

Iconic Air Force Academy cadet chapel to close for four years to fix leaking spires

By: **Tom Roeder** • March 23, 2017 • *Updated: Today at 6:22 am*

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The Air Force Academy will close its Cadet Chapel in late 2018 for up to four years to repair leaks that have plagued Colorado's most iconic building since it opened in 1962.

The planned \$68 million renovation will see the chapel's gleaming aluminum skin and soaring stained glass removed as workers install a new system designed to stop the leaks.

The closure of the chapel was announced Wednesday morning by AFA Superintendent Lt. Gen. Michelle Johnson.

"We love it a lot, but it is over 53 years old," Johnson said during a speech for community leaders at the school. "We're going to be putting scaffolding up in 2018."

While water has been a longtime problem at the chapel, the fix for it is not a new solution, said Duane Boyle, the school's chief architect. The sealing system, called internal flashing in construction terms, was designed into the chapel in the 1950s but was later eliminated in a cost-cutting effort that has haunted the place ever since.

Instead of the more expensive sealing method, workers have relied on caulking to keep water out. "There's 32 miles of caulking in the Cadet Chapel," Boyle said.

Despite academy efforts that have had workers caulking the place on a near-daily basis for decades, the leaks continued. And deterioration to the aluminum structure has become alarming.

"We're kind of in a downward spiral for what we could do to stop the leaking," Boyle said. Taking care of the chapel is a top priority for the school because it is a building that put the academy on the map.

The 150-foot-tall structure features 17 triangular spires that are supposed to remind onlookers of the mountainous backdrop of the academy and the planes flown by the Air Force.

The academy estimates that the chapel draws as many as 500,000 visitors a year, making it Colorado's top man-made tourist attraction.

It has also gained national respect with honors including the American Institute of Architect's Twenty-five Year Award, a distinction it shares with other structures including the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and New York's Guggenheim Museum.

Having the chapel out of commission has the school's chaplains scrambling.

The building is home to the main Protestant chapel, a Catholic chapel, a Jewish temple space, a Buddhist prayer room, a Muslim worship space and other areas that can be quickly converted to accommodate every faith from Hinduism to Native American rites.

In addition to regular Sunday services, the chapel is a famed wedding backdrop that hosts scores of weddings every June as newly graduated cadets are allowed to take a spouse.

Chaplain Lt. Col. Michael Newton said he has been scouting around the school for months to find standard military digs that can become temporary holy places in a pinch.

"The cadets will be well taken care of," Newton said. "We have about seven faith groups here that will relocate." Lecture halls, a ballroom and other community spaces have been picked to fill the need, he said. Newton has also been working on how to box up and relocate the religious artifacts that fill the chapel.

Religion is a big deal at the academy and other military bases but not for the reasons one might suspect. The services are barred from evangelism, and promotion of faith is restricted, but the academy like the rest of the military must care for the religious needs of troops under federal law.

"Religious freedom is very important to us at the academy," he said.

They've got religious freedom at the academy, but their hands are tightly bound when it comes to changing the chapel. The chapel is a National Historic Landmark, an honor that comes with tight restrictions on how a structure can be changed or repaired.

To get the job done, Boyle and others have been delving into the past. "We got a lot of information on what the original intent of this building was," he said. In scouring original blueprints, Boyle discovered how the leaks would have been avoided if it weren't for military cost-cutting. "We looked at the original design prints and found this internal flashing system," he said.

Workers will pull apart the outer skin of the chapel in stages, preserving and numbering any piece that can be reused. New metal that's needed will have to comply with the standards set in the original mid-1950s design from architect Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in Chicago.

The interior will get the same meticulous treatment, right down to the chapel's famous pipe organ, which will be restored.

The organ gives an idea of the impacts of 55 years of water leaks.

"About 200 of the 4,400 pipes are not usable due to water damage," Newton said.

Along with chapel renovations, Johnson said, the school is also planning to refurbish its Sijan Hall dormitory and fix Clune Arena, the school's basketball and hockey venue.

Johnson said the renovation projects and other changes are aimed at keeping the academy a place worth visiting. "We want the community to come out," she said.