Creating Citizens: The Institutional Character of Cathedrals

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This is the third in a series of reflections about Anglican cathedrals written by those of us who have been given custodianship of these great buildings: Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, Washington National Cathedral, and Salisbury Cathedral. Jane Shaw and Gary Hall have already described, from their context in the United States, how cathedrals across the whole Anglican Communion are icons of visible Christianity and “mother churches” within our dioceses. In the West, where churchgoing as a routine habit is on the decline—the Church of England lost a million regular attenders in the decade of the 1990s—our cathedrals are seen as beacons of confident, open Christianity making a difference through exceptional worship and outreach. What is happening within these buildings, whether small, middling, or large, is an intriguing phenomenon of contemporary Christianity. Regardless of size, they stand large on our landscapes, whether geographical or social, urban or rural.

All of our Anglican cathedrals draw on the legacy of ancient foundations. Some, such as Salisbury Cathedral, have capitular foundations which go back over a thousand years, with “new” buildings that predate the dissolution of the monasteries, Reformation zeal, the transforming worldview of the Enlightenment, and the collapse of empires. Some have libraries that contain manuscripts as early as Anglo Saxon. For all of us life tends to be measured in decades rather than weeks. Even twentieth-century cathedrals draw on those same ancient rhythms and habits of worship, shared common life, hospitality, outreach, education, and learning. In South Sudan, where civil society is as fragile as anywhere on the Anglican map, new dioceses

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enthusiastically build themselves a cathedral, many with basic materials of corrugated iron and brick, and the bishop then appoints a dean and canons who build the diocese with him in that tradition of well-ordered liturgy and the proclamation of the Word of God.

Here in the Provinces of Canterbury and York, the Church of England has recently started offering its bishops and deans a newly created form of professional training. The body that won the contract for providing this training is a business school, so most current episcopal and decanal leaders will have joined MBA students in Cambridge for intensive courses where the skill sets offered are not theological but organizational and managerial.

You can understand the justification for this investment of the church’s resources. Deans are responsible for significant and complex enterprises involving heritage buildings and historic environments, commercial operations and schools alongside being also priests and guardians of the spiritualities of these communities of prayer. If things go wrong in a cathedral it tends to make national headlines. In recent memory, one English cathedral has had to be rescued from bankruptcy, another from a crisis brought on by the “Occupy” movement, and another from the scandal of historic child abuse by one of its leading volunteers. All manage the more routine risks of reputation and finance, with a severe breakdown of relationships always the most painful of threats. In the face of such responsibilities deans could legitimately ask what provision the church makes for equipping them for the task. Hence most of the English deans have found themselves students of accountancy skills, project management, marketing, and other forms of strategic leadership in a mini MBA program.

In the two previous articles describing the experience of the modern Anglican cathedral, my fellow deans Jane Shaw and Gary Hall gave abundant evidence of the popularity of cathedral life. From being narrowly and exclusively the “seat of the bishop” they have become a trusted public space in which the whole community gathers, extending a truly Christ-like model of the church as a safe space in which people of all faiths or none meet to do risky or difficult things. These are not primarily structures for congregational existence, though multiple congregations thrive within them. Cathedrals belong to the entire community and through their websites make global connections. Their beauty and the history of their foundations inspire. They have a reputation for being able to both articulate and move
forward a community’s needs and desires. They do not promote membership but rather offer the simplicity and profundity of prayer.

One of the most fascinating aspects of contemporary cathedrals is that they manage to be both a most institutional and popular expression of religion in a time when institutions are by and large unpopular. Whatever the declining figures for religious affiliation, we know that the majority of ordinary people still identify with the impulse of spirituality and their own appetite to pray. More than just being an offer to individuals who cross their threshold, cathedrals are popular as places where our collective life is expressed and challenged: welcoming soldiers returning from the theater of war; accompanying thousands of school children who are about to change schools; helping those with learning disabilities to make Evensong from the Book of Common Prayer alive for them; exhibiting artwork by prisoners; enabling young people to envision and create systems of restorative justice. The list of innovative ways cathedrals attempt to connect human life with the divine and the gospel message of liberty and redemption is endless.

Of course they are churches, houses where the sacraments are offered. In the last ten years we have introduced a new baptismal font into Salisbury Cathedral. For reasons lost in the mists of long gone memory, the original font had been removed more than a century ago. An imported font in a side chapel was occasionally deployed but more often than not we had been baptizing new Christians out of the marmalade pan belonging to the bishop’s wife. After much thought and consultation and not a little resistance, we commissioned a new installation from the water sculptor William Pye. The result is both an impressive work of art and a proclamation of our baptismal theology, which runs as a dominant thread through all we believe and do. It is an example of how cathedrals are places where the sacraments are offered, where the community meets, and where organizational projects and processes are managed.

Yet cathedrals also operate as institutions, and it is institutions that help make citizens. In their institutional character cathedrals operate in very particular ways.

- They hand on beliefs. It makes an enormous impact on me that I exercise my ministerial priesthood and leadership in the context that I described at the beginning, passing beliefs from one generation to another as it has been done for over a
thousand years. The priorities of hospitality, learning, community, and worship were as vivid for Bishop Osmund in the eleventh century as they are in our contemporary production of strategic plans and budgeting priorities. We are custodians of such manifestations of the divine life and we hand it on.

- Institutions also create *stabilitas* as they reinforce the habits and behaviors of a society hoping that it might hold that society together, and that people might not kill each other. Institutions like cathedrals, schools, universities, and museums should owe no political or tribal allegiance. Their cause is a stable civic society out of which everyone can benefit, but especially those whose voice and concerns are less valued. We have already recognized how cathedrals, like other institutional expressions—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum—are embodiments of our collective life. What are our shared symbols and shared story? That is not the story of a single building but of how a community—local, regional, national, and international—understands and interprets what is significant; a cathedral would add that faith is an essential part of that well-lived life.

- As a way of communicating that interpretation, cathedrals create ceremonial expressions of that wider story. I recently took part in a cross-cultural welcoming ceremony that marked the start and finish of the Salisbury International Arts Festival. Different symbols, gestures, songs, and expressions of welcome were woven together to create a powerful community event. Our message was the ancient biblical theme of welcoming the stranger, but in a context within which all members of the local community could participate and call their own.

- Another aspect of that institutional myth-making is how we memorialize. Cathedrals are particularly adept at offering memorials both as part of the fabric and within activities such as programs of outreach. We recognize how important the dead are to us. We walk gently on the dust of our ancestors. We weave the recollection of the saints into our prayers. We honor those who have championed our values and our freedoms. We respond swiftly when death offends us, such as the homophobic attacks in Orlando, or the murder, motivated by
Cathedrals are in their nature religious institutions, but they have broad social relevance: handing on beliefs, creating *stabilitas*, embodying collective meaning through a shared story, ceremonial expression, and public memorialization.

The way cathedrals operate is also distinctly institutional. Our most comfortable way of behaving exhibits a degree of formality. It is difficult to make entirely impromptu proceedings work well against the background of majestic architecture. Cathedrals tend to encourage grand dramas and large perspectives. Anglican liturgy is used to moving between the transcendence and the immanence of God, but those who feel more comfortable with the former often find themselves in cathedral worship. It is a big stage with many events that require formal dress, be they liturgical vestments or the uniforms which accompany recognizable social roles such as the military or law officers. Such formalities convey degrees of hierarchy and a sense of the Establishment, though it has to be remembered that such expressions of power are put in their place by the acknowledgment of the authority and glory of God. They speak of a confident Christianity at a time when much of the church is anxious. That confidence allows cathedrals to see the contemporary as intrinsically provisional in societies that are tempted to view progress as their utopia and the immediate as everything there is.

So here we have a fascinating paradox. Cathedrals, the most institutional expression of Anglican life, operate in many ways as church at its most counter-cultural. Like all Christian endeavor, the vocation of cathedrals is to build the kingdom of God, though they do it through more institutional means than most. They create strategies, manage structures and systems, develop skills and styles which enable them to keep alive the rumor of God, whether in the local and regional communities or in the diocese and beyond.

At its best a cathedral can, like other institutions, cope with the tensions of a society, measuring those tensions by the rule and light of Christ. It can challenge abusive power or collusive mindsets and by doing so address a broken society in its hurts and failings. The task is to name social dissonances between values and behavior, to offer different perspectives which show that a life well lived and a well-lived xenophobic hatred, of a British Member of Parliament, or a tragic natural disaster.
society both need the resources of faith. Many cathedrals exercise this institutional vocation within limited means, but creativity is often at its very best when funds are in short supply.

All institutions have their own moral, social, and spiritual ecology and are capable of behaving badly. They can inhabit fear, become risk-averse or self-centered or cowardly. Like any other institutional body cathedrals are capable of becoming centers of hubris and of losing their integrity and effectiveness. But at their very best they are on the cutting edge of Christ’s mission because paradoxically they are the least “churchy” of church bodies.

The Anglican household is made up of many inspirational institutions. We underestimate both their exceptional and missional quality because we are nervous about expressions of human life that offer a collective view of God’s redemptive grace. Yet our collective life has its own soteriology, and cathedrals constantly remind us how salvation works at all levels and not just in the heart and mind of the individual. It is their institutional quality that proclaims the scale of God’s providential action reaching all. It opens our imagination to the way God shares our life within our own landscape and context and then transforms it. It is unafraid of a plural and untidy world and recognizes that God speaks in plural voices to people who live wholly within that untidiness.

Institutional religion is able to encourage our imagination in such a way that it enables us to question cultural norms. The very institutional nature of cathedrals means they are able to offer the wideness of the way of Christ when the church risks losing the inclusive sense of God’s mercy.

All of this means that the vocation of being a dean has to include being a bold institutional leader. The caricature of a dean that has found its way into English literature portrays not so much a pastorally-minded minister of the gospel as an archetypally driven creature. Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Chronicles* portrayed a cathedral close full of ecclesiastical personalities intent on dividing and ruling. William Golding’s *The Spire* laid bare the dark side of priestly passion and determination. Susan Howatch, Joanna Trollope, and Catherine Fox have more recently followed with similar storylines based on the tensions of institutional power mixed with claims of spiritual forces and mixed motives. Such fiction concentrates on the charismatic influence and prestige of the dean, but also influences the deeper question of
what is happening to the calling to be a dean in today’s social and ecclesiastical context.

The Anglican Communion has been blessed with some exemplary models in recent years, Jane Shaw and Gary Hall included. What these models share in common is a priestly identity that enlarges the spiritual impact of their institutions. They are true guardians of the spiritualities of their cathedrals and dioceses. They exercise their legal roles of jurisdiction, trusteeship, and governance with great care and wisdom. They are recognized by CEOs as the kind of leaders who build effective and long-lasting organizations. Deans are priests, pastors, teachers, and chairs of trustee bodies, and to all intents and purposes they are themselves chief executive officers. Yet they are also custodians of a visible symbol of confident Christianity and thereby are institutional creatures. Neil MacGregor, one time director of both the National Gallery and the British Museum, says that the role of a director of a museum is to “articulate the mythology out of which the institution lives.” Likewise deans have to reinforce the institutional story of their cathedral. As such, they do not seek primarily to formulate and protect church dogma; rather, they are in the business of making worthy citizens who will build the kingdom of God in whatever place they find themselves. They are stewards of symbolic power and disruptive truths that expose the dissonances of society and, having exposed them, to bring healing.