Bad times spell boom for religion

Surge in numbers at many places of worship here; many religious leaders devote sermons to coping with the financial crisis

By Tan Duen Wei

Since news of layoffs began making its way into the papers daily in the past month or so, housewife Elizabeth Tan has been making weekly trips to the Kuala Lumpur Thong Hooi Choo Temple in Waterloo Street to pray. Her husband runs a watch manufacturer, which has been one of the hardest-hit industries in this financial downturn.

"I don't ask for much, just for him to be able to hold on to his job," said Madam Tan, 66, who said she had never been very religious before.

Bad times for business, good times for religion? In the United States, churches have been filling up as rapidly as its economy has been waning since September. The same seems to be true here, too.

Of the 30 temples, mosques and churches that The Sunday Times checked with, 15 said they have seen a jump in the number of worshippers showing up since the recession.

At the Church of the Holy Spirit in Upp Thomson Road, the 4,000-strong congregation has grown by as much as 10 to 15 per cent in the past six months.

"Clearly, more are coming. People are more fervent and prayerful now," said parish priest Andrew Wong, who last saw a spike in attendance during the Sars crisis in 2003.

"All the pews are full and people are standing. You also see more migrant workers," he said of the church's Sunday service.

Mr Ang Moi Ong, president of the Buddhist Fellowship, has also seen his group grow from 2,000 last year to almost 3,000 mostly in the last six months.

Last month alone, it welcomed 175 new people.

"When things are not going well, people look for deeper meaning to life because materialism doesn't hold," she said.

In the last Census in 2000, Buddhists and Taoists made up 51 per cent of the population 15 years and over. Christians and Muslims made up 15 per cent of the population each while 4 per cent are Hindu.

Mr Sumath Bandara, a volunteer at the Sri Sakti Mahavihari Temple in Geylang, said that while he has not seen a significant increase in the number of devotees coming to the temple, he believes religion is one of the first things people turn to in bad times.

"We have a saying in Buddhism that if the good times don't stay, the bad times will also not last. It preaches positive thinking, faith, patience. Religion is the only thing we can fall back on."

Many of these believers will probably be turning up today for the community's 31st Anniversary festival, held annually by the chief executive officer of the Hindu Endowment Board.

Given the shaky economy, he expects a bigger turnout this year at the annual festival where devotees seek blessings and make vows.

Pandit Laxman Lall, who is in private practice, said people often seek solace in religion during a crisis, whether it is personal or something bigger like the current economic troubles.

"When we have issues, there is a human desire to want an answer. Religion provides the framework for that certain understanding of the situation," said Dr Lall, who has been seeing patients with problems related to the recession.

He encourages his patients to find comfort in their own religions, "It really doesn't matter which religion they turn to. The important thing is what is relevant and makes them comfortable."

Besides providing emotional and spiritual uplifting, religious networks can also provide economic possibilities which may draw people in, said Singapore Management University sociologist Paul Chang, who studies religion.

"During hard times, people tend to pull back into their close network. Religious communities tend to be your personal in that way," said Assistant Prof Chang.

"For example, if someone needs a loan and he can't get it from the bank, he turns to interpersonal networks."

Some religious groups say they have seen more worshippers approach them for financial advice.

"Their concern is about how religion comes into play at difficult times like this. They want to know how, as Muslims, they should react to it," said Ustaz Muhammad Sadik Ali, chief of the Mosque in Changi Road.

Given worshippers' increasing fears about the recession, most of the religious leaders interviewed said they have devised parts of their sermons to dealing with the gloom.

Kasturi Mosque had a set of sermons in December geared towards handling the economic crisis.

"It had a religious component but at the same time we encourage our congregation to pick up life skills like budgeting themselves with courses and be more prudent financially. These are things that need to be addressed urgently," said Ustaz Saiful.

Many churches, mosques and temples have also gone one step further by organizing workshops and talks that dispense practical tips.

The Buddhist Fellowship has two upcoming workshops: one to be held tomorrow to coach job seekers to write resumes and prepare for interviews, and the other on Nov 17 to equip people to help their friends in distress.

When had news from the United States started coming in fast and furious last September - like Lehman Brothers' collapse - Mr Ronald Lee, who is in charge of Grass Assembly of God's marketplace ministry, decided to run a series of workshops addressing the church members' increasing fears.

He also began a counselling service for those with specific financial concerns, tapping volunteers within the church with the appropriate professional experience to give advice.

"These are hard times and we have to do what we can to help people understand that someone else is facing this and we have to hold hands in times of crisis," said Mr Lee, chief executive officer of KeyPost International, a provider of personal safety solutions.

Not only are people thronging temples and churches in search of hope, but kitchens at some temples are also booming.

Singapore Buddhist Lodge is feeding at least 300 people more than the daily usual of 1,000, and it has had to increase its food supply, said chairman Lee Boock Guan.

It has also increased its education bursary budget this year from $1 million to $1.2 million, even though the organisation expects donations this year to dip by about 20 per cent.

Observing say it is hard to tell if the upsurge in attendance numbers in churches, mosques and temples will be only temporary or amount to something more permanent.