

In hard-hit Indiana churches pull together: Twenty percent unemployment

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The annual Family Fest at Bethany Christian Schools in Goshen, Indiana, is usually a joyous event as families auction off handmade quilts, furniture and other goods in the annual school fund-raiser. But this year, double-digit unemployment rates overshadowed the event with a sense of anxiety. The event failed to match last year's proceeds.

Indiana's Elkhart County has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country—20 percent, which is more than twice the national average. And in this overwhelmingly Christian community with a significant Mennonite population, churches are being called upon more than ever to help meet physical and spiritual needs.

"People . . . know that there but by the grace of God go I," school principal Allen Dueck told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. "It could be me tomorrow or my family member. So I think there's a real sense of pulling together in ways we can."

This is RV country, where more than 60 percent of the nation's recreational vehicles have been manufactured. But in these tough economic times people aren't buying luxury items, and the RV industry has collapsed.

Factories have been closed or have made drastic cutbacks. And the ripple effect is touching virtually everyone.

Many believe that the unemployment rate is actually much higher because the official numbers don't include those who don't file for unemployment benefits. In parts of Indiana people who don't file for benefits include undocumented immigrants and Amish people who sometimes take factory jobs when they can't make a living in

farming.

Derald Bontrager, chief operating officer of the Jayco RV company, said: “It’s a gut-wrenching experience to go from 2,200 employees down to 1,100, particularly in this environment because you know that [for every employee] you lay off, the chance of finding any meaningful employment in the future is almost nonexistent.”

A leader in his local Mennonite congregation, Bontrager says he is dealing with a difficult moral equation. “In many cases, the people that we’re no longer able to employ are the same people that I go to church with on Sunday,” he said.

“I see them at the basketball games on the weekend. . . . But you really have to try to separate that from knowing that we have a real obligation to make sure that we survive as a company in this environment because we’re still employing 1,100 people.”

Churches are banding together to help the unemployed. Among the most prominent efforts are those of Church Community Services, a ministry supported by Mennonite, Catholic, mainline Protestant and evangelical congregations.

CCS has several programs, including a food pantry that is seeing an all-time high in the number of requests. They also provide emergency assistance to people who can’t pay for rent, utilities and prescription medicine.

“To me, it’s a way of Christians actually putting their hands and their feet to what they believe,” said Dean Preheim Bartel, the program’s executive director.

But resources are being stretched thin. At one point, the agency was seeing between 300 and 400 new clients every month, many of whom have worked their entire lives.

At the same time, local churches that support these community ministries are facing their own budget shortfalls—even as they are being asked to do more. Church leaders say the situation has taken a heavy spiritual toll.

At Elkhart’s Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, future pastors are being taught how to counsel people affected by the economic crisis. It starts with listening, said seminary president Nelson Kraybill. “You don’t come with quick and easy answers, and anyone who does, saying ‘well, this is what you ought to do,’ or ‘this is where you made a mistake’—if you start with that, I think you have defeated the entire

purpose of the pastoral encounter," he said.

Kraybill believes that the entire community is learning important spiritual lessons.

"When I have my bank account and my retirement and secure employment, and my mortgage pretty well paid off, it's easy for me to get spiritually smug and think, I don't need God," he said. "It's in the people around us who are the most vulnerable where we are going to see the face of God." -*Kim Lawton, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*