

Washington National Cathedral donates 5,000 medical masks found underground

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Boxes of N95 respirator masks are brought out of Washington National Cathedral to be donated to two Washington hospitals on March 25. The cathedral's chief stone mason found the unopened masks in an unfinished section of the cathedral's underground crypts. (Washington National Cathedral/Danielle E. Thomas)

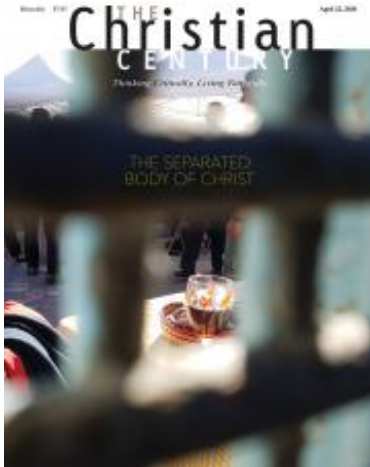
The Washington National Cathedral donated thousands of medical masks to two hospitals in the nation's capital after discovering a trove of the much-needed protective equipment just feet from where Helen Keller and other prominent Americans lie in the cathedral's underground crypts.

Bought in 2006 as a precaution during an outbreak of the H5N1 flu, the 5,000 plus N95 respiratory masks had been forgotten until early this month, when the cathedral's chief stonemason, Joseph Alonso, remembered coming across them in an unfinished area of the crypt level.

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Though still in their original packaging, the masks have technically expired, and cathedral staffers first reached out to the manufacturer and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to determine whether they were safe to use.

Since the coronavirus pandemic hit the US in February, mass buying of N95 masks has resulted in a critical shortage at medical centers. Doctors across the country have been reusing masks, along with medical gowns and eye shields, risking spreading the disease to multiple patients or contracting it themselves.

Given the dire situation, Kevin Eckstrom, the chief communications officer at the cathedral, said they were told the decade-old masks “were either fine or better than nothing.”

On March 25, 3,000 masks were donated to Georgetown University Hospital and 2,000 to Children’s National Hospital in Washington.

When the cathedral reached administrators at the two hospitals, they asked, “How quickly can you get them to us?” according to Eckstrom.

The cathedral kept “fewer than a couple hundred” masks, said Eckstrom, for their original purpose: for clergy to wear when visiting vulnerable people who need pastoral care, for cathedral cleaning staff, or for staffers dealing with the public during a viral outbreak.

While best known to the public as the stage for funerals for presidents and other high officials, most recently the December 2018 state funeral for President George H. W. Bush, the cathedral is also an Episcopal parish with some 1,400 congregants.

“We are not doing many pastoral visits at the moment because of health concerns,” said Eckstrom. “But if they had to do last rites (a sacramental anointing of the sick), they want to be suited up as best they could be.”

This is not the first time Alonso, the stonemason who found the masks, has made headlines. A 35-year veteran of the cathedral’s staff, Alonso was integral to the \$32 million restoration project that followed a 5.8 magnitude earthquake in 2011. He also placed the final stone on the cathedral when it was officially completed in 1990, after being commissioned in 1893 and begun in 1907.

His latest news-making turn, however, was less ceremonial.

“Joe is always crawling around every part of the building and knows every nook and cranny,” said Eckstrom. “If any one was going to find them, it’s him.” —Religion News Service