

Support system: Networking in the suburbs

by [Gary Stern](#) in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue

Westchester County, which lies directly north of New York City, is well known for its many classic suburban communities where cars line up at train stations at 6 p.m. each day to pick up returning executives and money managers. Through the first half of this decade, it was difficult to find homes for less than \$1 million in such Westchester towns as Rye, Larchmont, Scarsdale, Chappaqua and Bedford.

The greatest challenge for religious leaders, particularly in mainline churches, has been how to keep people coming. Pastors of dwindling congregations often lament that as many as half the people in their communities are unchurched. Suburbanites who do belong to congregations—to Catholic churches of all sizes, clusters of downtown mainline churches, synagogues great and small, a smattering of evangelical churches—are urged most weeks to share their good fortune. Almost all congregations make midnight runs to feed the homeless in the Bronx or Manhattan, send delegations to build homes or schools on the Gulf Coast or in Central America and enlist their teenagers to visit nursing homes or tutor kids from less-well-off communities.

But now the recession threatens to undo the good life that so many in Westchester have known, and most houses of worship have had to grapple with how to respond. Westchester's unemployment rate hit 7.5 percent in February, its highest in 20 years. Affluent congregations are seeing members lose their jobs, with many Wall Streeters facing unemployment for the first time. Others are fearful that their paychecks and their way of life will soon disappear. These are families with big monthly bills—fat mortgages, high taxes, multiple SUV payments, fees for specialized summer camps and more. To top it off, a good number of victims of financier Bernard Madoff's fraudulent investment schemes reside in Westchester.

The challenges facing religious congregations are great, according to more than two dozen suburban clergy interviewed over the past several months. Many of the newly

unemployed are embarrassed and stay quiet, leaving pastors to find out through the grapevine.

“Everybody is trying to make sense of this, to figure out what to do,” said Joseph Agne, pastor of Memorial United Methodist Church in White Plains, an economically diverse congregation that includes executives and blue-collar workers. “In the past, the less well-to-do people in the church were the ones struggling. Now people of means are struggling. We can offer compassion. We can listen. We’re all in the same boat now.”

In January and February, a weekly study group at the church examined the economic crisis and how people can deal with stress. Now the church is setting up a thrift shop so people can buy the things they need for low prices. And a daily 5 p.m. coffee time is in the works so that those who are out of work—or worried about what comes next—have a place to meet.

“Our response hasn’t taken shape entirely,” Agne said. “It’s piece by piece. For a long time, we’ve been asking people to simplify, to stop all the acquiring. Now people are being forced to. It can help us to see the connectedness of our humanity.”

There are a few congregations in Westchester that have been helping congregants and the general community deal with economic angst for many years and can serve as role models. Several began to offer practical ministries for the unemployed during the recession of the early 1990s and have continued to do so even during good times. These congregations are now well positioned to help people who are facing radical lifestyle changes and crumbling confidence, if not faith.

With almost 5,000 families, St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church in Yorktown Heights is one of the ten largest parishes in the Archdiocese of New York. Most of its congregants are solidly middle class, the kind of two-career, soccer-obsessed families that are the bedrock of modern suburbia.

Twenty years ago, in March 1989, a few congregants set up the St. Patrick’s Employment Assistance and Resource Network (EARN) to help some early victims of downsizing by giants like IBM, General Foods and Ciba-Geigy. The idea was to hold monthly meetings where job seekers could network and get quality advice on résumé-building, interviewing and the like.

EARN has continued to meet ever since, even a few years back when only three people were coming to the meetings. The congregants who run the program see it as a vital ministry, though sometimes there is little religious talk outside of an opening prayer.

“We don’t proselytize, and it’s open to anybody, but this is absolutely a ministry,” said Ed McEneney, a parishioner who has been involved from the start and works for a company that assists the unemployed. “We try to inspire people, teach them not to give up. If we can help one person, it’s worth it. This downturn we’re seeing now, it’s one of the toughest.”

At a recent meeting at the church’s Family Education Center, more than 50 people, many in business attire, came to grab a few cookies, swap business cards and listen to a presentation about how to sell yourself to an employer. Most took notes diligently and asked detailed questions related to their job histories and the current market. People seemed to appreciate having a place to refocus.

Dermot Brennan, a retired pastor of St. Patrick’s, recalled EARN’s start. “We got together first thing in the morning, went to the 6:55 mass and then went to the parish center and spent a half-hour in prayer,” he said. “Then I said, ‘That’s what I’m trained to do,’ and the parishioners took over. There were a lot of guys out of work, and there was a lot to do. At the time, a lot of men who had gone straight to work from college had to learn how to do a résumé, look for a job. And a lot of them were blaming themselves, as people are today: ‘What did I do wrong?’”

Brennan said that he is proud that the ministry is still going at this difficult time.

“Being a Catholic or a Christian or whatever is not just about going to church,” he said. “What you celebrate on Sunday, you have to live Monday through Saturday.”

A few years after EARN began, several houses of worship by the Long Island Sound saw growing numbers of executives and middle managers laid off and responded by starting Community Support for Employment Transition, or ComSET. Again, the idea was to provide practical training for a job search and to inspire the newly jobless white-collar workers who doubted their self-worth and their place in the community. ComSET continues to meet weekly, although it is based at and supported by a single church in a very affluent village, Larchmont Avenue Presbyterian.

“We’re set up mostly to help people on a long-term job search, who may be out of work for so long that they are having a hard time answering questions about what they’re doing,” said Ida Davis, a professional career counselor who runs the program voluntarily. “Sometimes people are so angry that they’re not marketable. We do some hand-holding and try to give them some clarity about marketing themselves and keeping their options open.”

Bill Crawford, pastor at Larchmont, noted that mainline churches are very good at responding to natural disasters and that they may need to look at the fallout from the recession in a similar way.

“These people are our neighbors—some are congregants, some not,” he said. “Some have severance packages; some have less of a cushion. In a success-driven, affluent area like this, there is a connotation of failure. Some don’t know how to share what they’re going through. It’s really something to behold. We have to show them they are not alone.” Crawford said that the congregation plans to have more family meals and informal get-togethers to encourage community.

More recently, Christ’s Church (Episcopal) in Rye, another prestigious address out of the reach of most middle-class families, has tried to provide support to at least 14 families that have lost sizable incomes. Several families may have to move away from Rye, said Susan Harriss, rector of the church.

“I feel for them; it’s a very painful experience,” Harriss said. “It’s become so much a part of our lives that when the gospel suggests anything about suffering, I’m likely to include this crisis as an example.”

When Harriss hears about an affected family, she contacts the church’s unofficial chaplain to the unemployed, 54-year-old Bill Cusano. Cusano, who leads a weekly Christian education fellowship at the church, lost his job in information technology almost a year and a half ago. He decided recently to start a biweekly meeting for the newly unemployed—a chance to rebuild one another’s morale.

“There is a real need to help each other,” Cusano said. “Some people are used to having an assistant and don’t have basic skills. One investment banker said to me, ‘I know I won’t have an assistant in my next job, so I need to learn how to use Excel.’”

Cusano is organizing seminars, publishing a newsletter, trying to connect the unemployed with small businesses that may need help and even organizing people

with time on their hands all of a sudden to feed the hungry.

“This is a ministry that’s turned into . . . I don’t know what it is,” he said. “It’s been a blast helping people. I hope that people stay connected after they get a job, so they can help others.”