

## The Smaller Cathedral in the Episcopal Church: A Place of Loss and Hope

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Many cathedrals within the Episcopal Church have small congregations, staffs, and buildings. This is particularly the case in New England, the Great Lakes, and the Midwest. Often these cathedrals do not have the largest congregations or facilities in their dioceses and some are struggling to sustain their life and mission—a few, in fact, have closed in recent years. Can they rightly be considered as cathedrals alongside the great historic Anglican cathedrals and the larger cathedrals found in other parts of North America? Is there even something distinctive about them as one expression of cathedral life today?

Growth in the cathedrals of the Church of England has been well documented.<sup>1</sup> Attendance at both Sunday and midweek worship services and at educational, cultural, and civic events, as well as the number of volunteers, have all been increasing in recent years. But do these English considerations translate into the context of The Episcopal Church in the United States? No formal research has taken such a translation from anecdote to evidence, but observations and impressions do indicate a similar vitality among many Episcopal Church cathedrals, large and small. Can this also be said of the smaller cathedrals in areas like the American Rust Belt?

The cathedrals of the Episcopal Church are not in the same position in relation to their wider church and culture as the English cathedrals; however they do share some important characteristics with them. Episcopal Church cathedrals are often deeply intertwined with the history of their cities. Among other things, this often can be

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<sup>1</sup> Church Growth Research and the Church of England, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (Church of England, 2014), Church of England Research and Statistics, *Cathedral Statistics 2015* (Church of England, 2015), Theos and the Grubb Institute, *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (London: Theos and The Grubb Institute, 2012).

seen in their locations, which in many cases would be nearly impossible to acquire today for the building of a church. The buildings are soaked in local history, as is evident in the names found on windows or memorial tablets. These cathedrals have often amassed significant financial endowments that provide resources beyond the capacities of their current congregations. Worship and music usually reflect the English choral and cathedral tradition, with highly trained musicians and professional singers. Clergy and lay leaders have been people of influence and impact in the community and beyond. Alongside their traditional ways, cathedrals have been places of civic engagement and social programs, at times with innovation and boldness. Of course not all of these are true in all places, and much is not like it used to be. Nonetheless, cathedrals of all sizes generally remain an important part of their cities and dioceses.

Cathedrals were not part of the Episcopal Church when it was organized following the Revolutionary War. Perhaps they were thought to represent the institutions and authorities of the Old World and thus were not fitting for the new Republic. However, the desirability of cathedrals began to be proposed fairly early in the nineteenth century and some locations were designated as pro-cathedrals or cathedrals in the 1860s. As the century progressed, a genuine “cathedral movement” can be identified, in part a development of the growing Anglo-Catholic movement, but equally an enterprise of a Broad Church effort to both magnify the presence and prestige of the Episcopal Church and to respond to the developing demographic trends of American cities.<sup>2</sup>

Around the turn of the century, new cathedrals began to be built, some on the scale of the European cathedrals, notably, Saint John the Divine in New York City, Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Washington, D.C. In 1919, Bishop William Lawrence of Massachusetts wrote *The American Cathedral*. This book gave one prominent bishop’s case for the significance of cathedrals in the Episcopal Church and in the cities of the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Prichard, *A History of the Episcopal Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 245. James Addison, *The Episcopal Church in the United States 1789–1931* (1951; reprinted., New Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 1969), 213–214.

Lawrence recognized the hesitations some felt about cathedrals in the American Church and city: the limitations of the English models and the possible threat to parish churches. Nonetheless, he was convinced, “the fact is that in the Episcopal Church in this country is offered the best opportunity since the days of the Apostles for carrying out to the full the true idea of the cathedral and that especially because of the wisdom of the founders of our Church in so organizing the Church in harmony with our national institutions that the cathedral system is the most American of all for spiritual administration.”<sup>3</sup>

This optimism was based on the capacity of a cathedral to express the life of a whole diocese and thereby of its unique ability to be a “peoples’ church,” attractive to those thronging American cities, uprooted from home, including a home church. Such a church is open to one who “walks the streets and does not so much look for as feels the want of a church which he can enter with as confident a sense of possession as he enters the public library, a place that is impersonal.”<sup>4</sup>

This kind of church might draw one who can “quietly enter, and without committing himself to any form of religious faith, feel the sense of the eternities.” Congregations of such folk could mean that “beneath the great arches of the cathedral may be kneeling side by side men and women of many faiths and creeds, and the temple may become a church of reconciliation.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of the Episcopal Church as the “church of reconciliation” was widespread during this era.

The supreme embodiment of the ideal of the American cathedral was the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Washington, D.C., now generally known as Washington National Cathedral (or simply, the National Cathedral), begun in 1907 and completed in 1990. Although it was somewhat anomalous and ambiguous in a nation with no established religion, the National Cathedral was chartered by the United States Congress as “a great church for national purposes.”

A few other churches were founded and built expressly to be cathedrals during this era, but the great majority of the cathedrals of the Episcopal Church are smaller in scale and nearly all of them were previously parish churches. Several of the Church of England cathedrals are “parish church cathedrals,” designated as such during the

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<sup>3</sup> William Lawrence, *The American Cathedral* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, *The American Cathedral*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence, *The American Cathedral*, 35.

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Michael Sadgrove has written that these urban parish church cathedrals can be “half hidden and only half acknowledged at the heart of many of our cities,” and yet they are often in “highly strategic places” near to “people and institutions that drive regional if not national economies.”<sup>6</sup> With a long history as parishes, they face the challenge of developing a fitting, and perhaps different, model of cathedral life and work. The same could be said about most of the cathedrals of the Episcopal Church.

As Gary Hall has written, many of the factors that contribute to the current vitality of cathedrals can be seen as well in other high membership churches, whether they are cathedrals or not.<sup>7</sup> Smaller cathedrals often also share similar dynamics in ways that would usually not be the case in other congregations of a comparable size. The scale of their facilities and congregations may be smaller, but in their context these cathedrals have historic buildings, significant locations, and a legacy of impact in their cities. They are places where large numbers, far beyond the official membership, gather for worship on great holidays and for other special religious and civic occasions. Perhaps even the very name *cathedral* borrows spiritual capital from the European and larger American cathedrals, drawing on multiple experiences and impressions of the historic cathedrals to bring cathedral identity and expectations to newer and smaller ones. Alongside this, it may be that smaller cathedrals bring their own distinctive perspective to the mission of cathedrals in our time.

The smaller cathedrals of the Episcopal Church have been deeply affected by depopulation, economic decline, and demographic change. Like most congregations in these contexts, they provide a range of social outreach ministries to those in need in their cities. As cathedrals, their “spiritual capital” often means that their leaders and members are also community leaders or have valued relationships with civic leaders. As centers of support for the arts, especially music, they are places of beauty in the center of their cities. Cathedral liturgies and events often reach beyond the members of the congregation. In these ways, the cathedral and its people become known as companions in living with the city’s challenges.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Sadgrove, “Cathedrals and Urban Life,” in Stephen Platten, ed., *Dreaming Spires? Cathedrals in a New Age* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2006), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Hall, “The Purpose of Cathedrals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 96, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 727.

At the same time, their smaller size, along with the fact that they are “parish church cathedrals,” makes them credible companions with the congregations of their diocese who face demographic and economic challenges in their communities as well. In these ways, smaller cathedrals are of vital importance to their cities and dioceses as well as to those who make them their congregational home. A closer look at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Erie, Pennsylvania provides an example.

Erie has been the subject of several national media stories, especially in the months following the 2016 presidential election. In that election, the City of Erie voted Democratic, while the vote outside the city was Republican. This was not an unusual voting pattern for the region. What was different, however, was that the total vote count gave Erie County to the Republican candidate for the first time in decades. In this way, Erie County reflected the results in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin that led to the Electoral College outcome. Erie’s Rust Belt setting, with both severe economic challenges and determined new initiatives, attracted the media’s attention with a narrative considered worth following in postelection America.

Following several visits to the city, James Fallows of *The Atlantic* wrote,

Erie, Pennsylvania, has a landscape of abandoned factory buildings and a generation of laid-off blue-collar workers who know that their children will never enjoy the security they did at the once-mighty GE locomotive plant. (Those GE jobs, by the way, are moving not to China or Mexico but instead to Fort Worth, Texas). But Erie also has as active a civic-reform movement as you will find anywhere in the country, led by people in their 20s and 30s who believe they can create new businesses for themselves and new life for their town. Erie is worse off in most ways than it was 50 years ago—but better off than five years ago, and headed toward better prospects five years from now, in the view of most people there.<sup>8</sup>

This is the context in which the Cathedral of Saint Paul finds itself, sharing in the fate of its city.

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<sup>8</sup> James Fallows, “Despair and Hope in the Age of Trump,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2017, 14.

Saint Paul's was organized in 1826 and its current building was built in 1866. It is located in the midst of Gannon University and the county government buildings, just two blocks from the old downtown and six blocks from Lake Erie and the developing bay front. It was designated as the cathedral for the new diocese of Erie (now Northwestern Pennsylvania) in 1915, the first Episcopal cathedral in Pennsylvania, even though the diocese was the last to be created in the Commonwealth.

Bishop Rogers Israel, speaking to the Fifth Diocesan Convention of the Diocese of Erie in 1915, remarked that "this enables us to have almost at the beginning of our Diocesan life, as in the early Church, the Cathedral as the center of both material and spiritual power of the Diocese."<sup>9</sup> He went on to quote at length from Lawrence's *The American Cathedral*, indicating his sympathy for the vision and ideals presented therein.

Like many such congregations, the Cathedral of Saint Paul was at one time a church of the establishment, of the wealthy and powerful, reaching its heyday in the 1950s. Since then it declined and later stabilized with a current congregation that includes several younger families and individuals, many of them university faculty. Reflecting the ideals of *The American Cathedral*, its website states, "Our members and friends include Episcopalians and others, all of us seekers, sinners, strugglers, and saints."<sup>10</sup>

In the 1990s all of the cathedral's facilities, except for the church itself, were demolished and replaced with new buildings, designed to be more energy efficient, multipurpose, accessible, and reflective of current congregational and community life. This allowed for the creation of an attractive campus with a large green space. All of this was a sign of hope and investment in the center of a declining city and had a significant impact on the development of the congregation and its ministry. It also anticipated the strategic plan for the city of Erie, which calls for the demolition of outdated properties, the preservation of historic ones, and the creation of green spaces throughout the city.

Like most cathedrals, liturgy and music are a high priority at the Cathedral of Saint Paul. Its music in the Anglican choral tradition is

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<sup>9</sup> *Journal of the Third Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Erie*, 1915, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Cathedral of St. Paul website, <http://www.cathedralofstpaul.org/#/welcome/welcome>.

of a high quality and this is known and valued in the wider community. Liturgies on major holidays, and services like Choral Evensong and Lessons and Carols, as well as concerts and other musical events, bring large numbers of visitors and guests who are not members of the cathedral congregation. The same is true of other arts and culture events. The cathedral is especially concerned to preserve and promote the music and story of Harry T. Burleigh, the renowned African American musician and performer who was born in Erie and baptized at St. Paul's. Best known for his arrangements of the spirituals, he is commemorated in the cathedral's newest stained glass window, and the cathedral choir regularly performs his music.

The cathedral reaches out to the surrounding community in three major ways. A long-established food pantry is the one of the largest in the city and the only one in the immediate downtown area. The Erie public schools face severe challenges, and the cathedral partners with a nearby elementary school, providing supplies, tutoring, and after-school music to a student population with a 90 percent poverty rate. And a large group of cathedral members help staff a winter homeless shelter on the next block. These efforts are the current chapter of an ongoing history of civic engagement and social service that has taken many forms over St. Paul's history.

The unique spiritual capital of the cathedral identity provides an opportunity for public commentary, as the bishop and dean are frequently interviewed by local media. This is also reflected in the way the cathedral's physical, historical, and social place brings convening authority when the cathedral hosts conferences and civic meetings.

Any and all of these things can be and are done by many churches that are not cathedrals. This is especially the case for larger membership congregations. But the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Erie and other smaller cathedrals in the Episcopal Church bring such things together through a cathedral identity and legacy in smaller, often struggling community contexts, serving and enriching the people who live in such places. Erie's future is uncertain, like that of many other smaller cities in the wider Great Lakes and Rust Belt region. The cathedral's life and mission will continue to share in the fate of the city.

Rust Belt author David Giffels writes, "As I grew into early adulthood and observed a large pattern of hope and loss and hope and loss and hope and loss, and the concurrent resilience thereof, I came to a begrudging conclusion: neither of these things—hope and loss—can exist without the other, and yet at every turn it is necessary to believe

that at some point one will ultimately conquer. And that will be our legacy.”<sup>11</sup> As resilient places of loss and hope, the smaller cathedrals of The Episcopal Church offer cathedral ministry in the midst of their cities and dioceses. By doing this, they are engaged in an enterprise of believing that hope will ultimately conquer.

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<sup>11</sup> David Giffels, *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 8.