

With giving down, congregations cut back

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

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The economic crisis has hit collection plates at North Jersey houses of worship, with many congregations cutting costs and, in some cases, reducing staff and programs to compensate.

At Mount Olive Baptist Church in Hackensack, the Rev. Greg Jackson said he slashed his 2009 operating budget by about 10 percent and cut two staffers.

"The offerings are down," Jackson said. "People are a little nervous and afraid and reserved."

A Catholic priest in Glen Rock said his weekly collections are off about 10 percent, with some parishioners writing him to explain their frugality.

"I have had people write to me and say, 'It's not a reflection of what's going on in the parish, we are just cutting back,'" said the Rev. Thomas Wisniewski of St. Catharine's Church.

Even some congregations with stable collections say they are instituting cost-cutting measures to prepare for a potentially painful year.

A Presbyterian church in Ringwood, for example, has reduced staff salaries by 1 percent.

"This was symbolic and preemptive," said the Rev. Ben Fraumann of Community Presbyterian Church. "So far, we have not had this happen to us."

But in Ridgewood, where many people work in financial services, an Episcopal priest said she can see the fallout from the Wall Street meltdown.

"There are various [church members] who have been downsized or had to take packages or just don't have jobs anymore," said the Rev. S. Elizabeth Searle of Christ Episcopal Church.

Searle said annual pledges that account for much of the congregation's income are down for 2009. She is wondering aloud whether the church's air conditioning will be among the casualties.

"How do you decide what's really non-essential so you don't have to

cut what is fundamental?" Searle asked.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Newark, meanwhile, has instructed its 226 parishes to halt capital improvement projects except for essential repairs. The diocese has instituted a hiring and wage freeze at the chancery offices.

"Everyone has to ask themselves, 'Is this really needed now?'" said Jim Goodness, a spokesman for the archdiocese. "We have to hold off for a little while and make sure all the current needs are met."

Despite the bleak financial picture, some clergy say they're seeing an extraordinary response by congregants, who, mindful of the crisis, are contributing more to local food pantries and volunteering their time to care for the homeless.

"The local food pantry was very short on turkeys, and almost overnight, we had 40 turkeys," said the Rev. Kimberly Chastain, who serves as the sole pastor to three small Presbyterian churches in Lyndhurst, Moonachie and Wood-Ridge.

Chastain said one of the congregations recently decided to make its little-used college loan fund available for members facing financial emergencies.

"The reality is that the economic situation for individual members is very difficult, especially for my retired folks on a fixed income," Chastain said. "Because everyone knows people are hurting, they are all pulling together and finding ways to make that a basis for ministry."

A Hackensack pastor said he is heartened by his congregation's generosity to a local food bank and in volunteering to host homeless people in the church.

"It reminds me of what my parents and grandparents told me it was like in the Great Depression," said the Rev. Steven McClelland of the First Presbyterian Church of Hackensack. "There was a sense then that it was our job to take care of people."

A Wayne rabbi said his synagogue is committed to helping what he said is an increase in congregants having

difficulty paying their membership dues.

"Our general attitude is that these are hard times, and we want everyone to be able to afford a synagogue," said Rabbi Stephen M. Wylen of Temple Beth Tikvah. "If they are unemployed or underemployed, we will carry them."

Jackson, of Mount Olive Baptist, said he is joining with a dozen other clergymen in organizing an "employment mission" that will begin with an April 1 worship service. Jackson said the service is aimed at raising money to help offset job-search costs, such as clothing and transportation to interviews. But he said the service also is aimed at lifting people's spirits as they struggle with the economy.

"My vision is to pack our church with people," he said. "We offer something else other than financial resources, which is hope."

Some faith groups, meanwhile, have had some success even amid the downturn.

The Paterson Diocese, which covers Passaic, Morris and Sussex counties, said the Bishop's Annual Appeal in 2008 generated \$3.38 million in pledges, surpassing the goal of \$2.88 million. A total of 21,005 Catholics made or pledged gifts to the fund drive — the first time the appeal has exceeded 21,000 gifts since 2001.

A Teaneck mosque said it raised about \$30,000 during a recent one-day fund-raiser to benefit Palestinians in the war-ravaged Gaza Strip. Waheed Khalid, president of Darul Islah, said members of the mosque, in general, haven't been hit too hard with job losses because they do not work in the banking and investment trades.

Khalid said many members work in the public sector or in the fields of engineering and architecture or medicine.

"Those jobs are not affected at the moment, and I hope they will not be," Khalid said.

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