

Parishioners gird for fight

By D. Craig MacCormack / Daily News Staff

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FRAMINGHAM -- With two weeks left until St. Jeremiah parishioners start their vigil in hopes of keeping their church open, the removal of the central air-conditioning system they paid for is one tangible sign of what's ahead.

Still, members of the parish appeals committee are pushing forward with plans for a vigil and could take charge on a civil lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Boston that says each parish should control its own possessions.

Some longtime communicants believe the air conditioning was yanked now to limit the appeal's length, as the summer months will lead to steamy conditions inside the parish.

"It's one of the many ongoing tactics by the archdiocese," said William Sell, who opposes the closing.

Other churchgoers have heard the Framingham Police Department will dispatch officers to St. Jeremiah during its appeal to pull the fire alarm and force the sit-in to break up. Police Chief Steven Carl denied that yesterday.

"We wouldn't stoop that low," he said. "We're too busy to get involved with 50 peaceful people in a church. If it turns into a riot, maybe we'd call in the state police.

"You can't commit a crime to facilitate a lawful service. The police can't solve every problem. This is something the archdiocese has to deal with," said Carl.

Pulling a false alarm is a crime punishable by a \$100 to \$500 fine and up to one year in a House of Correction, said Carl. He expects his department's involvement to be limited as long as the situation stays quiet.

"It's a touchy situation because of how emotional it is," he said. "This is where the separation of church and state crosses the line. You have to tread very carefully. We're too busy to be arresting people for trespassing."

The appeals committee is preparing the church's appeal to Rome. That move is separate from the civil action that had been led by St. Albert's Church in Weymouth before that parish was reopened last month.

In the civil suit, St. Jeremiah would fight to keep control of the \$70,000 air-conditioning system and the bells dedicated to Christa McAuliffe, which are nearly 20 years old.

"(The lawsuit) could be an effective way to oppose the suppression by the archdiocese," said Jackie Lemmerhirt, co-chairwoman of the appeals committee.

"One of the things that got people was seeing the air conditioning gone. That was a big eye-opener for a lot of people," she said. "I still think (archdiocese officials) made the wrong decision (to close St. Jeremiah), but we're not dropping it so easily. I don't think it's over."

Appeals committee members last week sent another letter to Archbishop Sean O'Malley asking for a fresh review of the situation in North Framingham and Sudbury. St. Anselm's in Sudbury will stay open as a chapel.

Lemmerhirt sees hope in the reinstatement of St. Albert's and St. Anselm's.

"If you've got some good arguments, hopefully they will prevail," she said.

Sell called the idea of taking items paid for by St. Jeremiah's followers a "slap in the face."

"A chapel with one Mass is not a parish," said Sell. "Clearly we know the archdiocese is listening to the churches who have appealed, but we also know they're planning ahead."

Archdiocese spokeswoman Ann Carter said reversals of closings are rare, as are vigils in the 80-plus parishes that have been targeted.

"The overwhelming majority have closed without a vigil," she said, saying the number is more than 50. "We continue to recognize the difficulty being experienced by the churches in this situation, but we hope the people of St. Jeremiah will find the strength and resolve to join its welcoming parish."


St. Jeremiah's will host nightly rosary services starting Sunday at 7:30, said Lemmerhirt. They will be open to the public and scheduled to continue through the month, which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

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