

Parishioners learn how expensive it is to run their church

When Ss. Philip & James, Homewood, parishioner Mary Fetsch read a recent church bulletin, she was shocked to see a copy of her parish's Baltimore Gas & Electric bill inside. The document revealed the April utility charges for the church to be more than \$4,600, with an additional \$1,373.41 for the rectory.

The bill was included to impress upon parishioners the basic costs of running the church and the need for generous tithing, said Father William A. Au, pastor.

"Rising utility costs and insurance costs have killed us," Father Au said. "We had to cut back on the heating this winter and we'll have to cut back on the air conditioning this summer, and we will still probably spend more this year than we take in."

Without the parish's endowment, which is funded in part by several families who left sizeable contributions to the parish in their wills, the church would not be able to cover its annual \$550,000 budget, he said.

The endowment is currently about \$700,000 strong, but that amount is down from its once-high \$1.2 million total before the parish investments took a nosedive after Sept. 11.

A 1997 capital campaign during the parish's 100-year anniversary also helped fund the endowment.

"If we didn't have that endowment, we would have been bankrupt six or seven years ago," said Father Au, noting that the fund subsidized the annual budget by about \$200,000 several years in a row. "But, that endowment isn't going to sustain us forever if we don't find ways to raise more money, because costs keep going up."

With decreasing parish populations and mounting expenses, several Baltimore City faith communities have incurred expenses exceeding the amount of money tossed in each week's collection basket.

Some pastors have developed innovative methods to raise money.

Father Paul Zaborowski, O.F.M., pastor of St. Ambrose, Baltimore, rents out the former convent building on his parish grounds and leases the church's steeple to a cellular phone network to help meet the church's annual budget.

While items like the Ss. Philip and James music program may be costly, those ministries help to keep the parish population from dropping even more than the loss of 100 or more households since he became pastor in 1992, Father Au said.

If the parish loses more members, it also loses a vital revenue source.

"In a way, the parish suffers from our appearance," he said. "You see this beautiful church and think, 'hey, they have plenty of money.'"

Though the copy of the parish utility bill in the bulletin may have been jarring to some Ss. Philip & James parishioners, Father Au hopes it provides them with a tangible sense of the church's financial situation and convinces them to be generous in their tithing.

"I just think the Lord has been very good to me as an adult," said Ms. Fetsch. "I'm going to do what I can for the church. I hope my fellow parishioners will do the same."