and uncertain hours. Now he loads parts on a conveyor for what he describes as “astronomical” pay—about \$17 an hour—and “top-of-the-line benefits.” He says the compensation and steady work on Nemak’s second shift more than make up for the hourlong commute from Milwaukee, which comes on top of a 20-minute bus ride to get to the church each day.

“It’s worth it,” he said. “It definitely is.”

A version of this article, which was edited on December 19, appears in the December 20 print edition under the title “People: Jerome Smith Sr.”