



Grease and God: Mechanics jump-start spirituality

BOTHELL, Washington (AP) -- Slumped over the wheel of a stubborn car that just won't start, many a desperate person has pleaded with God for help.

For mechanics Craig Brandenburg and Teang Ie, praying for automotive miracles is just part of the routine at Cedar Park Assembly of God church, where every weekday the two service a steady stream of cars in their mechanics ministry.

Cedar Park is one of many churches across the nation offering such a service, where single women, the elderly, poor and others can get a hassle-free fix-up for a low price. Some of the ministries even refurbish donated cars then give them away or sell them at a bargain rate.

"For the last five years, this has taken off all over the place," said Peter Leschuck, lead mechanic for the cars ministry at Willow Creek Community Church, in South Barrington, Illinois. Fifteen years ago, the suburban Chicago megachurch opened its mechanics ministry, believed to be the first in the nation, and now advises others on how to start their own.

Church car donation programs have become more popular over the past decade, as two-car families become three-car families, and more vehicles become available, said Jay Van Groningen, of the North American Ministry Team of the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. Hundreds of religious organizations now have car ministries, he said.

Typical shop, atypical purpose

Brandenburg's shop looks fairly typical. Cars -- some on lifts, some on the floor with their hoods open -- take up most of the space, and the piercing whine of an air wrench permeates the room. But the shop's wooden cross clock, and its regular shipments from the local Chrysler dealership addressed to "God," remind all of the mechanics' higher purpose.

Every morning before they pop the hood of their first car, Brandenburg and Ie sit in the shop's office and bow their heads to pray. As the two huddled together one recent morning, Ie thanked the Lord for any help he could bestow upon the day's lineup of ailing vehicles.

"I can tell you some great stories about God healing cars," Brandenburg said with a chuckle, as he twirled a wrench in his grease-stained hands. "Sometimes you just pray for a revelation."

The mechanics ministry at the 5,000-member church charges on a sliding scale, depending on the income and circumstances of the customer. One Saturday a month, the ministry, which has serviced around 2,200 cars since it began four years ago, holds a free fix-up day. The shop also accepts donated cars which they fix and either sell for a low price or give away.

"It's always nice to be able to help those who are just in need," Ie said as he plugged up an oil leak in an aging Dodge Caravan. "Every one of us has been in that place."

One of Brandenburg's longtime customers, 73-year-old Kitri Moran, said she would be lost without the ministry. Moran lives alone in a Kenmore trailer park and must drive six miles to get her water from a well -- an impossible task if her 1987 Ford Escort breaks down.

"He's an angel in disguise," said Moran, who scrapes by on her Social Security checks and occasional housecleaning jobs. "I cried when I walked out of there because he was so sweet."

Single moms approve

Pam Cornell brought her business to Brandenburg when her mechanic wanted to charge her \$200 for what she later discovered was a \$10 repair.

"I needed to find a real mechanic that I can trust," the 38-year-old single mother said as she handed Brandenburg the keys to her Honda Civic. "I

know he's not gonna purposely tell me something's wrong that's not."

Cornell's experience mirrors that of many of the single women who attend the divorce recovery ministry at Black Rock Congregational Church, said pastor of adult ministries, Dan McCandless.

The Fairfield, Connecticut, church started a mechanics ministry two years ago, after noticing that many of the congregation's single mothers were very dependent on their cars.

"If their vehicle went kerflooy, they were sunk," said McCandless. "And they're scared to death to get ripped off."

Brandenburg says he makes sure that doesn't happen. As he pours antifreeze into Cornell's overheated car, he patiently gives her tips on how to keep it running smoothly. When Cornell asks what she owes him, he waves her off without charging her a cent.

"You get to help people out and do what you like to do," he says with a smile. "It's the best."

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