

The Potential of Cathedrals

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Cathedrals are growing in the twenty-first century, in terms of both worshippers and general visitors, as statistics and reports over the last few years have confirmed. The number of people attending services at Anglican cathedrals in England went up by 30 percent in the last decade. This is a rise in attendees at worship services of about 3 percent a year.¹ Growth in the number of worshippers at cathedrals is also occurring in other parts of the Anglican Communion. For example, Grace Cathedral in San Francisco had an increase in Sunday attendance at worship services of 10 percent in 2011. The most recent report on cathedrals in England, *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals*, authored by the think-tank Theos and The Grubb Institute, shows that in 2012, 11 million United Kingdom residents, which represents 27 percent of the population, visited a cathedral. These figures include worshippers and visitors who come as pilgrims, tourists, concertgoers, and for arts and education events.² This was an increase from 8.8 million in 2004.³ This growth is particularly notable, of course, because of the overall decline in church going in the mainline Protestant denominations.

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¹ See the Church of England's summary of these statistics here: <http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2012/03/cathedral-attendance-statistics-enjoy-over-a-decade-of-growth.aspx>.

The statistics for attendance at cathedrals from 2001 to 2011 can be found here: http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1423215/2001_2011cathheadlines.pdf

² *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (London: Theos and The Grubb Institute, 2012), 10.

³ The 2004 statistic is quoted in Nick Spencer, "Let the Visitors Simply Ponder," *Church Times*, October 19, 2012.

This growth has not come out of the blue. If we contextualize it in the broader history of cathedrals, we can see that the current pattern of growth emerges from reforms of the last one hundred and fifty years. And if we step back to look at the fortunes of cathedrals in England from the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation, we can see why they needed reforming by the nineteenth century. Henry VIII stripped the church of much of its wealth, and this especially affected cathedrals.⁴ In the civil war of the mid-seventeenth century, cathedrals were often used as garrisons, stables, and storage places for ammunition. In some cathedrals, the colorful medieval paintings were whitewashed or defaced, and the heads of statues were knocked off. When the civil war and Interregnum period were over and the Church of England was restored, cathedrals regained some of their former status. When the medieval St. Paul's Cathedral in London burned in the fire of 1666, people were clear that it should be rebuilt; thus the Church of England got its first purpose-built Anglican cathedral, designed by Christopher Wren.

Nevertheless, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many cathedrals were in a moribund state, and came under attack. They lost a good deal of their wealth in the 1840 Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act, which centralized much (including cathedral income) that had previously been administered locally, and suspended many canonries. The Anglican cleric and Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley, who was a canon of Chester Cathedral in the early 1870s, gave a depressing picture of cathedral worship that was part caricature but part truth:

The organ droned sadly in its iron cage to a few musical amateurs. . . . As a wise author—a Protestant, too—has lately said, “the scanty service rattled in the vast building, like a dried kernel too small for its shell.” The place breathed imbecility, and unreality, and sleepy life-in-death, while the whole nineteenth century went roaring on its way outside.⁵

⁴ See Stanford E. Lehmborg, “Henry VIII, the Reformation and the Cathedrals,” in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 261–270.

⁵ Charles Kingsley, *The Novels, Poems, and Memories of Charles Kingsley: Yeast* (New York: J. F. Taylor and Co., 1903), 313.

There was much discussion about the purpose of cathedrals in the nineteenth-century English church, and some people questioned their usefulness.

It was in the later part of the nineteenth century that cathedrals began to make a comeback in Britain, and largely because of a series of reforming deans, starting with Harvey Goodwin at Ely (1858–1869) and continuing with others such as Arthur Penrhyn Stanley at Westminster Abbey (1864–1881), Edward Goulburn at Norwich (1866–1889), and R. W. Church at St. Paul's in London (1871–1890). These deans took seriously the duty of a cathedral to provide regular and beautiful worship, improving the music (which was often in a dire state), preaching, and liturgy. As Trevor Beeson writes of R. W. Church at St. Paul's (who had the good fortune to be working with an amenable and collaborative chapter), he “tackled the situation by declaring that the building, like any parish church, must be used from end to end. People must be made to feel that it was a place of prayer and praise. . . . The worship must be open to all with no suggestion of payment or of reserved seats. . . . Art and music at its very best must assist the offering of dignified worship.”⁶ Westminster Abbey began holding big services in its nave, and others followed that example, such as Ely Cathedral, which in the 1870s had Sunday evening services under the octagon, gathering some twelve or thirteen hundred worshippers, which accounted for more than one-sixth of the small population of Ely (just under six thousand).

Cathedrals began to encourage tourists, seeking to become more popular and accessible. Dean Stanley at Westminster Abbey opened the Abbey to the public without charge: on Easter Monday 1870, about nine thousand people visited the Abbey. Stanley walked around the building, talking about its history and religious significance to the visitors he encountered. Deans became more down to earth, like John Oakley, who was dean first of Carlisle and then of Manchester. He began an evening service, and introduced other popularizing moves such as flowers at Easter. He shocked people by shaking hands with the vergers, traveling third class on the railway, and swimming at the public baths. The advent of theological colleges, founded in the mid-nineteenth century for the professional training and education

⁶ Trevor Beeson, *The Deans* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 69.

of clergy and often attached to cathedrals—Chichester (1839), Wells (1840), Lichfield (1857), Salisbury and Exeter (1861), Gloucester (1868), Lincoln (1874), and Ely (1876)—meant that cathedrals were once again associated with education, and their intellectual standards were elevated.⁷

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the creation of new cathedrals in Britain, especially as new dioceses were formed to address the growing and changing demographics. In some new dioceses, there was already a suitable parish church or minster that could easily be designated the cathedral church, as Southwell Minster was in 1884. The Diocese of Liverpool, established in 1880, had to decide whether to build a new cathedral. It did not do so immediately because the first bishop, John Ryle, was one of the skeptics about the usefulness of cathedrals and wanted resources to go to ministry elsewhere. Only after his retirement in 1900 could the diocese turn its thoughts to building a cathedral. The selected architect was Giles Gilbert Scott (designer of the red telephone box and Battersea Power Station, now the Tate Modern). The foundation stone was laid in 1904 and the cathedral was consecrated in 1924, though not completed until 1978.

This was also the period in which the notion of a pan-national church began to be forged (the first Lambeth Conference was in 1867) and provinces across the nascent Anglican Communion entered a period of great cathedral building. St. Paul's Cathedral in Calcutta, begun in 1839 and built in the Gothic revival style, was finally consecrated in 1874. St. George's Church in Cape Town was designated the cathedral in 1847 in anticipation of the arrival of the first Anglican bishop in Africa, Robert Gray, but he did not like it. A much grander new cathedral was designed by Herbert Baker: the foundation stone was laid in 1901, building began in 1906, and it was completed in stages, in 1936, 1963, and 1978. St. Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, Australia, was built to a design by the English architect William Butterfield (who never visited Melbourne): the foundation stone was laid in 1880 and the cathedral was consecrated in 1891. There was money

⁷ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Part II: 1860–1901* (London: SCM Press, 1970, 1987), 373, 380–382. On Dean Stanley, see Beeson, *The Deans*, 53–62. On nineteenth-century theological colleges, see David A. Dowland, *Nineteenth-Century Anglican Theological Training: The Redbrick Challenge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially the Introduction.

for such cathedral building as a result of the industrial revolution, and its impact across the British Empire.

The Gilded Age in the United States boosted the building of cathedrals and large churches as the great industrialists-turned-philanthropists sought to make their mark on the spiritual and geographical landscape. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City was begun in 1892, and the foundation stone for the Washington National Cathedral was laid in 1907. In San Francisco, Bishops Kip and Nichols dreamt of a cathedral on the American west coast in the late nineteenth century, but it was only after the 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed Grace Church that work began on Grace Cathedral, which was built in stages over the twentieth century and finally completed in 1964. It was the railroad and banking Crocker family who donated the land for the cathedral in 1907; the land was the site of their former mansion that had been destroyed in the earthquake.

The building of a cathedral signified both a sense of belonging to the wider, Anglican transnational church, a church with cathedrals, and local pride and civic identity. Robert Scott's comment about the building of medieval cathedrals is no less true for this modern cathedral-building period: "A cathedral-building project provided a potentially defining focus, a master narrative, for collective identity among members of the community in which it was built. . . . Building a cathedral entailed an ongoing, difficult, yet energizing form of collective enterprise in which people could take enormous pride and around which they could rally as a community."⁸

It is not surprising then, that by 1936, when Evelyn Underhill wrote her last big book, *Worship*, cathedrals had thrown off their bad image and exemplified for her "new life" in the liturgical world. She wrote:

This new life . . . is specially seen in the Cathedrals; once little better than badly-kept museums, where the spirit of prayer was sternly discouraged, lumber—or sometimes fuel—was stored in the altar-less chapels of the Saints, and a brisk tour of inspection under a competent verger effectively destroyed any suspicion that the building existed for the praise and glory of God. . . . The Cathedral is now once more recognized as a sacred shrine, and

⁸ Robert A. Scott, *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 233–234.

the Mother Church of the Diocese; the visible sign and gathering point of its adoring prayer, where its interests, needs, and activities are remembered before God, and the daily celebration of the Eucharist and the Divine Office maintains the ancient tradition of worship.⁹

A cathedral is indeed “the visible sign and gathering point” for a diocese, being the seat of the diocesan bishop, and Underhill was right that one of the signs of the reform and liveliness of cathedrals was that they were once again fulfilling that function by the twentieth century. But cathedrals have always been more than that. Because of their role in the larger community and their engagement with civic issues, education, and the arts, cathedrals are often the least “churchy” of churches, reaching out to a wide audience beyond strict believers. A cathedral is a gathering place for a whole community. And that is one key reason why cathedrals continued not only to survive but also to thrive in the twentieth century. The great mid-twentieth-century dean of Westminster Abbey, Eric Symes Abbott, made the Abbey a vibrant and open place, and in his installation sermon on St. Andrew’s Day in 1959 he declared his vision of the Abbey was of “a great church in which all questing men and women, irrespective of faith and race, would ‘see Jesus’ and behold the glory of God.” Both the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco echo this sentiment when describing themselves as houses of prayer for all people.

Throughout the twentieth century, cathedrals continued to open their doors to the broader community, to be patrons of the arts and enlarge their educational and civic engagement, and to find new and creative ways to fund their activities and keep historic buildings in good shape. Many cathedrals began Friends organizations: George Bell founded the first Cathedral Friends group in 1927, when he was dean of Chichester, and most large English cathedrals adopted the idea in the 1930s. Such organizations enlarged the circle of people who felt some emotional tie to a given cathedral, provided volunteers in many spheres, and collected much needed income. Many cathedrals built visitors’ centers and restaurants and started gift shops in the 1970s and 1980s. Trevor Beeson, in his diary of his time as dean of Winchester Cathedral (1987–1996), talks about the difficulties he faced when he

⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1936), 335.

sought to build a visitors' center there in 1988, long after most English cathedrals had already done so.¹⁰ Cathedrals continued to be patrons of the arts, none more so than Coventry Cathedral. The new cathedral, built in the midst of the ruins of the bombed old cathedral, was designed by architect Basil Spence and commissioned art by some of the greatest postwar English artists: Graham Sutherland's great tapestry of Christ in Majesty, John Piper's stained glass windows, Jacob Epstein's sculpture of St. Michael and the devil, and Elisabeth Frink's Eagle Lectern. Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was composed for the new cathedral's consecration and performed there for the first time in 1952. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City likewise promoted the arts in many important ways in the second half of the twentieth century, underlining their enduring importance in cathedral life.

But Trevor Beeson's diary of his time at Winchester Cathedral also serves as a reminder that change in cathedrals can often take a long time and face considerable opposition. Cathedrals are large, complicated organizations, and their significant ties to tradition mean that they have a strong and important streak of conservatism running through them. Getting the balance right between tradition and innovation has long been a delicate task facing all cathedral deans and chapters.

The growth that cathedrals are seeing in the early twenty-first century has occurred after a dip. Beeson reminds us that English cathedrals are not yet seeing the visitor figures of the mid-1990s, which stood at about 14.5 million. Nevertheless, the swing is once again upwards, and cathedral growth—as an overall picture over the last century and more—stands in contrast with a documented decline in some other areas of church life. The long view—over about one hundred and fifty years—shows that current growth is not simply a result of happenstance but rather builds on the reforming work done in and with cathedrals over that period. We might conjecture, then, that while that phenomenon called “secularization” has been occurring over the last century or so (and historians disagree about what secularization is, and when it occurred¹¹), cathedrals have managed not

¹⁰ Trevor Beeson, *A Dean's Diary: Winchester 1987–1996* (London: SCM Press, 1997).

¹¹ For a useful summary of these arguments see Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). For a controversial but influential argument that secularization only occurred in the 1960s, see Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation*,

only to survive but also often to thrive in an environment that many other churches in the Protestant mainline denominations have found particularly challenging. We are all familiar with the “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon,¹² and cathedrals seem especially to appeal to those who are skeptical about institutional religion but have a longing for the spiritual, as the report *Spiritual Capital* makes clear. One of its findings is that “cathedrals have a particular capacity to connect with those who are on or ‘beyond’ the Christian periphery.”¹³

The reasons for this “particular capacity” are, I think, several. First of all, the beauty of a cathedral draws people in; the strong emphasis on worship and music reiterates that sense of the aesthetic, reflecting the glory of God, prompting people to reach beyond themselves to the transcendent. This is one reason the arts are so important in cathedrals.

Secondly, cathedrals allow anonymity. Cathedrals are often big places. That is stating the obvious but there is an important point here: cathedrals are places where people can be anonymous for as long as they want to be. People can “test” out religion without someone grabbing them and putting them on the coffee rota the minute they enter the door. They are places for resting in the beauty, for exploring the transcendent at one’s own pace. Kelvin Holdsworth, Provost of St. Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow, talks about the importance of large pillars in cathedrals, behind which people can hide!¹⁴

Cathedrals, as centers for civic engagement, are also places that have the vocation, and indeed the facilities, to offer a wide range of events, from the daily offices to yoga, from labyrinth walks to lectures. They have the capacity to draw in a wide variety of constituents. They are gathering spaces for diverse urban communities. They can host civic dialogues, and bring widely differing people together for conversation. *Spiritual Capital* observes: “Just as cathedrals are well placed to make links with the sacred for the ‘spiritual but not

1800–2000, second edition (London: Routledge, 2009). Recent scholarship is represented by the essays in Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape, eds., *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010).

¹² For a sociological account of this phenomenon, see Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

¹³ *Spiritual Capital*, 12.

¹⁴ Forum at Grace Cathedral with the Very Rev. Kelvin Holdsworth, October 21, 2012, <http://www.gracecathedral.org/cathedral-life/worship/listen/detail.php?fid=146>.

religious' population, they are equally well placed to make the links between individuals, organizations and institutions within a community." At the launch of the report, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that a cathedral is "a stage on which the most important issues can be framed and explored."¹⁵

Spiritual Capital goes on to draw two further, related conclusions. Cathedrals can establish and foster relationships between people and organizations that lie at the heart of healthy civil society. The vast majority of interviewees said that cathedrals reach out beyond the church and are "hubs to engage the life of the wider community." Cathedrals also have an enormous capacity to sustain, articulate, and even consecrate local and national tradition and identity.¹⁶

We can see how cathedrals have fulfilled these purposes in the recent past. People instinctively went to cathedrals all over the world on 9/11. St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town was a place of refuge for anti-apartheid workers. Grace Cathedral was a rallying place for forging a spiritual response to the AIDS crisis in San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s, long before most other religious institutions. Sometimes, because of a cathedral's particular history, it can have a special mission that goes beyond the local community. Coventry Cathedral in England has a particular concern for peace, and a ministry to and for peacemakers.

For all these reasons, cathedrals are today at the cutting edge of mission. Cathedrals, by their very nature, their space, their beauty, are places that encourage an exploration of the spiritual without an emphasis on dogma or belief, while offering the rhythms of well-worn rituals that people often deeply desire. The trick for those of us who are clergy and regular worshippers is to sense when someone wants to come out of the shadows, explore faith more deeply, and get involved with the life of the community.

What does this mean for membership and growth, in cathedrals and the wider church? The report *Spiritual Capital* offers a serious challenge in deliberately blurring the distinction between worshipper and tourist. It suggests that visitors who do not define themselves as spiritual seekers at the outset may end up becoming such seekers. Of those surveyed for the report, one-third said they were not religious.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, quoted in Ed Thornton, "Cathedrals 'Appeal to Non-religious,'" *Church Times*, October 19, 2012.

¹⁶ *Spiritual Capital*, 12.

However, of those in that one-third, 84 percent said they got a sense of the sacred from a cathedral building; 79 percent said they got a sense of the sacred from cathedral music; and 56 percent said they experienced God through the quiet of cathedral space.¹⁷

These findings prompt serious questions about how we think about membership and how we measure growth. What does growth mean in terms of the number of people visiting as tourists or for cultural events, and the number of people attending services? Most cathedrals now have a resident congregation: how are the lines between that resident congregation and the broader community—also deeply engaged in the life of a cathedral—blurred? And what do membership and growth mean in terms of virtual community: how might we include in membership rolls or attendance statistics those who listen to services, sermons, and educational offerings online but never or rarely actually attend the cathedral or church in person?

These questions have wide repercussions for our church life beyond cathedrals, because they remind us that spiritual impact is not confined to worship services, and certainly not to attendance at Sunday services. The latter, however, remains the yardstick by which the “state of the church” is measured in the Episcopal Church in the USA: cathedrals and parish churches alike are required to record the numbers attending church services on a Sunday in filing their parochial report, but not the numbers attending midweek services or any of their other activities. So “success” in growing is not measured, officially, by anything other than Sunday attendance. But if cathedrals—and indeed all churches—were measured on *all* their activity, then growth figures might look very different, and might more accurately reflect the kind of outreach activities in which most churches, not just cathedrals, are engaged.

The growth and influence of cathedrals in Britain and around the Anglican Communion over the last one hundred and fifty years, a time usually associated with the phenomenon of secularization, suggests that cathedrals by their very nature and reach, and by their capacity to appeal to so many different constituencies, have something very particular to offer the wider society and indeed the wider church. Cathedrals also balance innovation and tradition, responding to the issues of the day and the concerns of the communities in which they are

¹⁷ *Spiritual Capital*, chap. 1.

located while remaining rooted in the rituals and spiritual traditions that lie at the heart of the Christian faith. Cathedrals are modeling new ways forward that may be helpful to all churches in the search to forge new understandings and practices of mission in the twenty-first century, the “spiritual but not religious” age in which we live.

