



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Fearing loss of access, parishioners begin vigil

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Rumor drives a sit-in at Framingham church

By Franco Ordoñez, Globe Staff | May 7, 2005

FRAMINGHAM -- Word spread quickly: A locksmith hired by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston was on his way to change the locks at St. Jeremiah Church.

Maybe it was rumor, maybe not. But parishioners were not going to take the chance. So the calls went out, and they dropped what they were doing to rush to their parish, Framingham's smallest Catholic church.

Adam Sell, 19, cut short an e-mail he was writing about his fantasy baseball team. Ann Capobianco, 56, raced to the church after dropping her son home from school; she went directly to one of the first pews to start praying. And Tom Tierney, 62, left his yard partially mowed, arriving at the church wearing his grass-stained sweats and sneakers.

"I had to come," he said. "It's my church, and it's being ruined."

This was their preemptive strike against the archdiocese, which they feared was planning to shutter their church a week before its scheduled closing date of May 13.

Church members were planning to begin a peaceful vigil in protest tomorrow, following the final scheduled Mass. But when a member of a parish committee heard Thursday night -- they would not say from whom -- that the archdiocese might be arranging to have the locks changed the next day, they decided to launch the vigil two days early. People started showing up a little after 11 a.m. yesterday.

"We know from experience at other parishes that locks have been changed prior to the closing, so parishioners couldn't pray and say goodbye to their church," said Jackie Lemmerhirt, cochairwoman of the parish committee, which is seeking to appeal the closing. "And we wanted to be prepared if something happens."

Parishioners were aware of what happened last fall at St. Frances Xavier Cabrini in Scituate: The locks were changed in October, three days before the parish was scheduled to close. At the time, archdiocesan officials acknowledged that they had changed the locks at some parishes prior to their closing date, but they said parishioners still had access to the buildings until they closed.

Terry Donilon, a spokesman for the archdiocese, said yesterday that he had no knowledge of plans to change locks at St. Jeremiah.

"We still consider it an open parish with activities going on throughout the weekend," he said. "And it's our sincere hope and expectation that when the parish has its concluding Mass this weekend and it begins to close, that it will be in an orderly and peaceful and prayerfully transition into the new parish."

The occupation of St. Jeremiah marks the eighth time parishioners have hunkered down at their church for round-the-clock vigils since the archdiocese announced its restructuring last year, according to Peter Borre, cochairman of the Council of Parishes, a group representing the closed churches. The archdiocese decided that 83 parishes would close, so the church could focus on fewer, more vibrant ones.

St. Jeremiah was originally scheduled to close Dec. 1, 2004, but Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley gave the parish and several others more time to shut down. According to the archdiocese's plan, St. Jeremiah is supposed to merge with the nearby Church of St. George.

Framingham police were called to St. Jeremiah soon after 3 p.m. yesterday following a verbal confrontation between the protesters and Helena Siciliano, the parish secretary. Siciliano walked into the sanctuary and asked the half-dozen parishioners to leave so she could lock the doors. Lemmerhirt and the other cochairwoman of the parish committee, Mary Beth Carmody, confronted Siciliano and said they would not leave.

"We're not going to hurt anyone," Carmody, breaking into tears, told Siciliano. "We're not going to interfere in any way. We're here to pray peacefully and prayerfully."

After the exchange, Siciliano said she was not changing the locks but only locking the doors, as she does every weekday at 3 p.m.

Framingham police Lieutenant Vincent Alfano said that police were there only as a precaution.

Parishioners are less trusting of the archdiocese following the removal last week by local clergy of air-conditioning units at St. Jeremiah, but they said members of a church in Lexington have offered use of some of their air-conditioning units.

As church members continued to arrive throughout the afternoon yesterday, Carmody estimated that at least two dozen were likely to spend the night. "We'll be sleeping in the pews," she said.

They plan to stick it out as long as it takes.

"St. Albert's [in Weymouth] has been going for 10 months," said Adam Sell. "St. Anselm [in Sudbury] has been going about eight months. I'm more than willing to go that long or more if it means saving our church. I'm willing to be arrested for it."

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