

Spitz: It's about more than one church

By Julia Spitz

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This isn't about Jackie Lemmerhirt. It's not even about St. Jeremiah Church.

"We're not thinking it's St. Jeremiah's or nothing," said Lemmerhirt, co-chairwoman of the Framingham church's appeal committee. "We've always recognized at St. Jeremiah's that we're part of a bigger community.

"We're not looking back. We're looking forward."

But what she sees worries the woman who's been a member of the Catholic parish on Brook Street for more than 15 years, even if she is the type who "always sees the glass as half full."

It worries other people, too. In the past two weeks, about 500 people signed a petition asking the Archdiocese of Boston to re-examine its decision to close St. Jeremiah, Lemmerhirt said.

The signatures came from those who attend Framingham's St. George and St. Jeremiah churches, and St. Anselm, the church just over the Sudbury line where parish members have held round-the-clock vigils since the archdiocese ordered it closed last September.

"They've all got concerns," said Lemmerhirt. "I don't think anyone has a problem with coming together in a larger way. But if the facilities aren't big enough, if (parking and traffic) isn't safe, you're not going to that church.

"Can we all fit over at St. George's? Can you take 1,000 families from St. George, 1,500 from St. Jeremiah and 400 from St. Anselm and put them all over there? It was pretty crowded over there (on Sunday) and St. Jeremiah's and St. Anselm's were still having services.

"I don't think one church north of Rte. 9 is enough," she said.

Others think it's time to stop fighting.

"I'm sensing there are more people saying maybe we should just be quiet and go to St. George's," she said. "I got some flak (collecting signatures). Some people got more than I did. But there are 500 people who've got some concerns about all this."

They're just less willing to talk about it. The church's pastor, the Rev. Ron Calhoun, "does not prefer to speak to reporters," a secretary said this week. Parishioners who used to phone the newsroom no longer return calls.

"It's sad right now because we are so divided, instead of 'This is her belief and this is how she wants to pursue it,'" said Lemmerhirt.

Then again, there are others who quietly support the appeals committee's work.

"We have a survival bank account. Last week we got a donation from a member of St. Tarcisius Parish. She wrote a nice letter, saying, 'There are more people behind you than you think.'"

The archdiocese delayed St. Jeremiah's closing, now set for May 15, but the stay of execution has been a mixed blessing.

"Hopefully, it's giving people time to adjust," said Lemmerhirt. "It gave us a little hope. Now things are speeding up toward closure." Religious education classes moved to St. George in September. The Daily Mass group made the switch this month.

"As an appeal committee, it gives us more time to research (concerns such as overcrowding and traffic problems) and make some proposals."

One avenue of appeal hangs on bells donated in memory of Christa McAuliffe. The teacher who died in the 1986 space shuttle Challenger explosion grew up in the parish.

"Technically, (the digital electronic carillon system donated in 1987) needs to be at a site of worship," said Lemmerhirt. "We wrote to (the Church Closing Review Committee established by the archdiocese) and said, 'Here are some of our issues here in North Framingham.' They said yes (the members would meet with us), but there is no specific date."

McAuliffe's mother, Grace Corrigan, "is very happy to come along with us" when the meeting is set, Lemmerhirt said.

But "it's not the building, it's the community of people that come together. It's the people who know your name, the people who help you raise your children," said the mother of 8-year-old twins.

"I kind of look at this whole process as short-term and long-term. In the long term, how is the church going to evolve? Will it be more open? What kind of church do I want for my children? I don't want them to feel they go to church because they have to. I want them to live their faith and I think your church helps you do that.

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"If all three parishes could stay open, that would be ideal. If we could keep two churches open to serve the community, I'd consider that to be a success. It doesn't even matter which (church). It's not the building. We need adequate resources.

"The saddest scenario would be in three years or so, when we're all squeezed into St. George's, and we're told we need to build another church.

"I want to think I did everything I could," she said.

After that, it's simply a matter of faith.

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