



The Vergers Voice

The news blog of the Vergers Guild

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Friday, September 8, 2017

Tales from the Slype, Part 4: There will be Earthquakes...



Fallen angel on the roof of Washington National Cathedral (photo by John Stuhldreher)

By [David Deutsch](#), Volunteer Verger at Washington National Cathedral, dsd@his.com

I began as a volunteer verger at [Washington National Cathedral](#) in July of 2003. Over the course of my time, I had certain epiphanies that, among other results, told me that this great stone edifice which can look cold and imposing on the outside, actually has a warm heart and vibrant spirit. When I am at the cathedral, I hang out in the slype. Now a slype in medieval times was a covered passageway between the dean's office and the nave, giving the head of the cathedral easy access to the services. At Washington National Cathedral the slype is comfortably furnished, has storage for vestments, the service books, etc. The slype is both a control tower and hanger for worship. This is part 4 in the "Tales from the Slype Series:"

- [Tales from the Slype, Part 1: The Power of Prayer](#)
- [Tales from the Slype, Part 2: It Is In Giving That We Receive](#)
- [Tales from the Slype, Part 3: Be Still, and Know That I Am God](#)
- [Tales from the Slype, Part 4: There will be Earthquakes...](#)

...there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. – Mark 13:8

What the hell is that banging noise? On August 23, 2011 at 1:50pm¹, I am sitting in the slype, drowsy from lunch. The crashing sound immediately jolts me fully awake. I hurry to the door to see what is going on in the nave. But arriving at the slype door, I realize that sound is actually the door itself. Although closed with the latch, the large wooden door is bouncing around on its hinges, pounding back and forth creating a huge racket. I am beginning to feel a bit unsteady on

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my feet.

I open the door and immediately notice the nave looks eerie. Dust is swirling around blocking the light. The floor feels unsteady. I cannot process what is happening. I want to move more into the nave, but I cannot. Then I hear security—

"Earthquake! Everyone leave the cathedral!" That jolts my neurons and synapses. I am fully awake. My brain is racing. I know what I have to do.

I reenter the slype. Sitting at the computer, I log on and go to my Facebook page. I post an update:

I am at the Washington National Cathedral in the middle of an earthquake.

["YOU! GO NOW!" A security officer has poked his head into the slype.]

I have to leave. More later.

I log off, gather my stuff, exit through the North Entrance, and gather on the grass with other evacuees. On my way out, not far from where I exited, I saw a huge finial sticking into the ground like a guided missile. It had fallen off from the roof of the cathedral. Hmmm, I wonder if outdoors is the safest place to be. Soon we are told to go home.

"Home" lasted nearly two months. The magnitude 5.8 earthquake shut down the House of Prayer for all people causing 34 million dollars worth of damage. But, in some ways, the Cathedral came through quite well. Here is an excerpt from [The Day the Earth Shook: Washington National Cathedral Earthquake Restoration](#) by James W. Shepherd, AIA, LEED.

In some ways, it is amazing that the Cathedral performed as well as it did in a magnitude 5.8 earthquake. To truly understand the extent of the damage, however, one needs to look closely at the structural flying buttresses and the decorative architectural elements that extend above the roofline.

As the seismic energy worked its way through the ground and traveled upward, it was released through the displacement of the highest and most slender components of the Cathedral—and also, one of the highest geographical point in the city. Delicate pinnacles on the Cathedral's towers, each weighing thousands of pounds, spun and burst apart from the seismic force unleashed in less than a minute. One gargoyle was decapitated...

Inside the Cathedral, the "debris fields" held clues to where the stone vaulted ceiling overhead experienced the most movement. The seismic waves shifted stones, causing mortar to loosen, crack and fall. In some cases, the ceiling stones cracked and spalled².

An earthquake not only shakes the earth but shakes up the mind as well. What we take as solid can crumble. What we perceive as secure can become dangerous. In the midst of such chaos, what astounds me is the amazing spirit that humankind has to rebuild, to move forward, and to look through the debris to the future. We can see that spirit on the news when reporters interview residents of small towns who have been hit by a tornado. And I can feel that spirit beginning November 12, 2011 when I returned to the slype ten weeks after the earthquake. Fundraising has begun. The building is stabilized. Joe Alonso and his two stone carvers are hard at work. The Eucharist—a service of thanksgiving—has returned. Hope and faith abound.

More later.

¹ For those of you who like accuracy—and I know that vergers do like accuracy—the time was 1:51:04.

² Spall: To break up or reduce by or as if by chipping with a hammer (Merriam Webster)

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We are always looking for interesting topics, ideas, and creative ways of demonstrating the power and enjoyment of being part of the fellowship of the VGEC and our ministry of service.

If you have any ideas, or if you would like to take your turn at writing a post and sharing ideas, send them to ideas@vergersvoice.org!

The [2017 VGEC Annual Conference](#) in Atlanta is coming very soon on October 12th to October 15th. Registration is **\$275.00** per person. The deadline to [register](#) is **Monday, October 2, 2017**. **We cannot accept on-site registrations!**



Abstract: The photo for this blog post tells an incredible story. One of calm, surprise, shock, movement, shaking, falling, danger, fear, and the slow path to recovery. David Deutsch, a volunteer verger, tells about the 2011 earthquake at Washington National Cathedral from his own experience of being there: before, during, and after. More later.

Posted by [Scott Smith](#) at [7:17 PM](#)



1 comment:



[Cindy Fleming](#) September 19, 2017 at 12:26 AM

Thank you. I found this personally helpful having just held our first service post hurricane Irma.

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