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Invitations to Christian commitment:  
The distinctive voice of Anglican cathedrals

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## Introduction

My argument in this paper is that cathedrals could make a key contribution to the distinctive invitation that the Anglican Church can offer to Christian commitment. This distinctive invitation is especially important in societies in which the Christian narrative is not dominant and in which other clear invitations are being offered from narrow sectarian perspectives rather than from an inclusive church perspective. This argument emerges from my personal experience serving as canon theologian in three cathedrals within three different provinces of the Anglican Church: Bangor in Wales, St Johns in Newfoundland, and most recently Liverpool in England. I am, however, conscious that this personal experience may or may not be relevant to the Church of Ireland.

The argument also emerges from 20 years of patient and persistent research tested in the peer-reviewed literature. This paper invites the reader to enter that research world and to critique its potential relevance for a different political, social, and ecclesial context. The argument progresses in four steps. Step one introduces two key concepts: the science of cathedral studies and empirical theology. Step two draws on theology and ecclesiology to frame a vision. Step three draws on sociological theory to frame a perspective. Step four draws on empirical research to test that perspective.

## The science of cathedral studies

On the other side of the Irish Sea, Anglican cathedrals in England afford a fascinating part of the built environment and key locations within the heritage trail. They also constitute a puzzling feature of the religious landscape. At a time when the national census data for 2021 demonstrated that the ‘religious nones’ were on the trajectory to become the largest religious group in England, the position they already occupied in Wales, average weekly attendance in churches has continued to decline. Anglican cathedrals in England, however, seem to buck the trend. This distinctive emerging trajectory was obvious 20 years ago and that led me to

invest in a series of research projects that I styled ‘the science of cathedral studies’<sup>1</sup>. For me the science of cathedral studies is rooted in the field of empirical theology, a field that is informed by theories rooted in theology and ecclesiology and tested by methods shaped within the social sciences. I see the field of empirical theology to be consistent with the dominical invitation ‘to observe the sower’, to chart the different styles of soil and to count the yield.

As yet the science of cathedral studies languishes under the radar of central Church of England policy. While the Church of England seems keen on investing in new worshipping communities and in emerging resource churches, attracting new people to sing the Lord’s song in new ways, the *stabilitas* of the cathedral choral tradition seems to attract unlikely participants to Choral Evensong<sup>2</sup>, annual devotees to the Christmas carol services, and people searching or questing for faith to the Sunday Choral Eucharist. It is tempting to wonder whether these potentially pivotal pieces of Anglican ecclesiology may survive after the newly designed resource churches have disappeared, or whether the invisibility of cathedrals within current strategic diocesan planning will ensure their decay as well. To address this challenge I plan to summarise three contributions from the emerging science of cathedral studies: the first two are conceptual and the third is empirical.

### **What is distinctive about an Anglican cathedral?**

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, L. J. (Ed.) (2015). *Anglican cathedrals in modern life: The science of cathedral studies*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, S. (2021). *Lighten our darkness: Discovering and celebrating Choral Evensong*. London:

Darton, Longman, and Todd.

In my paper ‘Anglican cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches’<sup>3</sup>, I suggested that clear thinking about Anglican cathedrals needed to begin with three questions rooted in theology and ecclesiology. The first question is, ‘Why bother with Anglican identity?’ Within the broad landscape of Western Christianity, the Church of England emerged from the Reformation with a distinctive identity that has enabled it to embrace life-giving roots in both the Catholic tradition and the Reformed tradition. I see these twin roots giving Anglicanism a potential resilience and capacity to embrace diversity that is increasingly important in a religiously plural and largely secular society. Anglican identity remains committed to serving the wider community (feeding the five thousand) as well as to nurturing the faithful (investing in the 12 disciples). Given adequate resources cathedrals may lead the way in affirming Anglican identity.

The second question is, ‘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 afresh to Christian faith come ready equipped with the knowledge and the tools that are needed to interpret and to understand the Christian tradition. Within the ecclesial community, the newcomer is confronted by liturgy,

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, L. J. (2023). Anglican cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches for nurturing growth and sustainability. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 44(4), 464-474.

by scripture, by doctrine, and by ethical assumptions that all need unlocking. Given adequate resources cathedrals may lead the way in engaging with theology.

The third question is, ‘Why bother with bishops?’ The episcopacy remains at the heart of Anglican identity. Episcopacy is not an accident of church governance but the essence of church life, to which the geographical diocese is central. The dioceses themselves are divided into parishes. In licensing priests to serve in parishes, bishops do not abrogate responsibility for those parishes. In principle, if not always in reality, Anglican priests are not sole-traders, as may be the case for some other forms of church governance. Within an episcopal structure, ministry and mission are collaborative ventures. Given adequate resources cathedrals may lead the way in focusing episcopal identity.

These three initial questions (why bother with Anglican identity, why bother with theology, and why bother with bishops) leads to the fourth question, ‘Why bother with cathedrals?’ To address the fourth question I draw on the work of Gary Hall, sometime Dean of Washington National Cathedral, in his key paper published in *Anglican Theological Review*<sup>4</sup>. Here Hall argues 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. Given adequate resources cathedrals could be the central source of energy for an episcopally-led rejuvenated Anglican sense of ministry and mission. So there is my vision for ‘Anglican cathedrals as episcopal theological resource churches’.

### **What makes cathedrals different?**

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<sup>4</sup> Hall, G. (2014). The purpose of cathedrals. *Anglican Theological Review*, 96(4), 727-736.

The previous section has been rooted in theology and ecclesiology. It has been concerned with how things could be (or even *should* be) if we draw on our distinctive theological and ecclesiological roots. I now move territory to explore insights from sociological theory. How can we account for cathedrals growing while churches are declining? Here I am drawing on two sources. First, I turn to Edward Bailey's<sup>5</sup> concept of implicit religion. Bailey's interest is in accounting for the survival of religion (broadly conceived) in societies in which conventional religious practices are declining. The notion of implicit religion explores the softening of boundaries between the sacred and the secular. In his original research Bailey employed the insights of implicit religion to explore and to interpret what he was observing among those engaging with the parish church at various levels. The concept of implicit religion was introduced to the field of cathedral studies by Hammond in 2007 in a study of Siena Cathedral in Italy, and we have subsequently applied that concept to Anglican cathedrals in England in a series of studies.

Second, I turn to Judith Muskett's programmatic article 'Mobilising cathedral metaphors', and her subsequent carefully documented book, *Shop windows, flagships, common ground*<sup>6</sup>. In this book Muskett prioritises five metaphors for special attention. Each of these metaphors highlights distinctive ways in which cathedrals may soften boundaries between the secular and the sacred. Cathedrals are *shop windows* that arouse curiosity, enhance footfall, and draw people across the threshold. Cathedrals are *flagships* that indicate the serious intention of their operators to be effective in their mission. Cathedrals are *beacons* that shine out in the darkness, symbolise timeless stability, and serve as a secure reference

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<sup>5</sup> Bailey, E. I. (1997). *Implicit religion in contemporary society*. Kampen: Netherlands, Kok Pharos.

<sup>6</sup> Muskett, J. A. (2019). *Shop window, flagship, common ground: Metaphor in cathedral and congregation studies*. London: SCM Press.

point in times of uncertainty. Cathedrals are *magnets* that draw people in, generate tourism, bring economic prosperity, and keep people's attention. Cathedrals are *sacred space and common ground*, an image that perfectly captures Bailey's notion of softening boundaries between the secular and the sacred.

In an age when people are unfamiliar with churchgoing, it may take courage to cross the threshold into local churches. Often these days churches are shut and locked for most of the time, like chapels in a previous generation. The message is clear that these buildings are private property accessible to the keyholders and to those in-the-know. In recent years Anglican cathedrals have hosted a range of events and installations to draw people across the threshold. Three in particular have attracted considerable attention, some of which has been hostile: the Helter-Skelter in Norwich Cathedral, the Crazy Golf Bridges in Rochester Cathedral, and the Silent Disco in Canterbury Cathedral. In order to test the diversity and prevalence of innovative events, exhibitions and installations in cathedrals, we conducted a careful survey of the websites of all Anglican cathedrals in England<sup>7</sup>. Our data confirmed just how much this cultural shift has taken hold. In principle cathedrals possess the energy to draw people across the threshold, but what impact is that having on those who make the crossing?

### Mapping the impact of cathedrals

In the previous two sections I have been drawing on insights from theological, ecclesiological, and sociological theories. I now turn attention to the growing body of evidence from empirical studies rooted in these theories and drawing also on psychological

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<sup>7</sup> McKenna, U., Francis, L. J., & Stewart, F. (2022). Anglican cathedrals and implicit religion:

Softening the boundaries of sacred space through innovative events and installations. *HTS Theological Studies*, 78(4), article 7827, 1-11.



theories. Since there is not space here to do justice to the wide field of emerging empirical studies, I place the focus on one specific subset of studies concerning the distinctive voice of Anglican cathedrals at Christmas.

Bishop David Walker's pioneering research among people attending the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at Worcester Cathedral and at Lichfield Cathedral set research in this field moving in a new direction. Drawing on data provided by 1,151 participants, in a series of four papers Walker addressed different kinds of questions.

Walker's first question was rooted in psychographic segmentation theory drawing on Jung's model of psychological type as operationalised through the Francis Psychological Type Scales. Earlier studies of Anglican church congregations had drawn attention to the invisibility of some psychological types within these congregations, especially thinking types. The dominant preference for feeling within these congregations made it difficult for thinking types to fit in and led them to wish to get out. Research among participants at Fresh Expressions discovered that thinking types fared no better there. Walker styled his paper 'O come all ye thinking types'<sup>8</sup>: cathedral carol services were reaching psychological types other expressions of church were failing to reach. Walker's findings were subsequently confirmed by similar studies conducted in Bangor Cathedral and in Liverpool Cathedral<sup>9</sup>.

Walker's second question was also rooted in psychological theory, this time drawing on religious orientation theory, distinguishing among intrinsic, extrinsic, and quest

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<sup>8</sup> Walker, D. S. (2012). O come all ye thinking types: The wider appeal of the cathedral carol service.

*Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 15(10), 987-995.

<sup>9</sup> Francis, L. J., Jones, S. H., & McKenna, U. (2021). The science of congregation studies and psychometric segmentation: O come all ye thinking types? *HTS Theological Studies*, 77(4), article 6747, 1-10.

orientations as operationalised by the New Indices of Religious Orientation. The important distinction here is between people motivated by the intrinsic orientation and people motivated by the quest orientation. Walker found more evidence for the quest orientation among participants at the carol service. Subsequently, we found that this was also true for the regular Sunday morning congregation at Southwark Cathedral<sup>10</sup>.

Walker's third question was rooted in his own developing analysis of the different ways in which people may express their belonging to God through the Anglican Church<sup>11</sup>, distinguishing among belonging through activities (like weekly services), events (like carol services), place (like a specific church), and people (like knowing some of the regulars). Walker's appreciation of the sense of belonging through place and events was subsequently tested on data from participants at the Christmas Eve carol service in Liverpool Cathedral. The majority of these people were not casual visitors but committed returnees year-on-year 'to their cathedral'.

Building on David Walker's pioneering research among people attending carol services in Worcester Cathedral and Lichfield Cathedral, in 2019 Liverpool Cathedral conducted surveys at the distinctive Holly Bough Service on the evening of the Fourth Sunday of Advent and at the two afternoon carol services on Christmas Eve. Data was gathered from 564 participants at the Holly Bough Service and from 1,234 participants at the

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<sup>10</sup> Francis, L. J., & Lankshear, D. W. (2021). Psychological type, temperament theory, and religious motivation: Exploring the distinctive congregational profile of Southwark Cathedral. In L. J. Francis & D. W. Lankshear (Eds.), *The science of congregation studies: Searching for signs of growth* (pp. 329-348). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, D. S. (2017). *God's believers: How people engage with God today and how the church can help*. Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship.

Christmas Eve carol services. These surveys were designed to replicate some of Walker's work and also to extend that work in two new directions.

The first new direction taken by the Liverpool surveys concerned exploring the perceived impact of the services on the spiritual wellbeing of those who attended. For this perspective we took the relational model of spiritual wellbeing refined by John Fisher. Fisher argues that spiritual wellbeing is reflected in the way in which people evaluate their relations in four domains: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental. In the Christmas Eve survey 67% of participants reflected that attending the service had helped them to feel better about themselves; 62% that it had helped them to feel better about their relationships with other people; 57% that it had helped them to feel better about their relationship with the world; and 54% that it had helped them to feel better about their relationship with God<sup>12</sup>. The weakness with this measure is precisely that it is tapping self-assessed or *perceived* impact.

Reflecting further on the insights that could be drawn from the survey data on self-assessed or perceived impact on spiritual wellbeing, we reanalysed the data to assess the impact of the experience on participants who self-identified as not believing in God<sup>13</sup>. Then we examined the differences between atheists and agnostics, and between casual attendees and those who 'belonged' to the cathedral in the sense of coming every year. Using multiple

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, L. J., Jones, S. H., McKenna, U., Pike, N., & Williams, E. (2021). Belonging through events? Exploring the demographic profile, motivations, and experiences of those attending the afternoon Carol Services on Christmas Eve at Liverpool Cathedral. *Religions*, 12(90), 1-16.

<sup>13</sup> Francis, L. J., McKenna, U., & Stewart, F. (2024). Implicit religion, Anglican cathedrals, and spiritual wellbeing: The impact of carol services. *HTS Theological Studies*, 80(1), article 9049, 1-9.

regression to control for age, sex, and personality, the data demonstrated greater impact on agnostics compared with atheists, and greater impact on ‘belongers’ compared with casual attendees.

The second new direction taken by the Liverpool survey was more ambitious and concerned assessing the change in psychological wellbeing that occurred before and after the service. To achieve this aim the survey was designed in two parts. Participants were invited to complete part one while waiting for the service to begin. Then they were invited to complete the shorter second part during an organ improvisation on Christmas melodies immediately before the blessing and dismissal. Both parts of the survey included the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. The data demonstrated both for the Holly Bough Service and for the Christmas Eve carol services a significantly higher score on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire at time two compared with time one. This finding indicates that attendance at the service had exerted a positive impact on psychological health and wellbeing<sup>14</sup>.

So far we have reviewed the impact of carols services, attention is now turned to the impact of a pre-Christmas *son et lumiere*. During December 2022, 2023, and 2024 Liverpool Cathedral hosted the Luxmuralis installation *The light before Christmas*. Each year has a distinctive theme: The angels are coming in 2022, The manger in 2023, and Starlight in 2024. Each year a survey was conducted by email among people who had purchased online tickets. From the 2022 survey, we focused attention on the qualitative responses of participants who

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<sup>14</sup> Francis, L. J., Jones, S. H., & McKenna, U. (2021). The contribution of cathedrals to psychological health and wellbeing: Assessing the impact of Cathedral carol services. *HTS Theological Studies*, 77(4), article 6820, 1-8.

never attended church services<sup>15</sup>. Two main themes emerged from this analysis. The first theme concerned a sense of inclusion for the non-religious, non-Christian participant: one wrote ‘I am not particularly a religious person, as I do not attend church services. If I am struggling with anything I like to visit to light a candle. It helps me a lot.’ The second theme concerned a sense of appreciation: one wrote ‘I had the best experience ever as I have been going through a difficult time alone and I always have to stay strong for my boys.’

From the 2023 *son et lumiere* survey, we focused attention on the aspect of the quantitative survey that asked participants to assess the impact of the installation on how they valued the religious significance of Christmas<sup>16</sup>. They were invited to rate a set of items on a five-point scale: much less (1), less (2), same (3), more (4), or much more (5). The two specific items on which we focused were: attending church on Christmas Eve/Day, and attending a carol service in the Cathedral. The data showed that 18% thought they were more likely to attend a service on Christmas Eve/Day and 39% thought they were more likely to attend a carol service. We set alongside these data the figures for attendances at the Christmas Eve carol services and at the Christmas Eve/Day services from 2007 to 2023. Taking 2019 as the last point of comparison before Covid, the 4,749 attendance at the Christmas Eve carol services in 2023 was a 21% uplift on 2019; the 1,232 attendance at Midnight Mass was a 73% uplift; and the 910 attendance at the Christmas Day Choral Eucharist was a 26% uplift. Reflecting on the connection between these two sets of data, one drawn from participants at

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<sup>15</sup> McKenna, U., Francis, L. J., Village, A., & Stewart, F. (2024). Exploring the responses non-churchgoers to a cathedral pre-Christmas *son et lumiere*. *HTS Theological Studies*, 80(1), article 9347, 1-10.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, L. J. (2024). Evaluating the missional impact of an Advent *son et lumiere* in Liverpool Cathedral. *Theology*, 127(3), 169-178.

the *son et lumiere* and the other from the cathedral attendance register, we properly cautioned that they cannot be causally linked, but invited the reader to ponder the coincidence. What is needed now to test this linkage is a focused survey at the 2025 Christmas services.

The 2024 *son et lumiere* survey was designed to test and to expand the findings from the 2023 survey. The 2024 survey contained four items in place of the two used in the 2023 survey. Two items were designed to test the impact of the *son et lumiere* on intention to attend Christmas services in the cathedral and two further items were designed to test the impact on intention to attend Christmas services in their local church. In response to this survey, 28% reported that the experience had increased their intention to attend a carol service in the cathedral and 11% to attend the cathedral on Christmas Eve/Day. At the same time 21% reported that the experience had increased their intention to attend a carol service in their local church, and 19% to attend a Christmas service in their local church. These data clearly support the view that innovative installations, events, and exhibitions within the Cathedral may carry beneficial impact more widely throughout the diocese. What is needed now is a diocesan-wide survey designed to test this specific thesis.