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Boise religious groups ride wake of financial crisis

Some struggle to meet an increased demand for services while budgets are stretched.

Beyond the unemployment offices and the rows of foreclosed homes, faith-based organizations have been quietly caring for victims of the economic train wreck.

"You can't just talk about finding God when people's stomachs are empty," said Rabbi Dan Fink of Congregation Ahavath Beth Israel in Boise. "On the surface that may not seem like spirituality, but it absolutely is."

The congregation's budget is struggling, Fink said.

It's a time to get creative and to take care of the most vulnerable community members, Fink said.

"(Crises) take us as a community away from abstract issues of philosophy and observance and bring us down to Earth," Fink said. "The first priority becomes taking care of those who are hurting."

One of the ways his congregation is doing that is by collaborating with All Saints Episcopal Church. Ahavath Beth Israel is working to provide another day of staffing at the free clinic housed in one of the church's buildings.

Marie Blanchard opened Friendship Clinic in 2004. It's only open for a few hours on Monday nights.

"I was so excited when the synagogue wanted to partner with us," said Blanchard, who has been a member of the All Saints congregation for 30 years. "Most of our (patients) can't afford a minimum payment. They really can't."

The clinic usually sees 11-12 patients a night. One February evening, the clinic turned away seven people - a new high, Blanchard said. "It's going to get worse," she added. "The seven we turned away will probably be the norm."

BENT, NOT BROKEN

Since last summer, Catholic Charities of Idaho has seen more people on the verge of homelessness.

"I'd never seen that before, not to this degree," said Regional Director Melanie Swenson.

Part of the organization's challenge is that funding hasn't increased, Swenson said. People are losing their investments and can't afford to give any more.

The frontline staff hears more hardluck stories and can't help, Swenson said, and that's stressful.

But people aren't staying home from church. At St. Mary's Catholic Church in Boise, the Rev. Jess Camacho attends to the needs of Hispanic parishioners. More than 1,000 people are attending Masses in Spanish every weekend, Camacho said.

"The Hispanic people are prepared for the crisis because since they were young they've had crises," Camacho said. "It is one crisis more in their lives, but it is not as difficult as leaving their families to come to this country."

People are suffering, but they're not desperate, Camacho said. They're still donating money and labor to the church, he said.

"The spiritual life of Hispanics is very strong," Camacho said. "They know sooner or later God will respond to them, and for this reason they don't lose faith."

READY FOR THE WORST

When people invest a lot of themselves in their careers, it becomes a part of who they are. When they lose that, it can be devastating, said Douglas Rose, president of the Boise East Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which includes about 10 congregations.

Micron is in his stake.

"We've seen some significant increase in people without work and looking for ways to reposition themselves and find work," Rose said.

The number of people using the church's employment resource center has doubled since early last year, he said.

A key to the church's ability to respond to those in need is the monthly practice of fasting, Rose said.

Members give up two meals on the first Sunday of every month and contribute the money they would have spent for the food - or more if they can afford it - to the church as an offering that is used exclusively to assist people in need, he said in an e-mail.

"Experiencing hunger monthly helps create empathy and generosity toward those for whom going without is not a choice," Rose said.

While the church encourages self-reliance, it also is in a position to help with food, rent and counseling if necessary, he said.

"Because there's a large membership here, the infrastructure here is fully developed so members have access to virtually everything a member in Utah would have," Rose said.

GROWING CLOSER

At New Life Fellowship, a small independent congregation in Boise, the Rev. Loren Yadon has kept the overhead and staff to a minimum. He's seen the hard times coming.

"As a congregation, we have tried to maintain a debt-free structure," Yadon said. "A lot of congregations that have lived on the edge - it'll really take an effect on their existence."

Like many other congregations, New Life Fellowship has members out of work.

Yadon has given members in need money from the church treasury. Members of the congregation have taken the unemployed out to dinner and given them money as well, he said.

The good news is the bad economy had brought people together as a family, Yadon said.

"I'm optimistic about the spiritual side of it," he said. "I think the spiritual community will be tighter knit because of this."

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