

Non-Christian groups could win free Mass. campus

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(RNS) Eager to give away a 217-acre campus that's been earmarked for donation since 2009, the owners of a former prep school facility in Northfield, Mass., have broadened their criteria to include non-Christian applicants.

For nine months, the National Christian Foundation, a donor-advised fund, has been seeking a new owner for a campus previously owned by Northfield Mount Hermon School. The site's previous owners, Oklahoma's billionaire Green family, had wanted it to go to a Christian institution.

But now, to finish the deal, the foundation is entertaining less-than-ideal proposals from organizations that do not seek to spread the Christian gospel – at least not explicitly.

“It's possible that there are organizations doing the work of Christ without saying that they're doing it in Christ's name,” said Aimee Minnich, president of National Christian Foundation Heartland, the affiliate overseeing the Northfield property.

“Our strong preference is to find somebody who will use it to advance the gospel, (but) we'll look at other organizations as well.”

The foundation received the property, including 500,000-square-feet of building space, in December 2012 from the Green family, who'd bought it in 2009 for \$100,000. The Greens, who own the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, invested \$5 million in renovations with a plan to give it to an orthodox Christian institution.

But after deals with the C.S. Lewis Foundation and Grand Canyon University fell through, the Greens authorized the foundation to take hold of the property and find a suitable new owner.

Minnich describes the campus as “beautiful and big” and “in really good shape.” It would be ideally suited for a school, she said, but the foundation has also been welcoming proposals from other types of institutions and from multiple parties who would share ownership.

“Everybody (in the candidate pool) would be in some ways starting something new in a new part of the country,” Minnich said. “They may be extending what they were doing before, but they'd have to open a new location or start something new from scratch.”

A new owner would be responsible for operations and maintenance of a hilltop campus established in 1879 by legendary evangelist D.L. Moody. The Greens bought it with a vision to support Christian higher education and reclaim Moody's gospel-spreading mission in the secular Northeast.

Costs, however, have proven daunting. Grand Canyon initially accepted the campus in September 2012, but then backed out five weeks later after a cost analysis showed a need for \$30 million in sewer and road upgrades, among other unanticipated costs.

Now as students go back to school elsewhere, Northfield is quiet and waiting. The foundation wants to be sure the campus doesn't stay mothballed. It hopes either to name finalists or declare a recipient before year's end.

"We do have to give the campus away," Minnich said. "It's not good for anybody for us to be holding it and to have nobody doing anything there."