



A Hunger to be More Serious: The Mission of Cathedrals Today

by Michael Sadgrove

Over the past two decades, the ministry of British cathedrals have made an increasingly significant and distinctive contribution to the overall mission of the Church. Not only are visitors increasing; but attendance at Sunday and weekday worship is at an all-time high, with the growth of a regular and stable worshipping community. They are also providing hospitality to pilgrims, and those who come to celebrate great cultural events. More recently, there has been a rediscovery of the Minsters as centres of mission and learning. Here, Michael Sadgrove draws on his experience at Sheffield Cathedral, and discusses how cathedrals can contribute creatively to the overall mission of the Church, as centres of learning, hospitality and evangelism.

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*A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious...*

Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" describes the experience of entering an old church, savouring its atmosphere, pondering the meaning of sacred space. But Larkin's visitor is not a "churchgoer" who attends services. He is an intrigued outsider, who senses rather than knows that he is in a place invested with deep significance, but by others, not himself. To him, it is more than a little strange. What will become of churches when no-one is left to worship in them? Perhaps a few cathedrals will be kept "chronically on show" he suggests. Otherwise, these atmospheric but decaying places will increasingly induce nostalgia for a lost religious age. Meanwhile, "the hunger to be more serious" gnaws away inside us.

A Challenge

Nowadays cathedrals are visited as never before. They are part of

Britain's heritage trail. Millions cross their thresholds each year, enticed by a love of architecture, art and a feeling for history, or simply because they are sights that everyone must "do". There is a slogan in the cathedral world about "turning visitors into pilgrims". The distinction, I suppose, is that visitors come to *look* while pilgrims *participate*. It is difficult to distinguish sometimes. To "look" and to "see" are ancient metaphors of discerning truth. Perhaps the very act of entering a church or cathedral is already an act of pilgrimage, conscious or unconscious. And visitors or pilgrims, they are all *guests*. Hospitality is a basic Christian duty.

How to respond to this challenge is high on the agenda of cathedrals, and not only those everyone thinks of when "the cathedrals of England" are mentioned. Even a small suburban cathedral like Sheffield is visited by 50,000 people annually, and that presents a unique evangelistic opportunity. The task is both one of *welcome* and *imaginative interpretation*: helping people understand why the building is

there and what it represents. Churches have a sacramental quality. They stand for a God who is both intimate with his world and transcends it; a God who both empties himself for us and raises us to new possibilities of living, loving and self-giving. The evangelistic aim is to help visitors recognise in themselves that "hunger to be more serious", their quest for meaning and lifelong pilgrimage, their longing for God.

Of course, being "cathedral" is not primarily about architecture, art or music. What defines "cathedral" is that it is the seat of the bishop, housing his *cathedra* or chair. Its primary task is to promote his ministry of teaching, pastoral care, sacramental ministry and evangelism in his diocese. Cathedrals began life as churches where the bishop installed his *familia* or household: senior clergy with whom he could pray and consult as he engaged in mission in the diocese. So a cathedral is a mother church, or as I prefer to say, parish church to its diocese. The Cathedrals Measure, which will become law later this year, will

bring far-reaching changes in the way cathedrals are governed, but the most important will be to emphasise their core role as the bishop's church.

Tradition and Experiment

As public and visible “shop windows” of the church, cathedrals have a dual function. They hold the tradition, particularly through the rhythm of daily prayer and the singing of the choral office. You sometimes hear the wry comment that Anglican cathedrals are the only places left where you can count on finding mainstream Church of England worship. But they are also places of creative experiment: in R.S. Thomas's phrase (though he wasn't writing about cathedrals) “laboratories of the spirit”. There is huge variety in the way they embody this for they are marvellously inventive places. But perhaps the lesser-known cathedrals at the heart of some of our greatest cities such as Birmingham, Newcastle, Manchester and Sheffield are particularly privileged in this respect. Unencumbered by the responsibility of maintaining large buildings, these smaller foundations are especially free to explore how cathedrals can more imaginatively fulfil their role in an urban post-modern society.

Sheffield Cathedral's mission statement affirms that it is

- the seat of the Bishop
- a focus for the life of the Diocese of Sheffield
- an ancient part of the city's heritage
- a place of ceremony, pilgrimage, sanctuary and meeting

That encompasses a wide range of involvement. The city and diocese look to the cathedral and its forecourt, a significant public arena in its own right, as a ceremonial space for great church and civic occasions. The overused word excellence is appropriate here: it matters that things are done well, and meanings communicated, when people are grieving the death of Princess Diana or the victims at

Hillsborough, or celebrating the arrival of a new bishop. Worship is one of the best tools of evangelism we have. Cathedrals invest so heavily in this because there is a “converting” quality to liturgy when words, silence, music, ritual actions and architecture combine to create a theatre of the soul that speaks of the holiness and love of God.

Partnerships and Resources

To be “cathedral” means sharing our resources with the churches of the city and diocese. Music, liturgy and spirituality are obvious areas of skill. Education is another, for cathedrals have always been places where theology is (or ought to be) done. In Sheffield, our urban setting suggests a social or “applied” emphasis on questions like what God is doing in industry and commerce, how the cathedral can develop partnerships that will contribute to urban regeneration, and how the poor call us to act in ways that are more inclusive and just. The Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects embody *praxis* in a ministry of active care for the homeless and marginalised. In this way the cathedral focuses the attention of the wider community on needs that are always with us, and provides a pool of experience to help churches develop their own programmes of care for those in need.

None of this would be possible without a committed common life, lived out at the “centre”. It is out of the *koinonia* of Sunday and weekday worship, the involvement of dedicated congregation, volunteers and staff, and collaboration between lay people and ordained that the mission of the Cathedral takes shape. The Cathedral *is* the building. But it is also the people for whom it is “their” place. Cathedrals are often tempted to grandiose. At Sheffield, our spire does not dominate the skyline of the city, but modestly adds its own accent to it. Cathedrals exist to serve. That is their privilege and opportunity.