

St. Paul's Cathedral closes, asks protesters to leave

News

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London, October 21 (ENInews)--Due to health, safety and fire concerns connected with an anti-corporate protest camp at its doors, St. Paul's Cathedral, London's 16th-century landmark, announced it is closing until further notice and asked the protesters to leave.

"The decision to close ... is unprecedented in modern times and I have asked the Registrar to implement emergency procedures whereby the building remains closed but fit for purpose until such a time that we can open safely," said the Rev. Graeme Knowles, the cathedral dean, in a statement on St. Paul's website (www.stpauls.co.uk).

With hundreds of people and about 200 tents pitched around the huge building, "health, safety and fire officers have pointed out that access ... is seriously limited. With so many stoves and fires and lots of different types of fuel around, there is a clear fire hazard. Then there is the public health aspect which speaks for itself. The dangers relate not just to cathedral staff and visitors but are a potential hazard to those encamped themselves," Knowles said.

The protests began on 15 October under the banner Occupy London Stock Exchange, modeled after the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations that started last month in New York aimed at what organizers say is the corporate greed that has caused the financial crisis and worldwide hardship.

In an open letter to the protest group, distributed before the general announcement, Knowles said that "many people around the world, including many Christians, identify with the injustices and inequalities which you believe our financial systems perpetuate and support. Your peaceful protests have been significant in voicing the problem." However, he added, "in order that we might re-open the cathedral as speedily as possible, we ask you to withdraw peacefully."

Published reports indicated that the campers were not inclined to move. "The inconvenient truth about peaceful protest is that it takes a lot of people. We're not going anywhere," said demonstrator George Barda, quoted in The Guardian newspaper.

Not all visitors felt the protests were preventing access to the cathedral. The Guardian reporter spoke with two American tourists named Diane and Peter, who said they were a bit dismayed by the scene. However, Peter added, "since they're not preventing tourists from visiting this magnificent structure, they should be able to protest as they feel they need to."