

# No sanctuary from heating costs, as churches feel pinch

By Laura Crimaldi | Sunday, August 10, 2008 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Local Coverage

Bay State religious congregations have vast sanctuaries, vaulted ceilings, antique windows . . . and tiny fuel budgets - setting up a cruel calculus for flocks that will be forced to choose between funding religious missions and paying skyrocketing heat bills this winter.

A Herald survey of more than 20 congregations and associations representing churches and synagogues found that the faithful are weighing plans to seal off sanctuaries, trim office staff and make costly capital expenditures on more efficient heating systems to keep congregants warm for prayer as energy costs soar.

"It's costing us an arm and a leg that we could actually be using to revitalize our congregation - to open our doors to do great ministry - but we're paying fuel costs," said the Rev. Clare Yarborough of Trinity Episcopal Church in Weymouth.

The church will spend at least \$30,000 to convert from oil to natural gas heat. "It's actually a godsend," said Yarborough, noting that the change will put the church in a better position to use cutting-edge energy recapture technology in the future.

Advocates for the poor have spent the summer trying to shore up fuel assistance funds as heating oil prices are set to rise nearly 11 percent and natural gas by more than 15 percent, according to a new study from the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Boston.

The prospect of paying \$4.43 per gallon for heating oil and \$21.11 per 1,000 cubic feet of natural gas next year is daunting for religious congregations that use outdated systems to heat centuries-old sanctuaries with soaring ceilings and leaky windows.

"We just looked at the price of heating oil and said, 'Oh my God, something has got to be done,'" said Lois Corman, chairwoman of the Operations Committee at the historic Old South Church in Copley Square.

The church, which is open to the public seven days a week, consulted with Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light last month to find more energy-efficient ways to heat its four buildings. The church spent \$50,000 on heating oil in 2007, said senior church administrator Helen McCrady. She expects the cost to climb to \$60,000 to \$70,000 because of rising fuel costs.

"In 2007, more than 40,000 people entered our sanctuary to pray, escape the weather, ask for help, or simply take a look," said the Rev. Nancy S. Taylor in a recent letter to Old South Church worshipers about the toll of rising energy costs. "Keeping our doors open is a significant commitment. . . . Rising energy costs challenge us, but with your support they cannot defeat us."

The Archdiocese of Boston, which has 294 parishes, is encouraging pastors to use smaller chapels that are easier to heat for weekday services, facilities manager Peter Silva said in an e-mail. Individual parishes are responsible for paying their fuel costs; they are also urged to lock in heating oil prices well in advance, Silva said.

"It's just killing the budget," said Janice Loonie, a part-time bookkeeper and volunteer at Our Lady of Lourdes in Brockton.

Loonie estimated the Catholic parish paid \$12,000 last winter to heat the church and rectory. The annual budget is \$420,000.

"We'll probably have to take an extra collection to help out. Given the way that people's finances are, it's just making it worse to the point you might have to consider cutting staff," Loonie said.

About one-third of the Hub's 600 churches rent their worship space, mostly from other religious denominations, said Jeff Bass, executive director of the Emmanuel Gospel Center, which represents urban churches.

Bass said rising fuel costs have been ravaging religious budgets for the last couple years - "competing with pastors' salaries" and eating away at precious discretionary funds that the faithful want to spend on outreach.

"Costs have gone up. Churches aren't getting any newer. With prices going up more rapidly, that gives you incentive to do something," said Bass, who worships at the 100-year-old River of Life Church in Jamaica Plain.

River of Life Church is converting from heating oil to natural gas this summer, said senior pastor Thomas G. Griffith.

Temple Beth **Israel** in Waltham is considering closing off its big sanctuary and only using smaller areas, according to an e-mail statement. The synagogue researched more efficient windows and ceiling fans, but the \$23,000 price tag is out of reach for now.

At Congregation Beth Israel in Worcester, a 5 percent increase has been tacked on to annual dues to cover fuel costs, said executive director Judy Moseley in an e-mail.

The Boston Chinese Evangelical Church, which has locations in Chinatown and Newton, spent \$41,000 last year to heat both locations, said the Rev. Steven Chin.

"Obviously, a lot of heat goes up through there," said Chin, referring to the high ceiling at the church's Chinatown location. "It used to be fairly stable. Now it's just skyrocketed."

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