

Cash-poor cathedral mulls selling treasures: Washington National Cathedral

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Facing a reduced budget and a third round of layoffs, officials at Washington National Cathedral are considering disposing of priceless treasures—including a trove of rare books—that are no longer considered part of its central mission.

The cathedral has begun tentative talks with Washington's Folger Shakespeare Library as it reorients itself as an Episcopal congregation, tourist landmark and promoter of interfaith dialogue.

The cathedral's rare book library, which dates to 1964, can no longer be considered a "core function" in the current economic climate, said Kathleen Cox, the cathedral's chief operating officer. "In tough times, you start having to pull away so you can make sure that worship continues," she said. "So once that happens, you have to make sure that you are doing the best by those assets."

The predicament at the iconic National Cathedral mirrors tough decisions facing mainline denominations to trim staffs and reduce budgets. At least 73 positions were cut by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a reorganization that will reduce spending of its General Assembly Mission Council by 12.2 percent in 2011. Also, United Church of Christ officials expect a budget deficit of \$3.7 million for 2011 and continuing reduced giving from churches—a trend the UCC predicts will last a few years.

Cox emphasized that the discussions are "preliminary" and that it would be "premature" to say if any items would be sold or loaned. "What would be an ideal situation is to find . . . through a partnership someone that might take on the responsibility of conserving and maintaining the books and then having them accessible to the public in some way," she said. "This has to be consistent with any of the donor restrictions or intents."

Stephen Enniss, Folger's librarian, said the two institutions have long worked together, with Folger's conservators advising cathedral staff on maintenance of the rare book collection.

Some tomes in the cathedral's 8,000-volume rare books collection will definitely stay, Cox said, including the Prince Henry Bible, a first edition of the King James Bible printed in London in 1611 that belonged to Henry, the prince of Wales and the king's eldest son.

The uncertain future of the rare assets —valued in the millions—comes amid a staff shake-up in which six employees were laid off. The cathedral has cut its staff from 170 to 70 since 2008, in large part because the cathedral outsourced its gift shop and discontinued residential courses at the Cathedral College.

Among the employees who lost their jobs in the latest round were the cathedral's chief conservator, John Runkle, and its chief liturgist, Carol Wade, who planned the cathedral's 2,000 annual services, including the 2007 funeral for former president Gerald Ford.

Runkle, who will be leaving at the end of June, said he doesn't view his departure as endangering the preservation of the building. "You just have to prioritize the efforts going forward," he said. "It may slow things down, but I don't think it will cancel or take off the table any efforts going forward in the future."

Cathedral officials describe the 2011 budget of \$12.9 million, a 12-percent decrease from the previous year's budget, as a "conservative" move even as contributions increased by 14 percent from the last fiscal year.

Though he could not estimate the individual worth of the cathedral's rare items, Runkle said the collection includes a wide array of Bibles and prayer books.

"It ranges from handwritten Bibles before the printing press came into existence to a Bible that was given to the cathedral by Queen Elizabeth when she visited in the 1990s," he said.

The landmark building, which had 385,000 visitors in the last year and receives no funding from either the federal government or the national Episcopal Church, often does not receive funding for the maintenance of donated items, said Cox. "Any kind of revenue that might be generated" through the transfer of rare items would be used for preservation and maintenance of the cathedral and its assets, she said. –

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