

Churches consider energy issues

Ashly McGlone Religion News Service | Jul. 3, 2008

At St. Stephen Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., the 14,000-member congregation billed itself as a "seven-day-a-week" hub of activity, with choir practices, ministry meetings or small groups scheduled every night.

Then Pastor Kevin Cosby noticed a drop-off -- people simply couldn't afford the gas to drive to several activities on several different evenings.

So Cosby shuffled the schedule to combine all activities on Wednesday night to give parishioners a "one-stop-shop for your soul." The church also bought a third 14-passenger bus to shuttle people to and from church.

"We thought it would be a better practice of stewardship," Cosby said. "The good use and stewardship of resources is how we demonstrate our love for God."

Members with long commutes say they already feel the benefit of the Wednesday shift.

"I think it's great. Tonight I am going to attend three different auxiliaries all in one night," said Cornelius Pumphrey, an 11-year member who lives 25 miles away. "Gas here is \$4 ... I will be able to save a considerable amount."

Added Brenda Dudley, a member for 21 years, "Budget-wise, it really helps to have everything under one roof at one time."

With rising food and gas prices, Americans are grappling for economic stability. Religious institutions, in turn, are getting creative in trying to soften the blow of rising prices on parishioners' pocketbooks.

Some churches have responded with weekly gas card raffles and subsidized gas outreaches to the community. For others, like St. Stephen, the answer lies in major changes of service offerings.

In Eastlake, Ohio, the Worldwide Great Commission Fellowship church started raffling one \$25 gas card and one \$20 grocery card during Sunday services for all attendees last month.

"People feel they cannot afford to come to church, and if they do come, that they do not have money to give into the offering," said Pastor Melinda Bauman. "That is a significant sign that people are struggling."

In Flushing, Mich., the Rev. Mary Lloyd said God called her to give \$5 gas cards to first-time visitors. Her 300-member church, Community Hope Church of God, has given out more than 36 cards since May.

"It costs a lot to even come to church," Lloyd said. "We want to say thanks for coming to church and here is a way to come back."

Meanwhile, the Catholic Diocese of Providence, R.I., used a \$17,500 grant from the Catholic Charity Fund to buy more than 1,000 bus fare booklets that were free to qualifying recipients based on income and how the

tickets would be used.

"Someone that makes \$50,000 on paper may not sound like someone who qualifies, but they could be caring for three to four children, or an ill parent. All those factors are considered," said Mark Guilfoile, director of communications for the diocese.

From bus tickets and gas cards to filling gas tanks with subsidized gas, novel ideas by religious organizations big and small are popping up across the nation.

Not many would choose to fill other people's gas tanks, but North Point Church in Springfield, Mo., set out to do just that. The 2,500-member church sponsored a gasoline outreach in May as a part of its "52 unforgettable experiences" vision statement.

The event at a local gas station was scheduled to last 52 minutes as the church paid more than \$1 on every gallon purchased. But not wanting to turn anyone away, the church subsidized 4,000 gallons of gas for 400 to 500 cars, lasting three hours. The total cost for the outreach was just under \$9,000.

Greg Marquart, director of church ministries at North Point, said the goal of the event was not about gaining members.

"There's no question Jesus came to this Earth and met physical needs. Our goal was to meet the need," Marquart said. "We wanted to tell people we cared about them without ties or caveats, and that's truly the biblical model."

Responses to gas hikes have taken on a more rustic, pastoral nature for some Texas churches.

At the Lone Star Cowboy Church, the Rev. Jonathan Coe has seen up to 15 horses on any given Sunday in the parking lot, up from the usual three or four. As a pastor of two cowboy congregations 45 minutes apart, Coe has also felt the stress of rising fuel costs.

"It used to cost me \$50 to fill up my diesel truck. Now it costs me \$132," Coe said. "I would imagine I am spending \$1,200 a week between Sunday services, weekly events and Bible study." Limited church funds mean he is only reimbursed for gas half of the time, he said.

Churches are also seeing financial ministries expand, and say requests for food and gasoline assistance are up. A recent Gallup Poll found that approximately one in six Americans cannot afford the cost of driving, and a separate poll of Southern Baptist pastors by LifeWay Research found that 72 percent say the U.S. economy is negatively affecting their churches.

Cindee Coffee, spokeswoman for Southeast Christian Church of Louisville, Ky., said about two-thirds of the 18,000-member congregation is living paycheck to paycheck. Demand for financial counseling has risen, and calls for help in buying food and gas have increased on the church's emergency-only after-hours phone line. In addition, some church employees have opted for a four-day workweek to reduce commuting costs.

According to Dave Travis, managing director of Leadership Network, a Dallas-based evangelical think tank, churches have only begun to see the impact of rising fuel costs.

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