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Anglican cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches for nurturing growth and sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the case for conceptualising Anglican cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches for nurturing growth and sustainability. The case is rooted in two sources of empirical evidence: statistical evidence published by the Church of England for the period 2009–2019 show cathedrals to be growing while the rest of the Church is declining; and a series of studies listening to those attending Sunday services and special events explores the motivation and experience of those attending cathedrals. The case is then advanced by exploring three questions that illuminate the distinctive religious and ecclesial identity of Anglican cathedrals within the contemporary spiritual landscape of England that is increasingly characterised by secularity: Why bother with Anglican identity? Why bother with theology? Why bother with bishops? Discussion of these three issues leads to a reasoned response to the fourth question: Why bother with cathedrals?

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Introduction

During the decade prior to Covid-19, that is from 2009 to 2019, the ‘measure of Church of England participation’ published by Church of England (2020b, 16) revealed an overall trajectory of decline in attendance figures: the all-age ‘Usual Sunday attendance declined by 16%, Easter communicants by 18%, and Christmas communicants by 16%’. The trajectory of decline was stronger in terms of the occasional offices: marriages and services of prayer and dedication declined by 42%, baptisms and thanksgivings declined by 37%, and funerals (combining in church and in crematoria/cemeteries) by 31%. These data present a challenging future for the Church of England. The profound disruption of Covid-19 did nothing to disrupt this apparent trajectory of decline (Church of England 2022).

During the same decade, from 2009 to 2019, the statistics for cathedrals published by Church of England (2020a) revealed an overall trajectory of growth in attendance figures: the total weekly attendance increased by 13%, Easter attendance by 4%, and Christmas

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attendance by 12%. These statistics seem to suggest that cathedrals were modelling a pathway for church growth. It may, therefore, be worthwhile to look below these surface statistics to examine more closely the characteristics and motivation of those who have been attracted to worship in cathedrals. The developing science of cathedral studies has differentiated among those attending regular Sunday services, and those attending special services (especially carol services). This differentiation recognises the capacity of cathedrals to nurture and to sustain two distinctive ways of belonging to God, through activities and through events (Walker 2017).

Listening to those attending Sunday services

Lankshear et al. (2015) compared the profile of the Sunday congregations at Southwark Cathedral (263 adult worshippers) with the profile of the congregations attending parish churches within the Woolwich Episcopal Area (6,042 adult worshippers). This study draws attention to key ways in which the cathedral congregation is different. In simple demographic terms, there were within the cathedral higher proportions of men, younger people, people who are single, or in non-married relationships, and people in full-time employment. This demographic profile suggests that the cathedral may be reaching some people whom the parish churches may find it more difficult to reach.

Francis and Williams (2015a) explored the experience of 269 worshippers attending the morning services at Llandaff Cathedral. Drawing on social capital theory, they assessed the different forms of capital that the worshippers generated in the social arena there. Contrary to some common speculation, the study indicated that the cathedral does not primarily draw those who enjoy anonymity and wish to escape from parish commitment; rather the cathedral attracts worshippers because of the friendly atmosphere, or because of the style of worship, and attendance exerts a positive impact on the development of personal, social, and spiritual capital.

Francis and Williams (2010) tested the generalisability of the survey in Llandaff Cathedral by administering the same questionnaire in two cathedrals in medieval English cities with 124 participants from one and 199 participants from the other. These data confirmed that anonymity was not a motivating factor. Holmes and Kautzer (2013) asked the same questions in four further cathedrals (Wakefield, Birmingham, Southwell, and Gloucester) and also confirmed ‘the comparative unimportance of anonymity as a motivating factor for choosing to worship in the cathedral’ (44). People seem to be attending cathedrals on Sundays not to escape from community engagement but to engage with the distinctive ambience of cathedral worship – something that cathedrals seem to be getting right and that engenders growth.

Francis and Williams (2015b) explored a different approach to examining the motivation of cathedral worshippers by drawing on psychological theory concerning ‘religious orientation’ (see Francis 2007). Religious orientation theory distinguishes among three religious motivations, styled intrinsic (committed religion is an end in itself), extrinsic (religion is adopted in light of its personal and social benefits), and quest (where religion is rooted in ongoing seeking rather than in settled answers). Drawing on data from 593 worshippers attending three cathedrals, Francis and Williams (2015b) found more evidence for the quest orientation among cathedral worshippers. A second study among 571 worshippers in Southwark cathedral by Francis and Lankshear (2021)

confirmed the greater prominence of the quest orientation among cathedral worshippers. People seem to be attracted to cathedrals because here they are able to ask religious questions within an environment that both respects such interrogation and seem to offer pathways for development and growth.

Listening to those attending Christmas carol services

Building on earlier qualitative research among those attending carol services in cathedrals (see Phillips 2010) and working within a quantitative tradition, Walker (2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015) reported on detailed surveys conducted at carol services held in Worcester Cathedral and in Lichfield Cathedral. In the first of these papers, Walker (2012a) reported on data provided by 393 participants at the carol services in Worcester Cathedral in 2009 who completed the New Indices of Religious Orientation (Francis 2007). The core finding from Walker's analysis was that the quest orientation was in much greater evidence among those who attended the cathedral carol service than among those who attended churches on a normal Sunday. Walker noted this as an opportunity for cathedrals to engage with people who come with religious questions, seeking further progress with their religious quest.

In the second paper, Walker (2012b) reported on data provided by 239 women and 164 men at the carol services in Worcester Cathedral in 2009 who completed the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis 2005; Francis, Laycock, and Brewster 2017). This instrument generates a psychological type profile in terms of two orientations (introversion and extraversion), two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes (judging and perceiving). A series of congregation studies has demonstrated that Anglican congregations are heavily weighted toward feeling (see Francis, Robbins, and Craig 2011; Francis, Robbins, et al. 2007). The main finding from the study reported by Walker (2012b) is that cathedral carol services are more successful in drawing in thinking types than current forms of fresh expressions (see Francis, Clymo, and Robbins 2014; Francis, Wright, and Robbins 2016; Village 2015). This finding was replicated by studies conducted in Bangor Cathedral (Francis, Edwards, and ap Siôn 2021) and in Liverpool Cathedral (Francis, Jones, and McKenna 2020, 2021).

In the third paper, Walker (2013), drew on data provided by 1,151 participants completing questionnaires during two carol services in Worcester Cathedral in 2009 and two carol services in Lichfield Cathedral in 2010, in order to examine closely the responses of the 460 individuals categorised as occasional churchgoers, that is as attending less often than six times a year (see Francis and Richter 2007). Walker examined these responses through the lens of 'ordinary theology' as refined by Astley (2002, 2003). Walker concluded that for these occasional churchgoers, rather than faith collapsing into a combination of sentiment, culture, and aesthetics, it retains for many a significant religious content.

In the fourth paper, Walker (2015) examined the attitudinal profile provided by the 1,151 participants at Worcester and Lichfield. He concludes from these data that what is most likely to attract these participants at the Christmas carol service is an inclusive and liberal Christian faith, a faith that engages them in their daily lives, invites them onto a mystical journey, is visible and engaged in the public realm, accepts and respects their

ordinary expression of faith, does not require them to hold fast to details of dogma, accommodates prevailing views on human sexuality, and works in open partnership both with other Christian traditions and with other world faiths. Moreover, Walker argues that these participants are ‘flexible in their church attendance and hence may be open to more regular churchgoing’ (128).

Walker’s close focus on occasional churchgoers prompted his analysis of the four distinctive ways in which people feel that they belong to God, which he identifies as belonging through activities (e.g. weekly churchgoing), events (e.g. carol services), place (e.g. a specific cathedral), and people (e.g. specific relationships). For Walker church growth comes with recognising, acknowledging, and respecting these four ways of belonging to God. Moreover, it seems that cathedrals have the capacity to do this and may be growing congregations as a consequence. This view was supported by the close analysis of the participants at the three carol services in Liverpool Cathedral on the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve 2019 when over 5,000 people (mainly event belongers) came to worship (Francis, Jones, et al. 2020, 2021).

Research question

Against this background of empirical evidence suggesting the capacity of Anglican cathedrals for nurturing growth and sustainability, the aim of the present paper is to explore three conceptual issues that may help to illuminate the distinctive religious and ecclesial identity of Anglican cathedrals within the contemporary spiritual landscape of England that is increasingly characterised by secularity and religious diversity. These issues concern the nature of Anglican identity, the role of theology within secular society, and the centrality of episcopal presence and diocesan structures. Put more crudely the three questions are: Why bother with Anglican identity? Why bother with theology? Why bother with bishops? Discussion of these three issues leads to a reasoned response to the fourth question: Why bother with cathedrals?

Why bother with Anglican identity?

Within the broad landscape of Western Christianity, the Church of England emerged from the Reformation and with a distinctive identity that has enabled it to embrace life-giving roots in both the Catholic tradition and the Reformed tradition. The rediscovery of these roots in the nineteenth century through the Tractarian movement and the Evangelical movement resourced the one Church to continue to embrace and to hold in tension the diverse strength that these roots represent. The two surveys of Anglican identity conducted among clergy and laity in 2001 (Francis, Robbins, and Astley 2005) and in 2013 (Village 2018) have confirmed the ongoing vibrancy of these two traditions within the Church of England.

There is a richness and strength in this diversity that is absent from other streams within the Christian tradition. This is the richness and strength that has helped the Church of England to weather more successfully than other denominations the ravages of secularisation. The history of Christianity in England and Wales since 1900 has illustrated how new churches and chapels can be planted with distinctive and successful strategies and trajectories and how these initiatives may be ephemeral.

Within England Anglican identity has been further enhanced by the status of being an Established Church. Establishment and the parish structure carries with it a highly distinctive responsibility to be a Church committed to serve the local people. This commitment is still well displayed in the Church of England's strapline to be 'a Christian presence in every community'. There are visible signs of this presence as still often seen in the maintenance of a church, the church being kept open, the church being a place for public worship at known times, and a recognised and designated local leader. At least vestiges of this aspiration still remain.

The experience within England can be constructively set alongside the experience in Wales. In the early twentieth century there was a sense of vibrancy from the competition among the Christian traditions in Wales (Morgan 1999). The oppression of the Church of England was dissolved by disestablishment in 1920 and by the creation of the Church in Wales (Price 1990). The publication of preliminary data from the religion question in the 2021 census has drawn attention to the distinctive trajectory of identification within Christianity in Wales. In England, the proportion of the population identifying as Christian fell from 71.7% in 2001 to 59.4% in 2011, and to 46.3% in 2021. This represents a decline of 13.1% between 2011 and 2021. In Wales, the proportion of the population identifying as Christian fell from 71.9% in 2001 to 57.5% in 2011, and to 43.6% in 2021. This represents a decline of 14.0% between 2011 and 2021. In England, the proportion of the population identifying as no religion increased from 14.6% in 2001 to 24.7% in 2011, and to 36.7% in 2021 (an increase of 12% between 2011 and 2021). In Wales, the proportion of the population identifying as no religion increased from 18.5% in 2001, to 32.1% in 2011, and to 46.5% in 2021 (an increase of 14.5% between 2011 and 2021). While in 2021 the highest response to the religion question in the census remained Christian (at 46.3%), the highest response in Wales was no religion (at 46.5%).

Within this changing landscape of secularity and religious diversity there may be value in protecting the distinctive richness of the Anglican heritage. Perhaps cathedrals have a part to play in this adventure.

Why bother with theology?

At the heart of the Anglican tradition, there is commitment to scripture, to tradition, and to reason. Theological enquiry, scholarship, and research remain an integral part of what it means to be Anglican. In increasingly secular and religiously diverse societies, theology may become more (rather than less) important for those trying to engage with the Christian tradition and trying to find their own place within the life of the Church. As familiarity with the Christian narrative becomes less embedded in society, the threshold between church and society becomes more difficult to navigate. We cannot now assume that those coming fresh to the Christian faith come ready equipped with the knowledge and with the tools that are needed to interpret and to understand the Christian tradition. Within the ecclesial community, the newcomer is confronted by liturgy, by scripture, by doctrine, and by ethical assumptions that all need unlocking. The Church needs to be equipped with resources that can help newcomers to unlock such matters.

The kind of theology that matters is not the kind of theology that lives in an ivory academic tower. It is the kind of theology with which Jesus engaged when, according to the Marcan tradition, he called his early followers into his school of discipleship learning.

In the Marcan narrative, it is the facilitated learning of these original 12 (or 13) disciples that signals the inauguration of the reign of God on which Jesus focuses his vocation (see further Francis 2015). Jesus' school of discipleship learning begins in the synagogue at Capernaum (where the scriptures are stored, read, and interpreted) and ventures out into Simon's home. Jesus' method of facilitated discipleship learning continuously draws on the disciples' experience of (and ordinary theology concerning) their day-to-day lives in God's world (see Astley 2002, 2003). Jesus invites them to observe the sower, to observe the baker, to observe the guests at the wedding feast. Jesus invites them to listen to what people are saying about him, and he invites them to draw conclusions about his true identity.

In today's Church, theological learning takes place in three distinctive modes (see Astley 2011) as sitting theology (when individuals read and reflect), as kneeling theology (when individuals pray and engage in liturgy), and as standing theology (when theologically-informed preaching engages the hearts and minds of the gathered community). An ecclesial community that engages actively in theology is enabling a new generation of disciples to reflect intelligently on their faith, to experience the life transformation that comes from being intelligently rooted in the tradition, and to engage in intelligent discourse with the secular world with an informed and distinctive voice.

One radical approach to discipleship learning that has sought university accreditation and church validation for a BTh in Theology for discipleship has been shown to flourish in various locations (Francis 2022; Neil 2015; Peddle 2015). Within the changing landscape of religious and theological education, what may be required are strong and sustainable communities in which a stable devotional and intellectual life may be supported in an environment of liturgy and scholarship. Perhaps cathedrals have a part to play in this adventure, as places where theological enquiry and research (sitting theology), theologically informed and vibrant liturgy (kneeling theology), and theologically engaged and intelligent preaching (standing theology) coalesce.

Why bother with bishops?

The episcopacy remains at the heart of the Anglican identity. Episcopacy is not an accident of church governance but the essence of church life. The Church of England has divided England into 42 dioceses, with a diocesan bishop appointed to oversee each diocese. The dioceses themselves are divided into parishes and over each parish a priest has been licensed to serve, but in licensing a priest to serve in a parish the bishops do not abrogate their responsibility for that parish. The care of souls is shared by bishop and priest in that place. Anglican parishes and Anglican priests are not sole-traders, as may be the case for some other forms of church governance.

Today, the Church of England is often described as 'episcopally led and synodically governed', reflecting the Synodical Government Measure 1969. Here is a form of governance that does not undermine episcopal authority but stresses the consultative manner in which such governance is informed and exercised, properly involving bishop, priests and laity.

In today's complex and mobile society, it is no easy matter to keep bishops and parishes connected, but failure in sustaining this connection may be detrimental to clergy serving in parishes and also to bishops. The pandemic provided a recent and crucial

example of when and how the episcopal structure may have left parish priests feeling either supported or unsupported. For example according to the *Covid-19 & Church-21 Survey*, parish clergy found that the really helpful support that they needed came from their household (60%) and friends (46%), rather than from their diocese (16%) and bishop (19%). On the other hand, where support was forthcoming from diocese or from bishop, the positive impact on clergy wellbeing was so much greater (see Village and Francis 2022). These simple statistics seem to tell us that the theory is good. When parish clergy feel engaged with and supported by their diocese and bishop their capacity to thrive and to deliver is enhanced. However, while the theory is good, the delivery is experienced as being patchy.

In planning for a sustainable future, there may be value in reflecting on how the Church of England can draw more effectively on its ecclesiology and strengthen the sense of effective episcopal engagement with parishes. Perhaps cathedrals have a part to play in this adventure too.

Why bother with cathedrals?

So far this paper has discussed three conceptual issues: Why bother with Anglican identity? Why bother with theology? Why bother with bishops? From this analysis, a case is emerging that a wise Anglican strategy for nurturing growth and sustainability could be built on taking the distinctiveness of the Anglican tradition seriously, on giving priority to discipleship learning and theological formation, and on recognising the strength of an episcopal ecclesiology. So where may Anglican cathedrals fit into such a vision? The answer all depends on what we imagine may be the identity and purpose of Anglican cathedrals.

One recent approach to exploring the identity and purpose of Anglican cathedrals was advanced by Muskett (2019) in her book, *Shop window, flagship, common ground*. Here Muskett argues that metaphors have the power not only to inform but to shape the reality of ministry and mission exemplified by these cathedrals. In her analysis, Muskett selected five metaphors for special attention. The metaphor of cathedrals as ‘shop window’ is rooted in the claim of the Archbishops’ Commission on Cathedrals (1994) that ‘Cathedrals are shop-windows of the Church of England’ (17). The metaphor of cathedrals as ‘flagship’ is rooted in the title *Flagships of the Spirit* for the collection of essays on cathedrals edited by Platten and Lewis (1998). The metaphor of cathedrals as ‘beacon’ is rooted in Richmond-Tulloch (2013) who argued that ‘cathedrals could become beacons for the gospel’ (97). The metaphor of cathedral as ‘magnet’ was introduced by Platten (2006). The more complex metaphor of cathedrals as ‘sacred space and common ground’ is rooted in Percy (2015, 7).

While in many ways potentially inspirational for firing the imagination, none of these metaphors is rooted in theological or ecclesial discourse. Finding a very different starting point for his study on ‘the purpose of cathedrals’, Hall (2014) writing as Dean of Washington National Cathedral, promoted the episcopal chair as an ecclesial metaphor for Anglican cathedrals. Hall’s argument is that cathedrals derive their very name from being the special location of the bishop’s chair (cathedra). Cathedrals are places that locate and focus the ministry of their bishop. In that sense, cathedrals are uniquely episcopal and, if cathedrals are uniquely

episcopal, their ministries should exemplify the salient characteristics of a bishop's ministry. In other words, cathedrals are mandated to do what bishops are called to be.

This ecclesiological rooting of Anglican cathedrals is fully consistent with the definition of the 'ecclesiastical purpose' of cathedrals specified in the opening section of the Cathedrals Measure 2021 (legislation.gov.uk). This section states that those working in cathedrals should have due regard to:

- (a) the fact that the cathedral is the seat of the bishop and a centre of worship and mission.
- (b) the importance of each cathedral's role in providing a focus for the life and work of the Church of England in the diocese.

In developing and applying his analysis of 'the purpose of cathedrals', the first strength of Hall's study concerns the way in which he recognises that Anglican theology and Anglican ecclesiology characteristically start with the consideration of liturgical texts. In other words, to understand what a cathedral is for, it is first necessary to understand what a bishop is called to be. Then to understand what a bishop is called to be, it is necessary to examine the ordinal, the form of ordaining or consecrating of a bishop.

In developing and applying this metaphor, the second strength of Hall's study concerns the way in which he analyses the episcopal ordinal for The Anglican Church of Canada (1985) and the episcopal ordinal for The Episcopal Church, USA (1979) to uncover what the Anglican Church has to say about the identity and ministry of a bishop. In so doing he identified seven salient characteristics. The ministry of a bishop, and by implication the ministry of a cathedral, is:

- apostolic: being called alongside the apostles;
- prophetic: proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel;
- teaching: guarding the faith, unity, and discipline of the church;
- prayerful: celebrating and providing for the administration of the sacraments;
- pastoral: being in all things a faithful pastor and a wholesome example;
- just: being merciful to all, showing compassion to the poor and strangers, and defending those who have no helper;
- empowering: encouraging and supporting all baptised people in their gifts and ministries.

Now, if Hall's argument works and Anglican cathedrals are mandated to do what bishops are called to be, there are very good grounds on which to promote cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches for nurturing growth and sustainability within the Anglican tradition.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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