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Faith sustains us in difficult times

Across a state under stress, there's hope in a higher power

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As an engineer for General Motor Corp.'s power train group, Scott Gendron, 35, of Ypsilanti depends on the auto company to make a living.

But with the Detroit icon expected to file for bankruptcy by Monday, Gendron and others across the region say they are increasingly relying on a higher authority: God.

"The less you have, and the less secure that you are ... the more that you have to draw upon faith," Gendron said after church last Sunday.

That gnawing uncertainty is leading some closer to their faith, according to interviews with worshippers across the region. Some say they're praying more. Others turn to the Bible for inspiration and answers to metro Detroit's woes.

"There could be more layoffs, especially if there's a bankruptcy," Gendron said. "It comes to a point of: What do you trust? Do you trust your finances, or do you trust God?"

Turning to faith

After Jack Forsyth of Westland was laid off last year from an auto supply company, he sunk into a depression that wracked his mind.

"I was really scared," Forsyth, 61, recalled. "I had no idea how I was going to survive through this."

He tried medications, but ultimately his faith kept him sane, he said.

"When the tension comes and the pressure comes, I just ask God for relief," he explained after services at Connection Church in Canton last Sunday. "He's in charge, even when things are bad."

Forsyth's story of turning to faith in tough times is echoed across metro Detroit, where thousands are reeling from an economic downturn that has upended their financial and mental stability.

While national surveys and some local places of worship say there has not been a measurable increase in attendance of religious services, the auto industry's challenges have many seeking solace in faith and thinking anew about their purpose in life.

Providing more than prayer

Metro Detroiters also are looking to houses of worship for more material needs, from jobs to food to housing. At Jewish Vocational Service in Southfield, the number of people seeking employment help has jumped 92% over the past year. About 40% of the e-mails and phone calls that Bishop Charles Ellis says he now gets at Greater Grace Temple in Detroit are from people suffering economically,

compared with roughly 15% two to three years ago.

At the same time, donations and tithing are down -- by roughly 5% to 10% this year among the 1.4 million Catholics in the Archdiocese of Detroit. And some churches, mosques and synagogues report that in many cases, past donors are now the ones seeking help.

To others, the economic crisis -- highlighted by General Motors Corp.'s expected bankruptcy filing Monday -- has reinforced their faith.

Eide Alawan, 69, of Dearborn was laid off in February from his job at a hospital. A devout Muslim, he prays five times a day -- a practice that he said helped him endure. A couple of months later, he found another job.

"People who have a steady diet of prayer have an even-keel type of feeling that things will work out," Alawan said. "It's just a matter of time."

When Pavani Malladi, 31, of Rochester Hills was laid off from her information technology job in November at Chrysler LLC, she found herself with more time to reflect on life and also to spend with her family.

"It's good to know there is an all-powerful presence overlooking everything in the world," said Malladi, who attends the Bharatiya Temple, a Hindu center in Troy. "Religion gives answers to the questions we face in our lives."

And Robert Lodge Jr., 46, of West Bloomfield says he has prayed more intensely since he was laid off this year from his job as an inspector in the Detroit Axle Plant at Chrysler, where he worked for 12 years.

"This has stabilized me and my family during these trying times," Lodge said. "Faith in Christ will bring you through all trials and tribulations."

'There is a lot of fear'

As one of the largest churches in western Wayne County, Connection Church has many successful congregants. But last Sunday, the theme of Pastor Rocky Barra's sermon was economic distress.

The economy is "affecting more than our finances," Barra told the audience. "It seems to be creating ... an emotional disequilibrium. There is a lot of anxiety going around. There is a lot of fear."

That uncertainty has made Gendron of Ypsilanti turn closer to God. An engineer, he works in a GM power train facility in Pontiac, where a colleague was recently laid off.

"The reality is, you never know how secure it is," Gendron said in the lobby of the church after Barra's sermon.

But Gendron says his faith enables him to cope -- including when he was laid off years ago.

"I definitely think there's a plan at work," he said. "I don't think you can explain it any other way. God provides -- we truly believe that. I believe that God provides, no matter what the situation is. No matter how bleak things look."

In Warren, hundreds have received free prayers at a booth set up in the lobby of Warren City Hall with a banner that reads: "Prayer Station." Started in February by the Tabernacle church in Warren, the booth sits across from the GM Tech Center and is staffed by volunteers from local churches who pray for whatever ails you.

The biggest prayer request?

"Jobs," said Linda Westfall, a volunteer and campus chaplain at the Tabernacle.

The booth has attracted both the religious and those who don't usually go to church, such as Eric Mott, 23, of St. Clair Shores. He was there Tuesday with Mike Szandzik, 23, of Warren, who works for Window Genie and came to City Hall to clean windows.

Szandzik prayed to save his family's house, which is under foreclosure, and to help his parents and two sisters through this tough time. He said his father started the window-cleaning franchise after he was laid off three years ago from an engineering job at a Warren firm with ties to the auto industry.

"I haven't prayed in a long time. I'm not a churchgoing person," Mott said. "But it was nice to talk to God and have Him watch over us."

That desire has led to some unique services. On Saturday, a special mass for unemployed people was to be held at St. James Catholic parish in Ferndale; it's thought to be one of the first of its kind locally in recent memory, Archdiocese officials says.

And in December, Greater Grace held a bailout rally for the auto industry, complete with gleaming SUVs at the altar -- a vivid illustration of how important the auto industry is to metro Detroit's religious communities.

Different religious viewpoints

But how religious people respond to the crisis varies, depending on their theology. Some preach that economic problems are a punishment from God for man's immoral behavior. Others caution against relying too much on religion as a way to deal with economic problems.

To some, the economic woes are a blessing in disguise, an opportunity for people to refocus their lives on what's really important.

"We learned that God is our source," said Beth Henninger, 58, of Taylor, with her husband, Steve, 58, outside Connection. "His mother always used to say, 'What this country needs is a good depression.' While there are a lot of negative things about it, I really think that it is drawing us closer to God."

Spiritual, material realignment

Beth Henninger said she notices more people "going back to basics," foregoing expensive vacations for family get-togethers or gardening more -- things that they say are in line with a religious life.

The Henningers come from a long line of autoworkers. Steve said his grandfather emigrated from England and got a job at Chrysler; his father then worked in tool and die at GM, while Steve recently took a buyout from Ford Motor Co., where he was a die maker.

"We always thought this was going to go on forever," he said. "Now, it looks like it may not. ... It makes me realize I can't count on Ford Motor Co. or the United States government. I have to count on God to get me through."

Whether such an attitude translates into increased worship-service attendance overall is unclear, though some say they are seeing an uptick. A spokesman for Greater Grace said the church added 300 new members in 2008 to its congregation of about 6,500. At Congregation T'Chiyah in Oak Park, attendance is up by about 10%. Some of the new attendees are recently unemployed people looking for work, Rabbi Jason Miller said.

And at Historic East Lake Church -- across from Chrysler's Conner Assembly Plant on Detroit's east side, which is slated to close -- there are about 100 new faces since the year began, said the pastor's wife, Vera Cunningham.

"You see so many new faces who look hurt," she said. "They want food and money. Some recently lost their jobs, recently lost their homes."

Torri Tucker, 44, of Southfield works on the door line at Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant, but the plant is idle and slated for closure in 2010. As a result, she's been going to church more often at Greater Grace and praying.

"I have faith that the Lord will lead me in the right direction."

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