

TV stations airing religious shows at risk of losing PBS affiliation

WASHINGTON - Public television stations may be confronted by a hard choice later this year: drop their religious programming or risk losing their affiliation with the Public Broadcasting Service.

The PBS board of directors will meet June 16 to consider stricter enforcement of a 1985 policy directing PBS member stations to air “noncommercial, nonpolitical and nonsectarian” programs. PBS was accepting comment from its stations through the end of May on the issue.

According to an e-mail from Jennifer Lawson, general manager of WHUT, one of three PBS affiliates whose signal includes the Washington area, there are “fewer than five” PBS stations that air religious programming.

Three air Catholic programming. Another PBS affiliate in Salt Lake City airs shows on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

WHUT has aired a Mass for shut-ins since 1996, when Washington’s CBS affiliate said it would no longer air the Mass as a public service and wanted \$1,500 for the 30 minutes of Sunday airtime.

However, WHUT has notified the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Arlington, Va., which co-sponsor the program, that - regardless of how the PBS board votes in June - it will drop the Mass for shut-ins after the July 26 telecast.

That has sent the two dioceses scrambling to find a new home for the Mass, as well as money in a weak economy to pay what is likely to be a weekly bill of \$1,500 to

\$2,000.

“Not only is it difficult for us, but a lot of our viewers are homebound or elderly,” said Susan Gibbs, spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Washington. “It’s hard for them to make an adjustment. They’re used to the Mass being on a certain time and place.”

The airtime purchase over a full year could come to \$114,000, “or more than the production costs of what I’ve been paying for the whole year,” Gibbs told Catholic News Service.

The prolonged conversion of TV signals from analog to digital, now scheduled to take place June 12, complicates matters, according to Gibbs.

An estimated 3 million U.S. households’ TVs are still not digital-ready, including many in the Washington area. Older viewers who tune in to the Mass may not know how to navigate through the digital subchannels, where airtime could cost less.

“We’re probably going to double-run” the Mass on both WHUT and a commercial TV station for at least a few weeks to get viewers acclimated to the station change, Gibbs said.

Mass can be seen on WLAE in New Orleans, which is not “a full-blown affiliate,” according to station general manager Ron Yager, but it broadcasts PBS’ “Ready to Learn” shows for nine hours each weekday, plus its news and talk shows “Nightly Business Report,” “The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer” and “Charlie Rose.”

The station, established by but no longer run by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, airs Mass daily. “The first day they broadcast, there was a Mass,” Yager told CNS.

He added WLAE could broadcast a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week schedule

without PBS programming if it had to.

“This is really what has hit home for us. After (Hurricane) Katrina, when the city was devastated as well as our television station and we were able to get our service back up through cable ... the one thing people were asking for – they were not asking for ‘Barney,’ they were not asking for ‘The NewsHour’ – they were asking for us to get the Mass on the air,” Yager said.

“At that point we knew we were doing a service for the community that made a difference ... providing comfort for people during the great tragedy,” he said.

One question the PBS board will have to consider, said PBS spokeswoman Jan McNamara, is “What defines ‘nonsectarian’?”

McNamara added, “It’s always our primary goal to work with our affiliates. That’s why we’re taking such care to get feedback from our stations.”

Asked if PBS had ever yanked affiliation from any of its 356 member stations in the United States, McNamara replied, “I don’t think it ever has.”