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In Detroit, Some See Grounds for Church Planting

New Evangelical Congregations Take Root in Depressed Areas, but City's Deep Burdens Sometimes Hinder Mission

By **ALEX P. KELLOGG**

DETROIT -- Crime, unemployment and the housing crisis have chased thousands of people out of this city. But those are the very reasons Eric Russ moved in.

Mr. Russ is "lead visionary pastor" and one of the founders of the Mack Avenue Community Church, named for a long thoroughfare that cuts across the east side of Detroit. He and his congregation at "Mack Ave." represent a small, young corps of church organizers trying to spark a revival -- both spiritual and economic -- in this battered city.

"We wanted to go where people were forgetting God loved them," says Mr. Russ, 33 years old, who left an affluent church in suburban Cincinnati to move to Detroit two years ago, around the time the city's gradual decline spiraled into a full-blown crisis.

In the past decade, a movement often referred to as "urban church planting" has gained steam in evangelical circles. The aim: to build vibrant congregations and revitalize neighborhoods in frayed communities.

Detroit has long had a heavy concentration of churches for a city its size, and many of them assist the community by doing everything from donating bicycles to opening fast-food restaurants to create jobs. The area also is home to synagogues and mosques, some of which have begun offering assistance such as health-care clinics to members and nonmembers alike. Yet the economic downturn has strained the resources of many religious organizations.

Mack Ave. is among a handful of evangelical churches that have set up shop in Detroit and nearby communities. Their founders typically are transplants like Mr. Russ who say they feel called to help Detroit pull itself back from the brink. With financial support donated largely from churches outside Detroit, a few are beginning to thrive, in some cases creating pockets of rejuvenation in an otherwise decaying urban landscape.

Their success echoes efforts by evangelical churches in places such as Atlanta and Chicago, where new congregations have reinvigorated blighted areas.

But a city like Detroit poses unique problems for church planters. There are festering racial tensions that date back decades, a beleaguered urban infrastructure and, now, a regional economy on its knees.

Scott Thomas is director of Acts 29 Network, which helps found evangelical churches nationwide. He estimates that new churches generally take three to five years to establish themselves, but given the lack of resources in Detroit, "it would probably take seven years" for a new church to survive without funding from donors outside the city, he says.

Citadel of Faith opened its doors six years ago in a former synagogue in an ailing area near Boston Edison, a quaint historic neighborhood north of downtown. Founder Harvey Carey, a Chicago native, says he has lured a dozen families, both black and white, to move to near Citadel from outside the city. He says his church has helped close a handful of local drug houses by holding ad hoc services on their lawns until the dealers could no longer operate.

"I didn't know anything about Detroit," says Mr. Carey, 43. He spent 14 years as an assistant pastor at Salem Baptist Church on Chicago's South Side before moving here in 2003. "I had no connections here," he says of Detroit. "It was literally a spiritual directive."

Evangelical church Mack Ave. opened its doors on Easter Sunday in Indian Village, an upscale neighborhood on Detroit's east side. Its congregation of some 70 people is racially diverse.

Mr. Russ and his pastoral team count on a wide network of financial supporters -- churches from Ohio to Massachusetts to Nova Scotia as well as his old Cincinnati congregation -- to help cover the \$600 monthly rent plus salaries for three pastors.

Still, young evangelicals who have moved to Detroit to join and help develop nascent congregations say the city can be a big adjustment. Last year, Jason McLean, 23, came to Detroit to join the Mack Ave. congregation from suburban Wayne, Mich., where he had lost several jobs and felt directionless, he says. He now lives in a church-owned house with three other young Mack Ave. members. He and his housemates, all in their 20s, prefer to have dinner parties at home than go out in Detroit at night, where they don't always feel safe, Mr. McLean says. "The lack of a police presence has been tough to see," he says.

Detroit wasn't founder Mr. Russ's first choice. The son of two drug addicts, he attended seminary in Massachusetts and spent time as a missionary in Uganda. After that, he took a job near Cincinnati and had planned to settle down there with a comfortable suburban congregation.

That changed after he and a small group of seminary classmates and other friends visited Detroit over Christmas three years ago. Local church leaders suggested Mr. Russ and his group focus on a particular neighborhood where they saw an acute need, and an opportunity.

While Mack Ave. was established in a historically affluent enclave, dilapidated neighborhoods that never recovered from 1967 riots surround the wealthy core. Just around the corner from the church are liquor stores, gas stations and empty storefronts.

Before the church opened its doors, Mr. Russ and his congregation spent a year and a half working in the community, focused on addressing basic needs. They offered backpacks of school supplies to children and sold toiletries and fresh fruit at street corners for pennies on the dollar. And before they had their own building, they began knocking on doors in search of parishioners.

Once he arrived in Detroit, Mr. Russ joined the neighborhood association in Indian Village and became a block marshal. He has purchased two homes in the area, rehabilitating one with the help of another church before selling it to a member of his congregation for little more than he bought it for.

More than a dozen families affiliated with Mack Ave., most from other states, ultimately purchased homes in the area and made improvements to them, hoping to demonstrate their intention to stay in Detroit.

But they are never far from the realities of Detroit. Mr. Russ once had his car stolen, only to recover it himself in a confrontation with thieves. Another Mack Ave. pastor, Leon Stevenson, and his wife were robbed at gunpoint in front of their home last fall.

Mack Ave.'s founders say they sense a lingering skepticism toward outsiders -- particularly whites -- who settle in the city. Indeed, a few of the founding members of the church ultimately left, deeming the divide too wide.

Tony Stec, 29, who attended seminary with Mr. Russ and worked as administrator of Mack Ave., left after less than a year. Mr. Stec, who is white, had racial epithets directed at him on the street, and says he ultimately felt unwelcome and unsafe. After deciding he didn't feel comfortable relocating his wife here, he took a job at a church outside Des Moines, Iowa, instead. "I wouldn't necessarily discourage anyone" from going to Detroit," says Mr. Stec. "But I would certainly preface it with the realization that it's going to be difficult."

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