

Newseum closing but Religious Freedom Center continues

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The nation’s capital is about to have one less museum when the Newseum closes Dec. 31, but the Religious Freedom Center that was housed there will continue operations.

Gene Policinski, chief operating officer of the Freedom Forum Institute, which includes the center among its five focus areas, said the building has not been the core of his institute’s operations, which occur more in other locations and online.



Charles Haynes of the Newseum Institute’s Religious Freedom Center. Photo courtesy of Religious Freedom Center via RNS

“We’re headquartered here; obviously, it’s a marvelous asset and we use the meeting rooms and the conference center,” he said of the building the institute shared with the Newseum, its partner. “But when we relocate our

administrative offices later in 2020, those programs simply move to where we now will be.”

The institute’s religious liberty programming—long led by recently retired scholar Charles Haynes—dates to the 1990s, when the Newseum was housed across the Potomac River in Rosslyn, Va. It moved to the Pennsylvania Avenue location in 2008 when the Newseum moved.

The Newseum, a seven-level museum about the free press and the First Amendment, announced it was closing earlier this year and has said “remaining in the current location has proved to be financially unsustainable.” Newseum spokeswoman Sonya Gavankar said the museum hopes to find a new location “but that process will take time.”

Religious Freedom Center offices move

The offices of the institute, including the Religious Freedom Center, will move less than a mile from the building on Pennsylvania Avenue with a terrace view of the U.S. Capitol. Its leaders have secured a two-year lease at 300 New Jersey Avenue, NW.



Suzan Johnson Cook, former U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, at podium, teaches a Religious Freedom Center class for black

theological students at the
Newseum in Washington, D.C. (RNS
Photo / Adelle M. Banks)

Other aspects of the institute include the First Amendment Center, and initiatives related to education, diversity and workplace integrity training, such as the Power Shift Project that helps the media industry address issues of sexual harassment.

As they head to a new temporary location, Religious Freedom Center staffers will be working to expand some of its newer initiatives. In January 2020, it will host a weeklong intensive course on religious freedom for students from African American theological institutions at local churches and seminaries. A portion of the first offering of the course for black seminarians was held at the Newseum in January of this year.

Policinski said the center is making plans to expand a training program for business executives that will include webinars and in-person sessions after it was piloted at firms such as Accenture, a professional services company, and Schreiber Foods, a Wisconsin dairy company. He said he hopes the center can help businesses navigate differences among employees about health care and family planning services and religious objections that could arise over transgender bathrooms.

“We feel very strongly that another area, unfortunately, of contention will be, as we increase in diversity and awareness of diversity of religion in the workplace, issues around religious holidays and religious observance in the workplace itself,” he said.

Staff in transition

The center is also planning to add a staffer to a multiyear project called Georgia 3Rs Project—Rights, Responsibility, Respect—that will continue to

address the academic study of religion in that state's public schools.

The center currently has a staff of about half a dozen, along with more than 20 nonresident scholars and fellows. Kristen Farrington left her role as the center's executive director during the summer to become an assistant chaplain at an Episcopal school. Policinski said filling that position is "on hold" during the time of transition.

The center recently held its last public event at the current location, hosting about 90 Muslim and Jewish leaders for a Dec. 3 conference that featured speakers representing American Jews and Muslims discussing what they wish members of each faith group knew about the other.

Richard Foltin, a senior scholar at the center and a member of the board of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance, said there are additional plans for those kinds of interreligious gatherings as well as others.

"One of the important things the Religious Freedom Center does is convene a Committee on Religious Liberty that brings together advocates and experts on church-state relations from a broad range of religious communities, from a broad range of political perspectives," he said. "That work is going to continue as well."