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G.M., Detroit and the Fall of the Black Middle Class

By JONATHAN MAHLER

The Pontiac Assembly Center in Pontiac, Mich., is a massive, low-slung structure of concrete and corrugated green steel that squats conspicuously among the many strip malls that line one of the city's main thoroughfares, South Opdyke Road. Locals refer to the three-million-square-foot factory, which makes Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra pickup trucks, as Plant 6, because when it opened in 1972, it was the sixth General Motors manufacturing facility in this city, 25 miles north of downtown Detroit. At the time, General Motors was the world's largest automaker. It dominated the American market, manufacturing half of the vehicles sold in the U.S. As recently as 2003, Plant 6 was running three consecutive eight-hour shifts, employing 3,000 people and making 1,300 trucks a day.

Today, Pontiac Assembly is the city's last working auto-assembly plant, and like many of America's car factories, it is operating at a greatly diminished capacity. By last summer, the plant was running just one shift — from 6 in the morning to 2:30 in the afternoon — having shed nearly two-thirds of its workers through a combination of layoffs, buyouts and early retirements. A few months ago, Plant 6 slowed down its assembly line and laid off another 600 employees, bringing the total number of remaining workers to fewer than 600. The factory now produces only about 230 vehicles a day.

On a clear, mild Thursday afternoon in April, I stood among the smattering of cars, mostly American-made pickup trucks and sport-utility vehicles, clustered together in a small section of Pontiac Assembly's vast parking lot as the plant's single shift ended and its employees trickled out. Among them was Marvin Powell, a tall, heavysset, African-American man in blue jeans, a green sweatshirt and a baseball cap that read "All-Star Dad." We were going to throw horseshoes with some of his co-workers in a park next to their union hall, Local 594, but as Powell climbed into his Chevy Equinox, he told me he wanted to grab something to eat first.

"You didn't have lunch?" I asked.

"I did, but that was at 10 o'clock," Powell said.

Powell wakes up every morning at 4, showers, eats breakfast and watches SportsCenter before setting out for the plant at 5:30. He is stationed at the very end of what's known as the final line, the last stage of the vehicle-assembly process. By the time a truck arrives at his position, its frame has been attached to the chassis and the engine is in place. Powell has 1 minute 40 seconds to perform his routine on each vehicle, a series of tasks that includes attaching cables to batteries, tightening nuts and bolts and installing a transmission dipstick.

[Barack Obama](#) has called the dying U.S. auto industry "an emblem of the American spirit," but Powell speaks about what he does without romance or nostalgia. "It's not a glamorous job, to say the least," he told me as we settled into a booth at a nearby Arby's. Still, Powell derives at least a little satisfaction from his work. "Do

I feel a sense of pride when I spot a Silverado or Sierra on the road?" he said. "Yeah. I do."

More to the point, he is grateful for the life the job has afforded him. There are the little things — the Saturday-night takeout, the flat-screen TV, the Caribbean cruise he and his wife took before they had kids, the trip to Disney World after, the high-end educational toys for his precocious 5-year-old son, Marvin II — and the bigger ones. Most notably, Powell was able to leave the city of Detroit, where he was born and raised, for Kingsley Estates, a quiet subdivision in Southfield, a racially integrated suburb of modest middle-class homes just north of the city. And his wife, Shirese, was able to quit her job to spend more time with their children and start a small day-care center in their house.

When Powell and I met outside Pontiac Assembly, the mood inside the plant was especially tense. Just a day before, the line was stopped early for a plantwide meeting on the factory floor. A G.M. executive had recently spent a day touring the plant to determine its future, and the guys wanted to know if any decisions had been made. Would they be bringing back any of the laid-off workers? Were there going to be more layoffs? Was the plant going to close?

The plant manager did his best to reassure everybody but offered no definitive answers. By the time most of the plant's employees got home, however, local news outlets were reporting that General Motors would be shutting down all of its factories for as many as 10 weeks this summer.

"People are worried about everything right now," one of Powell's co-workers, Stanley Hutcheson, told me at the horseshoe pit. Hutcheson was born and raised in Newark and came to Pontiac in 2002, when there were more than 900 layoffs at his plant in Linden, N.J. Given all of the uncertainty surrounding Detroit and the Big Three, I asked him if he thought about moving back home and looking for another job. "Nah," he said. "There's no money out there for me. G.M. is here."

Later that night, I asked Powell how he was going to manage while Pontiac Assembly was idle. "It's going to be extremely tight," he said. Powell earns more than \$900 a week. Between his government unemployment and his supplemental G.M. unemployment benefits — or SUB-pay — guaranteed under the company's contract with the U.A.W., he'll make \$700 a week while Pontiac Assembly is quiet, not quite enough to cover his family's bills. He was hoping that the write-offs for his wife's home-based business would yield a large enough tax refund to make up for the shortfall.

The idling of its plants was part of G.M.'s scramble to make a case for its continued viability by cutting costs in advance of a government-imposed deadline. The company, which is considerably larger than Ford and [Chrysler](#), has since filed for bankruptcy. Because of G.M.'s size, the government-orchestrated restructuring is going to be particularly painful. It remains to be seen what, exactly, the future of General Motors will hold, but it's unlikely to include many \$28-an-hour assembly-line jobs like Marvin Powell's.

When we talk about what the end of the U.S. auto industry will mean to thousands of autoworkers, we tend to have a specific image of that worker in mind: He's a conservative white Democrat who lives in suburban Detroit, hangs out in his local union hall, belongs to a bowling league and owns a hunting cabin in the Upper Peninsula. This is the iconic American autoworker. In fact, as much as a fifth of the industry's work force is African-American.

The story of the rise of America's black working and middle classes is inextricably bound up with that of

Detroit and the Big Three. It is not a story with a simple upward trajectory. For a long time, blacks were relegated to the least desirable jobs in the plants and initially confined to a small ghetto on the East Side of the city. But slowly, haltingly, over the course of the 1950s and early '60s, the plants became fully integrated and black workers spread across Detroit block by block, moving the city's de facto color line as they went. "It wasn't that long ago that Detroit was the home of the nation's most affluent African-American population with the largest percentage of black homeowners and the highest comparative wages," David Goldberg, an African-American Studies professor at Wayne State University, told me.

Autoworkers still make up much of what is left of Detroit's black middle class, but their numbers are shrinking fast. Last year, 20,000 black autoworkers nationwide were either laid off or took buyouts from the Big Three. A disproportionate number of those workers were from Detroit and its environs. When those who remain lose their jobs, have their homes foreclosed — Detroit has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the nation — and have to move elsewhere in search of work, when they accept an early-retirement package and no longer have any reason to stick around, that will truly spell the end of the city.

We've been hearing this phrase — "the death of Detroit" — for years now, but this is what it's going to look like, how it's going to play out. There's a perverse paradox here, one that I was reminded of every time I met a black autoworker in an Obama T-shirt or with an Obama bumper sticker adorning his or her car. We have just elected our first African-American president, and yet, at the same moment, a city and industry that together played a central role in the rise of the black middle class — that made possible lives like Marvin Powell's — is being destroyed.

A generation ago, it was a given that if you were a black man in Detroit, you worked in an auto plant. A job on the line was a birthright, reporting to the employment office of one of the Big Three a rite of passage. "We called it 'getting baptized,'" a retired African-American autoworker, General Baker, told me.

By the mid-1990s, though, with the Big Three losing market share and staggering under the weight of their union contracts, it became difficult to find assembly-line work in a plant, particularly if you didn't have a personal connection to the company. Hiring was governed almost exclusively by nepotism. If an automaker was looking to add workers, it invited existing employees to pass along a referral sheet — essentially a one-page job application — to a friend or relative. Nearly all of the autoworkers under the age of 40 whom I met in Detroit found their jobs through a family member.

This is how Marvin Powell got his start. When his father, a longtime G.M. line worker, first offered to refer him to the company, Powell said he felt conflicted. Like many second-generation autoworkers, he had never envisioned working in a plant. "I was going to make my money off my mind," Powell told me one night. We were sitting in a crowded sports bar in suburban Detroit, watching the Cleveland Cavaliers make short work of the Pistons in the first round of the [N.B.A.](#) playoffs. "You figure when you're young, before you know anything about life, you'll go to college, get a degree and get a good job," he said. "I wanted to be a TV anchor." Powell laughed. "Working in a plant was a long way from being a TV anchor."

After high school, Powell enrolled at Wayne State University in Detroit and was planning to major in mass communications and broadcasting, but he dropped out halfway toward his degree. He wasn't the most focused student. What's more, he had a weakness for trendy clothes and racked up about \$800 in credit-card debt. His father was already covering his tuition; Powell didn't want to ask him to pay off his credit cards too.

And he was pretty sure his father wouldn't be willing to anyway.

Out of college, Powell cycled through a series of jobs. He went to work for Foot Locker, first as a stock clerk and then in sales, made debt-collection calls for a finance company and did a stint in the mailroom of a bank. When the opportunity at G.M. arose in 1996, he was 26, already married and making \$13 an hour as an office temp for I.B.M. The starting wage at General Motors was \$13.65, and he would get a raise every six months. "As I thought more about it, it became a no-brainer," he says. Powell submitted his referral sheet, and after a few simple tests — math, reading comprehension, manual dexterity — followed by a team-building exercise, a formal interview and a physical, he started working at Pontiac Assembly.

Powell had no idea what to expect. He had been inside an auto factory only once, as a 10-year-old on family day at his father's plant, and his father had almost never talked about his job. After a weeklong orientation, he trained up and down the assembly line before being placed in a job attaching brake-fluid reservoirs. It was stressful at first. The line moved faster than he anticipated, and as a new hire who could be let go without cause during his first 90 days, he didn't want to be the one to slow it down. Adjusting to the culture of the factory was a challenge, too. A practicing Christian, Powell was taken aback by what he saw taking place around him. The plant was a world of temptations unto itself, with drugs, alcohol, numbers runners, bookies and even "parking-lot girls" who would come to the plant during lunch breaks to service male workers. "Anything you can find outside the plant, you can find inside the plant," Powell says. "You either get caught up in it, or stay apart from it."

Powell gradually settled in at Pontiac Assembly and was soon piling on as much overtime as he could. In a good week, he worked four 12-hour days and a 16-hour day. Overtime was especially abundant between the beginning of November and Christmas, when hunting season caused rampant absenteeism at the plant. Within two years, he was making \$18 an hour, and he and his wife soon saved up enough to put 3 percent down on their \$150,000 three-bedroom house in Southfield.

Powell has tried periodically to get off the assembly line. Not long after he started at the plant, his foreman recommended him for management. Powell took the test, which uses hypothetical questions to gauge how you would respond to particular situations, but failed. "I guess I could have given them the answers they wanted, but that's just not me," he told me. "I'm going to be me — I'm going to be honest — I'm going to put down how I would do the job, and if that doesn't line up with what you like, then that's cool, I don't take offense at that. I'm just not what you like." A few years later, at his father's urging, Powell tried to become a skilled tradesman, which would at least have given him a more transferable skill. He failed that test as well.

In the past few years, Powell watched a lot of people he knew leave the line at G.M. and elsewhere, courtesy of a variety of buyout packages. (Since 2007, G.M. has bought out nearly half of its workers in the U.S.; a total of more than 50,000 people.) For the most part, those who have opted to take these payouts were either nearing retirement age or were young enough to start a new career. A couple of years ago, Tim Slaughter, a friend of Powell's who recently turned 30, took an education buyout from Ford. The company paid \$30,000 toward his tuition at a computer-training center, while continuing to provide benefits and 70 percent of his salary for two years. "I could see the handwriting on the wall," Slaughter told me.

Slaughter now works as a computer technician at a school in Detroit. Even though he makes \$20,000 less than he did on the line at Ford, he feels fortunate that he got out when he did. The [Economic Policy Institute](#),

a Washington research group, predicts that African-American unemployment in Michigan, which is already at 23 percent, may reach 28 percent by mid-2010. The Detroit-area job market is flooded with ex-autoworkers recently laid off or bought out by the Big Three. One 38-year-old former Chrysler employee I met, who accepted a buyout package last fall — \$50,000 and a \$25,000 car voucher — had burned through all of the cash by May and still hadn't been on a single job interview. I wondered how much longer he would be able to afford to put gas in the brand-new Aspen S.U.V. he bought with his voucher.

Earlier this year Powell was offered \$20,000 and a \$25,000 car voucher to “separate” — meaning no pension or benefits — from G.M. Powell quickly did the math. Both the cash and the voucher were taxable, so he would actually only be getting \$14,000, enough to cover some bills and his mortgage for a few months, but not much more than that. Plus, he would have to pay out of pocket for his family's medical coverage. The car voucher would only be worth \$16,000 after taxes, not enough to buy a new vehicle without additional financing. Powell turned down the offer, essentially gambling that he wouldn't wind up being laid off and leaving G.M. with little more than his last paycheck.

He now finds himself approaching 40 with a large mortgage and two small children. The job he didn't really want to begin with is one that he desperately needs but may very well not be able to hang onto. Yet he remains cheerful, even optimistic, convinced that whatever happens to G.M., he will be O.K. and eventually find a more satisfying career. “I've always said I'm not a G.M. lifer,” he says. “I still aspire to do something more than work on an assembly line for 30 years.” In fact, Powell already has something in mind: to become a chef and start his own catering company. “I can cook just about anything,” he told me. “If it's written down, I can cook it.”

Powell's positive outlook is largely a product of the life he leads outside the plant at the Greater Grace Temple, one of Detroit's largest, best-known churches. Among its claims to fame is that in the fall of 2005, more than 4,000 people, including former President Clinton, [Aretha Franklin](#) and an Illinois senator named Barack Obama, packed its pews for the funeral for the transplanted Detroiter [Rosa Parks](#). (Parks came to Detroit in 1957, not long after famously refusing to vacate her bus seat, joining her brother, an auto-assembly-line worker who migrated North years earlier.)

Powell teaches a Sunday-school class to young men and women at Greater Grace and is also one of the church's “armor bearers.” In the Bible, the term refers to men chosen for their loyalty and bravery to carry weapons for the king, but it has been repurposed by some black churches as a title for special assistants to their pastors. The job entails more than its share of grunt work — moving furniture, pressing the pastor's pants, picking up the church's guests at the airport — but the main task is spiritual. “Our job is to cover the pastor in prayer,” Powell says.

On Sundays, Powell is at the church by 6:30 a.m. so that he and another armor bearer, a line worker at Ford, can be sure all of the pastor's needs have been met for the 7:30 service. Powell also spends one or two evenings a week at the church, either for Bible study or for one of Greater Grace's numerous other Christian-themed classes. Recently I went with him to a workshop, “The Seven Seasons of a Man's Life,” designed to help men cope with the emotional adversity they will invariably encounter in life. The seminar was part of the church's ongoing effort to beef up its men's ministry in response to the economic crisis affecting so many of its male members. “What happens most of the time with men is that we don't really talk about stuff,” James Edwards, an associate pastor of the church, told the group, by way of introduction. “We don't have that

ability to go into an environment and really open up as men, and because we don't we kind of go into a cave. This program is about trying to keep us from going into that cave."

He proceeded to lead the assembled men through the first "season": reflection. "The key of it is, in dealing with what we have to deal with, and contending with what we have to contend with as men — particularly now — is that we have to learn how to be O.K. with whatever we have done well and whatever we have not done well," he said. "We have two choices. We can embrace our lives or we can live a life of disappointment and really miss the whole thing. I mean, who has done everything right? Only Jesus has done everything right. The rest of us have missed somewhere along the way."

When the workshop was over, Powell and I stood in the church's parking lot and talked for a few minutes. He told me he had been struck in particular by something Edwards said about the importance of having someone in your life who will help you see your own shortcomings. "I've always been that brutally honest friend to everybody else, but it's been difficult for me to find that person who can be brutally honest with me," Powell said. "It just seems that everybody who comes to me comes to glean, not to give."

In a sense, Powell has brought this on himself. He advertises the fact that he is a person of faith — his personalized license plate reads "SHOWLUV" — and has embraced the role of spiritual leader, not only at Greater Grace but at Pontiac Assembly, where he runs a lunch-hour Bible study group three days a week.

Powell is a popular figure at Pontiac Assembly. Some of his co-workers have encouraged him to run for office at their local, and people often ask him what he thinks is going to happen to the plant and what he intends to do if it closes. "No. 1, I tell them that I can't worry about what I can't control; no matter what I say or do, I can't keep the plant open," Powell says. "And No. 2, I tell them that God provides for his own, and I am one of his own."

Powell delivers the same message in his Bible class at the plant. Recently he has returned repeatedly to Isaiah 6:1, in which Isaiah recounts how the death of King Uzziah inspired him to join the prophetic ministry: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." Powell tells his co-workers that G.M. is just like King Uzziah, an earthly entity whom people put their trust in but who ultimately failed them. "In the year King Uzziah died I saw the Lord — my focus shifted to the Lord," Powell says. "In the year G.M. became a bankrupt company, my focus shifted to the Lord."

In the aftermath of Detroit's polarizing 1967 riots, the steady stream of white residents who were already leaving the city turned into a torrent. Yet many middle-class blacks opted to stay behind. Most of the suburbs remained off limits to African-Americans; what's more, the 1973 election of Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young — himself a former Ford line worker — seemed like cause for renewed optimism. But in the 1980s, as crime rates soared, the quality of schools and services plummeted and the number of crack houses multiplied, more and more middle-class blacks abandoned the city for the suburbs, or in some cases, left the Detroit area altogether.

For now at least, Powell's mother and father remain in the city; they still live in the house on Curtis Street that Powell grew up in. One recent Friday afternoon, not long after Powell's shift at the plant ended, I went with him to drop off his children — Marvin, now 5, and Victoria, who is 18 months — at his parents' for the night.

Unlike most major metropolitan areas in the Northeast, which were designed for maximum density, Detroit rose in the age of the automobile. This helped create a sprawling city of detached, single-family homes. As Powell and I drove through it, I saw the images of the postapocalyptic city to which we've all become accustomed: the deserted streets, overgrown lots and empty storefronts with boarded-up windows and faded signs for long-closed stores and restaurants like Pick 'n Party, Jet King Chop Suey and African hair braiding. As familiar as these images have become (just punch "Detroit" and "urban decay" into YouTube to see them), it's only when you're actually riding around Detroit and can see that this goes on for block after block, mile after mile, that the profundity of this idea — the death of a city — really sets in.

Powell's parents live on a residential street of redbrick homes fronted by small lawns. As we approached the house, Powell spotted his father, Augustine, a trim, fit man of 70, leaning on their fence in a dark T-shirt, blue jeans and a black U.A.W. baseball cap. "I feel very fortunate," Powell told me, pulling into his parents' narrow driveway. "I could have had the same situation that a lot of young men have out here. I could have a father who was a deadbeat, who had babies and left. But I had parents who sacrificed a lot for me and gave me good examples of how I should treat my family."

Augustine and I went inside and talked while Powell went out to pick up a pizza. Powell's mother, Marva, soon joined us, while his son drew pictures of the animals from "Madagascar."

Augustine and Marva met in the early 1960s at Tuskegee University, a historically black college in Alabama. Marva came from rural Georgia, the only one of six sisters to finish college; Augustine lived near the school and worked in its cafeteria. Each of their families, like many in the South, farmed. Not long after they started dating, Augustine was drafted into the military. He and Marva corresponded by mail while he was in the service and were married in 1964 after he returned to Alabama.

At the time, opportunities were limited for African-Americans in the South: Marva hadn't been able to keep a job at a dry cleaner because too many customers complained about having a black woman handle their clothing. They moved briefly to Brooklyn before making their way to Detroit in 1966.

They were among some six and a half million African-Americans who left the South from 1910 to 1970 in what became known as the Great Migration. They were drawn to the North by the promise of equal treatment but also by the hope of finding work: the mechanization of agriculture, in particular the advent of the cotton picker, decimated black employment in the South. As [Nicholas Lemann](#) wrote in his 1991 book, "The Promised Land," what in fact awaited most blacks was a more subtle form of discrimination. But in Detroit at least, there were the auto plants. Ford started hiring African-Americans in 1914, offering them the same \$5-a-day wage it paid its white employees, even as it limited them to sweeping the floors and pouring hot steel in sweltering foundries. To discourage African-American employees from improving their lot by unionizing, the company offered free coal to ministers of black churches who preached the Ford gospel.

Black migration surged during World War II, when Detroit's auto plants were transformed into F.D.R.'s so-called arsenal of democracy. The sudden influx of African-Americans dovetailed with the birth of the modern civil rights movement. The nascent [United Auto Workers](#) and the local branch of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) made common cause, conducting sit-ins, condemning hate strikes — the practice of workers walking off the job to protest the hiring of a black employee for a traditionally white job — and ensuring that black workers would be protected by the same contracts that covered white employees. The

bond between the labor and civil rights movements was solidified in 1961, when the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) was invited to speak at the annual [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) convention. “Negroes are almost entirely a working people,” he said. “Our needs are identical with labor’s needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow and have education for their children and respect in the community.”

Augustine was making bearings for an auto-parts supplier within days of the Powells’ arrival in Detroit. He eventually moved on to General Motors, where he would stay for nearly 34 years until accepting a buyout package in 2006.

He and Marva, a dietitian, bought their house in a racially mixed neighborhood in northwest Detroit in 1968. In a matter of years, the neighborhood was predominantly black. Even as the city around them continued to spiral downward, theirs remained a stable, working-class neighborhood. By the 1980s, abandoned houses were being torched less than two miles south of them, but their neighbors kept up their homes, mowed their lawns and washed their cars. In the late '90s, though, their neighborhood also became overrun with drugs and crime. Recently its problems have been compounded by the epidemic of bank foreclosures spreading through the city. In the past few months alone, several of their neighbors, including a laid-off Ford employee, have lost their homes. More will doubtless follow as the auto industry continues to contract.

In a sense, Powell’s father spent his life on the assembly line so his children wouldn’t have to. On his G.M. salary, he was able to send both Powell and his older brother to Catholic school and to put away money for their college funds. (Powell’s brother, Aaron, attended Winston-Salem State University on a basketball scholarship, but never graduated and now works at a Pepsi bottling plant in Detroit.)

When I asked Powell’s parents if they ever imagined that Powell would one day end up on an assembly line like his father, Marva answered instantly: “No.” Powell was back now, feeding Victoria in a bouncy seat in the living room. His mother gestured toward him. “He’s sitting right there, and I don’t mind if he hears this — I had desires for him to finish school,” she said.

I asked Marva what sort of career she imagined him pursuing. “Marvin had a gift of gab — still does,” she said. “I thought he could probably do some English teaching, maybe even become a lawyer.” She paused. “Of course, he’s making more than most college grads. They’re trying to take it from him, though.”

Powell’s faith may be helping him weather the G.M. storm, but his parents are plainly worried about him and his family. Augustine and Marva are planning to move back to the South soon, probably to Dublin, Ga., the small town where Marva was born and raised. They are going to hold on to their house, though. It’s unlikely they could find a buyer, and even if they could it would hardly be worth it: the last house that sold in their neighborhood went for \$5,000, which is \$10,000 less than what they paid for theirs in 1968. But Powell’s parents want to make sure he and his family will have a place to live if he is laid off. “I’m hoping they won’t need it,” Marva told me. “But you do what you’ve got to do.”

One afternoon in Detroit, I went to meet Greater Grace’s pastor, Charles H. Ellis III, in his office. The church sprawls across the 19-acre site of an abandoned amusement park on the city’s West Side. With its well-tended lawn and freshly painted playground — part of “God’s Graceland Park” — Greater Grace’s \$35 million campus beckons like an oasis on an otherwise barren strip of Seven Mile Road.

I found Ellis, a young-looking 50, in a mock turtleneck and slacks, sitting in an unusual black leather desk chair. It took me a moment to place it: it was a driver's seat from the interior of a Cadillac Escalade that had been refashioned into an office chair. "It was a 50th-birthday present from one of my congregants who works for an auto supplier," Ellis told me. "The seat heater works and everything."

Ellis grew up in Detroit, the son of a popular minister. He remembers numerous families coming from the South and staying in his parents' basement until they were hired at an auto plant and could afford a place of their own. "This was the land of milk and honey," he said. "Once you get on that phone with someone who says, 'Man, you can make \$250 a week up here!' who wasn't coming?"

Ellis now lives in Bloomfield Hills, a posh, predominantly white suburban enclave historically popular among Big Three executives. His church remains deeply committed to Detroit, though. It hosts an annual back-to-school rally, at which children are given free school supplies and haircuts, and every Easter thousands of Detroiters flock to Greater Grace for its free Passion play, which features live animals and elaborate special effects for Jesus' scourging and crucifixion.

In December of last year, as Congress was debating whether to bail out the car companies, Greater Grace conducted a special service for autoworkers. As a kind of warm-up act, two African-American U.A.W. senior vice presidents urged the audience to join the union's prayers for deliverance. Ellis followed with a sermon titled "A Hybrid Hope," delivered against the backdrop of three U.S.-made hybrid S.U.V.'s. "For those who do not believe that this is a spiritual message," he began, the S.U.V.'s looming behind him on the altar, "I would suggest to you that it was the automobile industry that proved to be a catalyst for an underprivileged man, unlearned not due to his intellect but in large part due to the inequities of an educational system in a segregated society."

As he spoke, Ellis grew increasingly emotional, occasionally pausing to mop his forehead with a blue towel. "We're saying to America and to the government and to the leaders . . . 'These are the faces of our fathers and our mothers and our grandfathers who sweat and bled and died trying to make an honest living, and we will not let you turn your back and pretend that we don't exist!' "

Ellis's cadence gradually became more rhythmic as he built toward his climax. Half-singing, half-preaching, he told worshippers that it was not enough just to hope that the government would help them; they needed a hybrid hope, one that was equal parts hope and faith. The entire congregation — it was a cold, snowy Sunday in Detroit, but the church was packed — was on its feet, arms raised as people shouted out "amens" at Ellis. "When you see me dancing, it's not because everything is like I want it to be," he said, the choir now giving him a beat to sway to. "I'm dancing with a hybrid hope, because I've got a faith beyond this world." When he was finished, he called the hundreds of autoworkers and retirees in attendance to the altar and anointed them with holy oil.

As with so many things connected to Detroit — the 0-16 Lions; the spectacle of auto executives flying to Washington in private jets to beg Congress for a taxpayer-financed bailout; the "Wire"-worthy tale of its recently deposed mayor, [Kwame Kilpatrick](#) (who pleaded guilty to two counts of obstruction of justice and resigned his office after a sex scandal involving the woman who had been his chief of staff) — the "Hybrid Hope" service likely came across to anyone reading about it or seeing coverage of it on TV as another spectacularly misguided, comically desperate and, at bottom, self-serving gesture. After all, nearly half of the

church's 6,000 members work either for an American carmaker or for a company whose fate is directly linked to the Big Three. As goes the U.S. auto industry, so goes Greater Grace, which depends on its members to tithe, or donate 10 percent of their earnings to the church.

But Ellis is a skillful preacher, and his message clearly resonated with those for whom it was intended. "When I was a kid, you heard you could get a job at the plant," Powell told me when I asked him about the service. "It's a good job, it's secure, people are always going to buy cars. People who never saw this coming, who do they look to now? For Pastor Ellis to really feel that sense of despair and to act on it in what some people would think of as a grand way, I think it inspired a lot of hope."

There is a long history of Detroit's black ministers joining forces with the U.A.W. to advance the interests of African-American autoworkers. During the 1930s and '40s, two of Detroit's black religious leaders, Rev. Charles Hill and Rev. Horace White, were instrumental in persuading the city's black autoworkers to embrace an integrated U.A.W. as the surest route to dignity and economic security.

Ellis is now watching this historic experiment come unraveled one laid-off parishioner at a time. "The problem that I have is that most people, because of pride, don't want to tell me they're in trouble," Ellis told me. "They come here on Sunday morning in a suit, and I say, 'How you doing?' 'I'm blessed and I'm highly favored of God,' they answer. I don't know they're 30 days from being evicted. If I know early enough, I can help them make the most out of a bad situation. Now there's nothing I can do except help them get a U-Haul truck and find a place to store their stuff."

On a practical level, Ellis has been trying to set an example for his parishioners — he recently downsized from his Escalade to a Chrysler Sebring — as well as add more relevant programs for struggling congregants. An accounting major at Wayne State, he gives regular seminars, or "fireside chats," on how to avoid going into debt. The church has also beefed up its entrepreneur's ministry, which encourages laid-off congregants to avoid the job market altogether and instead start businesses of their own.

But Ellis is focused, foremost, on lifting spirits and bolstering faith. Even when his sermons don't overtly address the economic crisis affecting his congregation, the subject is never far away. One recent Sunday morning, I heard him deliver a sermon called "Peace in the Midst of Uncertainty." ("If your faith were brakes right now they'd be worn down to the nubs.") Afterward, Ellis told the congregation he just returned from guest-lecturing at [Harvard](#) Divinity School. "I was talking to a professor there, trying to get my son in, I asked him, 'What do you have to do; how much does it cost?' He said, '\$40,000,'" Ellis said. "I was like, '\$40,000? \$40,000? . . . But you come out of there, you can write your own ticket. Barack done opened the door: You can be the president of the free world!" The audience erupted in "amens."

As bad as things may be outside the doors of Greater Grace, the mood inside the church was relentlessly upbeat. The sense of optimism, of possibility, conveyed by Ellis and powerfully reinforced by a huge tapestry that was on display in the hallway outside the sanctuary depicting Obama, King and Harriet Tubman — "From Slavery to the White House" — is infectious. But nourishing this hope, at this moment and in this city, can mean keeping reality at bay.

After the service, I drifted into a workshop for aspiring entrepreneurs called "Financial Crisis 2009: Birthing Your Dream." The woman running the session, Deborah Glass, retired several years ago from Ford Motor's credit company and now operates her own marketing company, selling body garments intended to reshape

women's figures. Glass told the group that the key to success was to stop thinking negative thoughts.

A woman in the audience raised her hand. "I work for a supplier for G.M.," she said. "Every day they're talking about G.M. on the news, how they're closing this plant or that plant."

Glass cut her off. "You cannot listen to that. Whatever you keep hearing, you keep believing. You've got to protect your eyes and ears from that. I don't care what G.M. says or what Chrysler or Ford say."

Glass held up a Christian self-help book called "Spiritual Desire." "This would have been much more helpful to you than listening to that," she said.

During his early years at Pontiac Assembly, Powell bowled regularly with a group of his co-workers at a seedy alley a mile or so from the plant called Fiero Bowl (infelicitously named after a short-lived G.M. sports car, the Pontiac Fiero). At \$2 each, the games were cheap, and Powell always had a good time; he had a knack for leaving right before a fight invariably broke out. But he hasn't gone much recently. He prefers not to be around so much drinking and smoking, and he usually has to pick up his son at school anyway.

Powell now does most of his bowling in a Saturday-morning church league. (His ball is engraved with the word "prophetic.") There's no drinking allowed, and every match begins with both teams joining hands in prayer, but it's otherwise just like any other bowling league, with good-natured trash talk and even some low-stakes betting.

After one of his recent matches, Powell and I picked up a Slurpee for his son and a coffee for his wife and drove back to his house in Southfield. Detroit is now 85 percent black, and most of the suburbs I visited during my weeks there were either largely white or largely black, which made the diverse mix of people that we encountered as we made our way through Powell's subdivision all the more striking.

Powell and his wife, Shirese, met at a church function when he was 18 and she was 22, and fell in love a year later. "At the time, I was about 100 pounds lighter, I had a full head of curly hair — I was good-looking, thin, I could wear the mess out of a suit," Powell told me as we arrived at their home, a modest ranch house with a well-tended front lawn. "I had a lot of women approaching me, but the way they were approaching me let me know that's not what I wanted. But she was different. There was just so much more substance to her character."

Shirese and I sat down in their small living room, beside a box of overflowing toys, and talked. She told me that she was raised by a single mother, a home-health-care aide in Detroit. After graduating from a magnet high school in the city, Shirese said, she took out loans to attend Northwood University and soon transferred to Eastern Michigan University. During her sophomore year, she dropped out after souring on the party scene. She moved back home and started going to church. "I remember sitting there thinking, There's something different about these people," she told me. "I was like: Whatever it is that they have, I want it. I need it."

Shirese never went back to college. She worked at a credit-reporting company, first as a customer-service representative and then in sales before eventually becoming a mortgage broker. Several years ago, during the height of the mortgage boom, she was making close to six figures, she told me, but she wanted to spend more time with her son and start her own day-care center, Safe Haven. "Nobody's taking the time to teach this

younger generation to be well mannered and respectful," she said. "I decided that instead of just complaining about it, I needed to be part of the solution. I needed to help groom the next generation."

At the moment, Safe Haven operates out of the Powells' basement, a small, dark space crowded with highchairs and plastic play tables that Shirese has done her best to spruce up with some colorful posters designed to teach the children their shapes and the days of the week. But she has visions of moving her center into a separate building and expanding, eventually becoming a full-fledged elementary school that would be based in Southfield but draw children from inner-city Detroit. "I don't need to get the kids in Southfield; they have decent schools," she said. "I want the ones who don't have any options, who are being crowded into classrooms like a herd of cattle."

Her motivation isn't solely philanthropic; Shirese has every intention of building a profitable business. "I don't want my kids to have to struggle like me — being raised by a single mother who didn't have a dime to send me to college," she told me. "I want them to be able to enjoy their college life without having to worry about expenses and finances. And I want to buy them their first homes."

Shirese speaks as if she has no doubt that all of this — and much more — is about to happen. She is confident that Obama, in whom she recognizes a kindred spirit in faith, will help save Detroit. And she fully expects that she and Powell and the rest of "God's people" will all have their roles to play in the city's salvation. "We're supposed to be part of the change that's taking place," she told me.

Maybe the Powells are right. Maybe General Motors — and Chrysler, for that matter — will emerge from bankruptcy and once again become viable companies. Maybe Safe Haven will become, as Shirese puts it, "a pillar of our community." Maybe Powell will one day have his own catering company. Maybe there is still hope for Detroit.

But for the moment, the bad news just keeps coming. Two hours after Powell's shift started on the first Monday in June, the line was stopped for another plantwide meeting: Plant 6 would be shutting down for good on or before Oct. 1.

Powell's only option now will be to put in for a transfer to one of the Detroit area's remaining G.M. plants and hope for an opening before his unemployment benefits and SUB-pay expire. "They finally had enough integrity to tell us before they let the media know," he told me when his shift ended that afternoon, an uncharacteristic trace of bitterness in his voice. "Nobody really knows what to think right now."

Within a matter of minutes, though, Powell recovered his more familiar optimism. There were a few factories that wouldn't be too bad a drive from Southfield, including Detroit/Hamtramck — the plant where his father spent most of his career — which is in a neighborhood once known as Poletown because of the large Polish population that lived there. "Over time, I think I'll be O.K.," Powell said. "The bottom line is that they still need people to run."

They do, but G.M. also needs to cut 20,000 jobs before emerging from bankruptcy. The number of plants in the Detroit area is dwindling; Pontiac Assembly is one of seven factories that G.M. expects to close in Michigan by the end of next year. Even Hamtramck is down to a single shift. There and elsewhere, there will be a deluge of applicants for a rapidly shrinking pool of line jobs.

Talking to Powell, I was constantly torn between marveling at his faith, his stubborn belief that everything was going to work out, and the urge to tell him to look around, to read the paper on any given day, to see the train that's heading straight for him and so many others and try to make a viable plan for his future before it's too late. But what would that plan be? What if you were 38 and had spent the last 12 years doing one thing for a company and an industry that allowed your predecessors to escape the Jim Crow South, that gave generations of black workers a shot at dignity and their rightful place in the American middle class, that allowed you to buy a decent home in a neighborhood right next door to white families who had fled your city years before? Maybe it wasn't the job you dreamed of when you were 20, but it was what you did and what your father did and what you and almost everyone around you knew, and it had never failed you before. What would you do? How would you prepare for the loss of all that? It's a paralyzing notion. "You've got to have the mind-set that you can achieve greatness," he told me once when we were talking about what sort of future he felt it possible to imagine for himself and Detroit. It would be nice to believe that will be enough.

Jonathan Mahler is a contributing writer. His most recent book is "The Challenge: Hamdan v. Rumsfeld and the Fight Over Presidential Power."

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