

Churches get innovative in response to gas prices: Free gas cards, consolidated schedules

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At St. Stephen Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, the 14,000-member congregation billed itself as a “seven-day-a-week” hub of activity, with choir practices, ministry meetings or small groups scheduled every night.

Then Pastor Kevin Cosby noticed a drop-off—people simply couldn’t afford the gas to drive to several activities on several different evenings.

So Cosby shuffled the schedule to combine all activities on Wednesday night to give parishioners a “one-stop-shop for your soul.” The church also bought a third 14-passenger bus to shuttle people to and from church.

“We thought it would be a better practice of stewardship,” Cosby said. “The good use and stewardship of resources is how we demonstrate our love for God.”

Members with long commutes say they already feel the benefit of the Wednesday shift.

“I think it’s great. Tonight I am going to attend three different auxiliaries all in one night,” said Cornelius Pumphrey, an 11-year member who lives 25 miles away. “Gas here is \$4. . . . I will be able to save a considerable amount.”

Added Brenda Dudley, a member for 21 years: “Budget-wise, it really helps to have everything under one roof at one time.”

With rising food and gas prices, Americans are grappling for economic stability. Religious institutions, in turn, are getting creative in trying to soften the blow of rising prices on parishioners’ pocketbooks.

Some churches have responded with weekly gas card raffles and subsidized- gas outreaches to the community. For others, like St. Stephen, the answer lies in major changes of service offerings.

In Eastlake, Ohio, the Worldwide Great Commission Fellowship church started raffling one \$25 gas card and one \$20 grocery card during Sunday services for all attendees.

“People feel that they cannot afford to come to church, and if they do come, that they do not have money to give into the offering,” said Pastor Melinda Bauman. “That is a significant sign that people are struggling.”

In Flushing, Michigan, Pastor Mary Lloyd said God called her to give \$5 gas cards to first-time visitors. Her 300-member church, Community Hope Church of God, has given out more than 36 cards since May.

“It costs a lot to even come to church,” Lloyd said. “We want to say thanks for coming to church and here is a way to come back.”

Meanwhile, the Catholic Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, used a \$17,500 grant from the Catholic Charity Fund to buy more than 1,000 bus fare booklets and gave them out according to need.

“Someone who makes \$50,000 on paper may not sound like someone who qualifies, but they could be caring for three to four children, or an ill parent. All those factors are considered,” said Mark Guilfoile, director of communications for the diocese.

From bus tickets and gas cards to filling gas tanks with subsidized gas, novel ideas by religious organizations big and small are popping up across the nation.

Not many would choose to fill other people’s gas tanks, but North Point Church in Springfield, Missouri, set out to do just that. The 2,500-member church recently sponsored a gasoline outreach as a part of its “52 unforgettable experiences” project.

The event at a local gas station was scheduled to last 52 minutes. The church declared it would contribute more than \$1 for every gallon purchased. But not wanting to turn anyone away, the church subsidized 4,000 gallons of gas for 400 to 500 cars, in an event lasting three hours. The total cost for the outreach was just under \$9,000.

Greg Marquart, director of church ministries at North Point, said the goal of the event was not about gaining members.

“There’s no question Jesus came to this Earth and met physical needs. Our goal was to meet the need,” Marquart said. “We wanted to tell people we cared about them without ties or caveats, and that’s truly the biblical model.” –*Ashly McGlone, Religion News Service*