

Church offers “Soul Food” in town hit hard by recession

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DALTON, Ga. (ABP)—Many lives are unraveling in Dalton, Ga., nicknamed the “Carpet Capital of the World,” in the current recession, creating both challenges and opportunities for churches.

The North Georgia city of 33,000 makes nearly 75 percent of America’s floor coverings. Slumping home sales nationwide have taken a toll on a local economy that relies so extensively on construction.

In February, the U.S. Department of Labor listed Dalton’s unemployment rate as 12.9 percent and rising.

Dalton has seen housing slumps before, but observers say the city where the running joke four years ago was if somebody didn’t have a job they weren’t looking for one now is in uncharted waters.

“It is not simply the kind of people who expect to get laid off,” said Pastor Bill Wilson of First Baptist Church in Dalton. “This is reaching into a lot of white collar homes that have never even thought of the possibility of being affected by this.”

Wilson said his church also is feeling the pinch. “We’re going to have to get very creative about how we balance our budget,” Wilson said. Going into 2009, First Baptist anticipated giving 2 percent below last year, but during first quarter decline was closer to 10 percent.

Energized for missions

On the other hand, the recession has helped energize what Wilson called “a pretty significant DNA about missions” within the church.

“There have never been more opportunities to do very important and significant things to meet needs for this community,” Wilson said. “Our people are stepping up.”

A year ago, the church started a free supper for needy families called Soul Food. Held on the first, third and fifth Tuesday of each month, the crowd has grown from an original 35 to a high of more than 400.

Church member Gail Duke supervises the program. At a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly, Duke heard a woman from First Baptist Church in Rome talking about a similar program targeted to the working poor.

“That just kind of struck a chord with me,” she said. “I was a single mom who raised three boys for 19 years.”

Duke didn’t want to just give people a brown bag of cold food but rather serve a hot meal and build relationships gathered around a table. “And that’s what we do,” she said.

When it came time to enlist volunteers, Duke said 120 people signed up the first day. Volunteers work in teams that rotate, so some people don’t have to serve but once a quarter. Others come every time, just because they want to.

Duke said the conversation that got the idea for Soul Food started took place about three years ago, when the economy was much different, but First Baptist Church of Dalton was in the middle of a construction project and could not get it off the ground for two years. Soul Food served its first meal on March 18, 2008, just in time to get established in time for the recession.

“I think that was certainly God’s plan there,” Duke said.

Soul Food Garden

Soon, the church will expand the program by starting a Soul Food garden, a community effort to grow fresh vegetables for the Soul Food dinners and give to participants.

Wilson came up with the garden idea. He mentioned it in a recent sermon, and two dozen people lined up to volunteer. He said the idea has even recruited people who are usually less active in church activities.

“That has captured their imagination,” he said. “There are some things coming out of this, you wouldn’t wish in on anybody, but there are some great positives.”

In no time, two garden plots were donated, along with seed and fertilizer for planting.

“I know nothing about gardening,” Duke said. “But I know these people need food.”

Dalton’s woes have attracted widespread media attention. In March, Wilson appeared in a segment that aired on CBS Evening News.

“A lot of what we are doing on a weekly basis is dispensing hope and encouragement,” Wilson said in the television interview.

“There’s a hard part to it. There’s a heartbreaking part to it. There’s also a good part in that we’re talking about things that many times I can’t get people to talk about. Suddenly ... they’re interested in the deeper questions of life.”