

CHURCH TIMES

Parishes feel the squeeze as energy bills rocket

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Churches faced with choice between staying open for community use or paying fuel bills

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SOARING energy costs are leaving churches with a choice between keeping their buildings open for community groups or [paying their fuel bills](#) next winter.

Churches and charities are not subject to the cap on energy bills, and most are classed as businesses for their tariffs, which has meant that they have not been protected from price rises.

Churches report huge increases in bills; some clergy say that this has left them [feeling sick with stress](#) ([News, 24 June](#)). One assistant curate has joined the Don't Pay UK campaign, which is urging people to cancel their direct-debit payments for energy bills.

Among those facing soaring costs is the Revd Andy Fitchet, of Andover Methodist Church. He reported that his bill had gone up from £70 a month last July to £1000 a month a year later; he feared that it could climb to £4000 during the winter months. He said that he had no idea how the church was going to pay for its energy, and felt sick at the thought of the impending bills.

He has called for a social tariff to be introduced for the non-profit sector to protect organisations serving the community.

The Vicar of St Mary's, Wendover, in [Oxford diocese](#), the Revd Sally Moring, has just had to renew her contract for electricity and gas; the bill has risen by £14,000, from £8428 in the past 12 months, to a forecast of £22,500 for the next year.

She was given just five hours to decide whether to accept the quote, as prices were so volatile. Several companies refused to quote altogether, she said.

The [PCC](#) is now desperately looking to make savings and is starting with the installation of LED lights throughout the building to reduce costs.

“We have always been able to pay our parish share which is substantial, but this rise is huge,” Ms Moring said. “I am also the area dean, and I am concerned about other churches who may not be able to pay their parish share.

“St Mary's is used by quite a lot of groups, which is what we want; but we will probably have to charge them a bit more. We wanted to be a warm space for people this winter, but we will have to see if we can afford to keep the church at a level where it would be comfortable for people.

“For us, the choice will be between keeping the church warm enough for the midweek activities that are important to our young families — we have a thriving toddler group one morning a week — and more elderly members, who come for mid-week communion and coffee, tea dances, and U3A meetings, and paying the bills.”

The Assistant Curate of St Mary's, Addington, in [Croydon](#), the Revd Mo Budd, has joined the Don't Pay UK movement. It has more than 100,000 people signed up to cancel their direct debits to energy companies, in protest at the price rises while the companies are making record profits.

She told *The Times* that she was acting “in solidarity with the most vulnerable in my community”.

One church, St George's, Rugby, is hoping to keep down its energy costs by installing heat pumps and insulating the church hall. Phil Hemsley, a member of the congregation, who is also on the Church of England's energy advisory group, said that there were “technical solutions” available for churches to cut energy bills and carbon-dioxide emissions.

“We have had solar panels fitted this year and are currently exporting energy. The [Church Commissioners](#) have freed up some money for [carbon-dioxide reduction measures](#), which is very positive, and my diocese, [Coventry](#), has voted through increases in green funding; so there are a lot of positive signs.

“A big proportion of church expenditure is on parish share. Our diocese already helps those who cannot afford their parish share. We won’t see churches go bankrupt; but it is likely that dioceses will have to pick up the underfunding of parish share.

“We have more projects in the church to reduce carbon, which will bring our prices down to what they were before the increase. We are looking at an air-to-air heat pump, which would dramatically reduce our energy consumption, and insulating our church hall, which would halve its energy costs. We are getting help from the county council and diocese for these projects. If you have the human energy it is possible to find the funds.

“I am very aware it is very worrying for people, but there are technical solutions if people are prepared to find them.”

High prices were the only lever to force people to review their energy consumption, he said.

“The biggest crisis we have is global warming. If this is making people reduce their energy consumption, well, that is what people have been gluing themselves to motorways for.

“Encourage the Church Commissioners to take further steps — they’ve taken a step in right direction, but they need to keep moving.

“The only incentive in today’s world to get carbon dioxide down is through cost, and this could be a tipping point in right direction,” he said.

A Church House spokesperson said: “There is concern about the impact of rising energy costs over the coming year for churches, in particular those most vulnerable to a sharp rise in their bills. We are keeping the situation under close review and are continuing to work with churches to help them to reduce energy consumption and improve energy efficiency as part of our Net Zero programme.”