

## At north St. Louis parish, a dog watches over communion



Dec. 6, 2009 - Fr. Don Buhr his dog Elijah, a Labrador and border collie mix, greet parishioners after Mass at Our Lady of the Holy Cross Catholic Church in St. Louis. Elijah has joined his owner during Mass for the past several months. (Photo by Whitney Curtis)

By [Paul Hampel](#)

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**BADEN** — Our Lady of the Holy Cross Catholic Church got a new priest last summer, the Rev. Don Buhr.

With Buhr came Elijah, also known in this North Side parish as the Church Dog.

Elijah is a Labrador and border collie mix who attends every Mass that Buhr celebrates.

"A dog in church — I know it doesn't sound right and doesn't seem right," Buhr said. "But this dog is a gift from God."

Elijah is slim and black with white paws and a splash of white fur on his chest in the shape of a cross that, Buhr said, marks the animal as "a real priest dog."

Buhr, 69, insists that Elijah smiles at people he likes. "But it's the stupidest smile you ever saw," he said, stretching his lips and gritting his teeth in imitation.

When Buhr came to the church, he asked the parishioners if it would be all right if Elijah attended Mass. He said he didn't want anyone's prayer to be disturbed. So far, he said, no one has complained.

Buhr's last assignment was at a country parish where Elijah was allowed to roam the fields and woods.

The dog has made a smooth transition to the inner city. He is the terror of squirrels and other animals that trespass on the parish grounds, at 1018 Baden Avenue.

Inside the church, however, Elijah is as gentle as a lamb.

During Mass, he tends to quietly meander.

He may stroll onto the altar to sit beside Buhr or server Brittany Pfaffenback, 16. At one Mass, Brittany petted Elijah with one hand and rang the bell with the other.

"I'm a dog lover so I'm glad to have him around," she said.

Elijah occasionally wanders down the aisle and sticks his nose into the pews, seeking affection.

In the summer, he prefers lounging on the cool terrazzo tiles of the high altar.

On a recent cold Sunday, he favored a spot beside a radiator to the side of the altar.

When the crowd lined up to receive Communion, he took up his regular post in front of the first pew on the left. From there, he watched as Buhr distributed the Eucharist.

"He loves that little space and plants himself there every Communion," said a parish deacon, Gerry Quinn, 63, of Affton. "We do worry sometimes that someone will trip over him, but we've all adjusted fine."

At the end of Mass, Elijah trotted ahead of the servers, deacons and priest as they filed down the main aisle.

Growing up, Buhr always had a dog. But he wasn't sure a pet would fit into the lifestyle of a priest.

Then, eight years ago, he decided to give it a try.

He had heard that border collies were supposed to be the smartest and black Labs the gentlest of dogs.

"I told a friend one day that that was the mix I wanted," he said. "The very next day, I saw an ad in the paper. A guy was moving and had to get rid of his dog — a 1-year-old border collie and black Lab mix."

Buhr named the dog Elijah because he came into his life like a whirlwind, "the same way the prophet Elijah went up to heaven," Buhr said.

Buhr knows of no other dog that attends Mass.

Elijah, in fact, had never tagged along to church with Buhr until the priest came to Our Lady of the Holy Cross.

Buhr was an associate pastor at his previous parish, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Villa Ridge.

Elijah was not allowed inside that church.

"It was not my decision to make," he said.

But at Our Lady of the Holy Cross, the congregation has embraced Elijah, said a longtime member, Charlotte Flowers.

"We have a true church dog," said Flowers, 68. "He's a joy and so well-behaved. The children especially love him. And he never barks in church."

Buhr points out that Elijah is not the only unusual element at the church.

The church, built in 1909, was designed by two architects from Cologne, Germany, in a 13th-century motif.

It has a 185-foot spire visible for miles. Renowned artist Emil Frei designed the 10 stained glass windows, each 25 feet high and 6 feet wide.

Amid the historic features is a distinctly modern touch: The processional cross bears an African-American figure of a crucified Christ.

The priest hopes that word of the Church Dog will spread and perhaps draw people to the parish.

"Maybe there are some dog lovers out there who haven't been to church in a while," Buhr said. "And they will come and meet this special dog."

Weekend Masses are at 4 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. Sunday.