

The Purpose of Cathedrals

GARY HALL*

I said, "The truth is, cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are."
—Raymond Carver, "Cathedral"¹

What is the purpose of a cathedral? Is it just another big church, or does it have a particular vocation in the economy of Christian communities? In Raymond Carver's often-anthologized 1983 short story "Cathedral," two men—one of them blind—sit in a living room talking when a late-night documentary about cathedrals comes on television. The narrator tries to describe a cathedral to the blind man, but he gradually realizes that, try as he might, he cannot verbally depict the spatial reality of a medieval edifice:

I wasn't getting through to him, I could see that. But he waited for me to go on just the same. He nodded, like he was trying to encourage me. I tried to think what else to say. "They're really big," I said. "They're massive. They're built of stone. Marble, too, sometimes. In those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life. You could tell this from their cathedral-building. I'm sorry," I said, "but it looks like that's the best I can do for you. I'm just no good at it."²

As the story progresses, the narrator and the blind man join hands and draw a cathedral together. The narrator puts in windows, arches, flying buttresses, and great doors. When they finish, the blind man

* Gary Hall is Dean of Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., and has served parishes in California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. He has taught Anglican theology and polity at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont, and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, which he also served as Dean and President.

¹ Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," in Raymond Carver, *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 372.

² Carver, "Cathedral," 371–372.

runs his fingers across the drawing and appears to understand: “Sure. You got it, bub, I can tell. You didn’t think you could. But you can, can’t you? You’re cooking with gas now.”³

Carver’s story has been widely distributed, in part because it represents the way one person touches another and so can suggest to him an ineffable physical reality. But what about a missional reality? What are cathedrals for? As the narrator says, “Cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me.” They’re relegated to the “olden days” when “God was an important part of everyone’s life.”

What, in the twenty-first century, is the point of a cathedral? In a provocative 2013 *ATR* article Jane Shaw began a discussion of contemporary cathedral missional possibilities with an examination of the cultural and demographic trends driving a dramatic increase over the past several decades in cathedral attendance in the United Kingdom. Citing the beauty, anonymity, and civic engagement offered by cathedrals, Dean Shaw concluded with this observation:

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.⁴

Cathedrals do have a potential for reaching constituencies not normally served by parish churches. Their spaces, their programs, their function as community gathering places can draw a range of people (devotees of the arts, skeptics, the spiritual but not religious, those who doubt the credibility of the institutional church, to name a few) who would never consider going to a local parish. Cathedrals are uniquely positioned to engage the world in a way no other church community can.

The conclusions of Dean Shaw’s article suggest a logical next stage of the cathedral conversation. Now that we have ascertained their great potential, can we pose some initial, more foundational questions? Specifically: what are cathedrals for?

³ Carver, “Cathedral,” 374.

⁴ Jane Shaw, “The Potential of Cathedrals,” *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no.1 (Winter 2013): 146.

Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" frames two dilemmas for those of us seeking to understand cathedral ministry in the twenty-first century. The story begs the question of how to define a cathedral: it tacitly equates "cathedral" with "big Gothic church." Cathedrals can be big physically. In some cases they boast large membership and attendance.

Space questions aside, there is a lot to say about big churches and the way they can tend to flourish in the current moment. Indeed, many of the conclusions of *Spiritual Capital* (the Theos/Grubb Institute 2012 study of British cathedrals from which Shaw draws much of her data)⁵ could be said to apply to high membership churches whether they are cathedrals or not. We seem to have a confusion of terms. In the U.S. and Canada one can name both very large parish churches and small to middling cathedral churches. I have served both large parishes and now a cathedral church, so I am aware that many of the characteristics named in *Spiritual Capital* and Dean Shaw's essay obtain for churches of a certain size, no matter their ecclesiastical designation.

Moreover, Carver's tale nicely epitomizes the misalignment between the contemporary church and popular culture. ("In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life.") According to recent studies,⁶ God may still be a part of everyone's life, but for increasing numbers of people the institutional church no longer is. So the role of (cathedral) churches relative to a secular and spiritual-but-not-religious public becomes increasingly problematic. If a cathedral gets its name from the bishop's chair (*cathedra*), and if fewer and fewer people know what a *cathedra* (not even to say what a bishop) is, how do cathedral churches embody and enact a ministry we would call apostolic?

The question before us might best be framed this way: what, specifically, are *cathedral* churches for? What is uniquely episcopal about them? What are the qualities of apostolic ministry they exist to serve, and how might they carry them forward in their own particular way?

Here, then, is the crux of my argument: because cathedrals are by definition bishops' churches, their ministries should exemplify the

⁵ *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (London: Theos/The Grubb Institute, 2012).

⁶ See, for example, "Religion Among the Millennials," *Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project*, February 2010.

salient characteristics of a bishop's ministry. For the purposes of this essay, I will use a narrow definition of *cathedral* and apply the term to a church that functions primarily as the location of a bishop's ministry. And because the *ATR* primarily serves the Anglican communities in the United States and Canada, let's confine the discussion to bishops as understood in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.

Anglican teaching characteristically starts with a consideration of liturgical texts (*lex orandi, lex credendi*—"the law of prayer is the law of belief"). In this case, the ordinals of our two churches⁷ tell us what we usefully need to know about how bishops function. Specifically, the examination sections of both rites lay out the principal aspects of episcopal ministry. That ministry is *apostolic* ("called to be one with the apostles"), it is *prophetic* ("proclaiming Christ's resurrection and interpreting the Gospel"), it is *theological* ("called to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church"), it is *prayerful* ("to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments"), and it is *pastoral* ("to be in all things a faithful pastor and a wholesome example for the entire flock of Christ"). Both ordinals agree that the ministry of a bishop is also oriented toward *justice* ("Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?") and is *empowering* (asking the new bishop to "encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries").

So here we have a series of adjectives that our churches use to describe bishops and their ministries: *apostolic, prophetic, theological, prayerful, pastoral, just, empowering*. As we reflect on the purpose of cathedrals in the next century, these adjectives could well serve as the skeleton of a mission statement for a cathedral church. Let's take each adjective in turn.

A cathedral, like the bishop it seats, must be *apostolic*. The word "apostolic" has become a loaded word. Those who call themselves "traditionalists" have used the term in recent years to denote what they would call faithfulness to received tradition. But the Greek root of the word recalls us to its basic meaning. "Apostolic" is the English,

⁷ "The Ordination of a Bishop," *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 511–523; "The Ordination of a Bishop," *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 632–641.

adjectival form of the Greek verb *apostello*: to send. So an apostolic church is necessarily a church that is sent. It is a church on a mission.

There is already a robust contemporary discussion of missional theology,⁸ and it applies to cathedral churches as well as to other ecclesiastical communities. If the church is primarily called to enact God's mission (and not, say, its own ecclesiastical agenda), then it must see itself less as an institution and more of a movement. Because they are the seats of episcopal authority and ministry, cathedrals have tended to describe themselves more in institutional and less in missional language. (Like many church organizations, they describe what they are but not what they do.) But if the bishop whose chair they house is defined more as a missionary and less as a wielder of institutional authority, the cathedral churches themselves will need to redefine their self-understanding as well.

To some this institution/mission tension will seem like a distinction without a difference. The word "apostolic" recalls us to a resolution of that tension. If cathedrals embody a ministry that is "sent," then the next question inevitably arises: to whom are they sent? Rather than understanding a cathedral primarily as a church housing an ecclesiastical power structure, we can begin to redefine it as a church oriented to the world. The cathedral is preeminently the chief mission church of its bishop and diocese. It is therefore a public church, oriented to proclaiming the gospel in the public square. It is less a place where the councils of the church gather and more a center for bringing the kerygma to bear on issues of shared, public concern.

The open, missional nature of a cathedral suggests our next adjective from the ordinal. A cathedral is called to a ministry that is *prophetic*. If so-called traditionalists have hijacked the term "apostolic," the word "prophetic" has similarly been claimed by those who self-identify as progressives. In current church parlance, the term "prophetic" is often defined in the tired phrase, "speaking truth to power." Noam Chomsky has aptly criticized the fallacy of such an errand: "First of all, you don't have to speak truth to power, because they know it already. And secondly, you don't speak truth to anybody, that's too

⁸ See, for example, David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989); Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

arrogant. What you do is join with people and try to find the truth, so you listen to them and tell them what you think and so on, and you try to encourage people to think for themselves.”⁹

Chomsky’s critique of the truth/power standoff suggests that cathedrals might lead the church in a new way of living out our ordinals’ charge of “proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel.” We associate the prophetic with the declamatory. But what if, following Chomsky’s lead, we were to understand prophecy as principally relational and dialogical? The central piece of furniture in a cathedral church is not the pulpit. It is the bishop’s chair. You speak *at* someone from a pulpit. You speak *with* someone from a chair.

When we locate ourselves in pulpits, we do a much better job of telling people what we think than of inviting them into a conversation. Nearly forty years after the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*’s articulation of the Baptismal Covenant, our churches still enact the Ministry of the Word as if it were a lecture rather than a dialogue. Cathedrals can lead a renewed understanding and appreciation of the missional agency conferred at baptism by making liturgical invitations for the people to give voice to proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the gospel themselves. So doing means the sermon would give way to a new, mutual form of expression. This new thing would be consonant with Chomsky’s advice that we “join with people and try to find the truth.”

Because many cathedrals offer the Daily Office and weekday celebrations of the Eucharist as their round of services, most observers would characterize cathedrals, of their nature, as *prayerful*. In many ways cathedrals in the United States and Canada have followed their English models in holding up Morning and Evening Prayer and the daily Eucharist as the sole necessary forms of cathedral prayer life. We should remember, though, that English cathedrals developed their prayer schedules in a particular context. Many of them were monastic foundations before the Reformation, and, as part of Cranmer’s Benedictine revision of the medieval prayer books, the English rubrics in the *Book of Common Prayer* require that Church of England clerics say the Daily Office.

As deeply grounded as those Prayer Book offices are in English spirituality and church life, the changing contexts of cathedral

⁹ “Noam Chomsky: Speaking of Truth and Power,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, June 3, 2010; <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1001/intrvw.htm>.

ministries in Canada and the United States suggest we ask what twenty-first-century prayer practices might look like in our current cultural settings. Beyond their warrant “to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments,” cathedrals might seek to investigate and develop a wider range of prayer practices that would engage a broader range of participants than our decidedly lexically-oriented Daily Office does. Rather than perpetuate a practice so rooted in a different cultural context, our cathedrals can explore and offer meditative, somatic, and non-cognitive ways of praying, either from within the Christian tradition or borrowed and adapted from other faith traditions.

The question of interfaith practice suggests the *theological* aspect of cathedral life. Bishops are charged “to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church.” There are many ways that the Anglican tradition has conceived of cathedrals as analogous to theological colleges or seminaries: they both have deans, faculties/canons, and a community liturgical life. But a missional and apostolic understanding of the unique role of cathedrals in their settings raises the prospect of some differentiation here—that cathedrals might be less centers of clerical formation than expansive communities of discourse. Cathedrals can be places for the church and the world to do theological reflection on real world problems and events. Given their “public church” identification, they should lead our shared conversation on the intersection of faith and public life.

To say “faith and public life” is not the same as to say “faith and politics.” Because the last decades have witnessed political activism from Christians across the entire spectrum of belief, it is natural to think of the church’s role in public life as one of activism, serving primarily as an interest or pressure group. But for a cathedral to be theological in its engagement of public questions means that it might more authentically raise intellectually serious questions about the role of the church (indeed, of the entire faith community) in the development of public policy.

To engage faith and public policy suggests that we will have to resolve a tension deeply embedded in Anglican polity. In the United States and Canada we are at once the inheritors of an established church tradition and participants in democracies separating church and state. Following Hooker, Anglicanism understands the church as a necessary participant in a society’s articulating and achieving “commonwealth” or the common good. But since our context does not

privilege one faith tradition over another, we have developed a split personality when speaking of questions of faith and public life. Either we pretend to speak as the imperious religious voice of the culture, or we take up a position on one side of an issue.

Might there be a new way for cathedrals to lead the church in addressing questions of the common good, of defining a role for the church in questions of public policy? In this new posture, the church would be neither an Erastian “state at prayer” nor a single-issue pressure group. In a mode derived from community organizing, we would come to the table (along with the government, business, and non-profit sectors) as participants in a conversation designed to envision and enact the common good. Cathedrals can enact their theological mission even as they engage in work that might seem at the outset entirely secular.

The relentlessly public nature of a cathedral’s mission particularly affects the *pastoral* side of cathedral ministry. Because they are “tall steeple” public churches, we tend not to think of cathedrals as pastoral in the way a parish church might be. While a cathedral church may be home to an ongoing worshipping community, its public identity directs its missional and pastoral energy outward.

What this outward orientation suggests pastorally involves the cathedral’s role as a point of entry into the Christian faith and life. If cathedral churches are truly serving the varied constituencies suggested in Jane Shaw’s article (especially those drawn to cultural and artistic offerings),¹⁰ then an increasing number of “unchurched” people will cross their thresholds. Though most parish churches find enticing people into their buildings a challenge, the range of cathedral programs and offerings presents an opportunity to use the building itself for evangelistic purposes. A cathedral can both serve and expand “the entire flock of Christ” by providing a way in to the Christian faith and life. Those drawn to concerts, lectures, or prayer practices, or by the historic nature of the cathedral building itself, can be offered an opportunity to be introduced to the faith tradition that stands behind the programmatic offerings.

It will be important that cathedrals see this evangelistic, pastoral opportunity as a way of serving the entire church. These points of entry can be portals for those who want to explore the Christian

¹⁰ Shaw, “The Potential of Cathedrals,” 144–145.

tradition in a local parish setting. In this as in other ways a cathedral so minded will be serving the church beyond itself.

When the ordinal asks the new bishop, “Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper?” it orients episcopal ministry in a concern for justice. For cathedrals to be agents of a God who is *just* is not exactly the same as being prophetic. Prophecy describes how we speak. Justice denotes how we act. For cathedrals to be involved in justice means that they will necessarily enact a compassionate ministry oriented toward the poor, strangers, and those who have no helper.

Here again, a cathedral justice ministry should differ from a parochial one. Parishes are by their nature providers of direct services. They recruit, train, and supervise ministers who will serve the oppressed and marginalized who are always at the center of Christian concern and action. Because of their civic and public nature, though, cathedrals can leverage their government and nonprofit relationships to work in partnership to advocate for justice on a systemic level. It is no accident that cathedrals are often located near city halls and state houses. In the twenty-first century, cathedrals can use their proximity to government centers as an occasion for developing transformative partnerships that will bring about systemic, and not just ameliorative, change.

Finally, we come to the aspect of cathedral life I have called *empowering*. The bishop is asked to “encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries.” Under the heading of the *prophetic* above I noted the 1979 Prayer Book’s articulation of the Baptismal Covenant. The idea of a cathedral as a center of empowerment emerges both from a consideration of baptism from a fresh look at ordination and the structure of authority in the church.

A cathedral is the only place in our polity (outside of conventions) where members of all orders gather regularly for prayer and action. Bishops, priests, deacons, and laity gather around the cathedral table and go forth to engage the world. One way to describe cathedral ministry is to suggest how cathedrals allow the fullest expression of the church in all its orders. Another would be to suggest that, because of the collegial presence of all four orders within their walls, cathedrals have a unique twenty-first-century opportunity to interrogate hierarchy and reform our ecclesial practice along the lines of a baptismal ecclesiology.

This last aspect of cathedral life—empowerment—is perhaps the most radical, and its implications are as yet unclear. Elsewhere I have noted the “increasing elevation of bishops (a trait I call on good days ‘episcopal exceptionalism’ and on bad days ‘primatial creep’).”¹¹ This national and international tendency to elevate and isolate the episcopate runs directly counter to the logical implications of baptism, and its origins are hard to identify. Who, in this day and age, would think that more hierarchy is an answer to the challenges facing twenty-first-century Christians? Nevertheless, a cathedral church faithful to the implications of apostolic ministry laid out in the 1979 Prayer Book ordinals will find itself asking how its life and witness can truly exemplify the egalitarian and collaborative values so deeply embedded in Holy Baptism and the Baptismal Covenant.

Cathedrals are uniquely poised to address the challenges and opportunities facing twenty-first-century Christians. Like the characters in Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral,” we will have to embark on a new act of imagination together. The principles of vibrant cathedral mission and ministry are embedded deep in our polity and ethos, but we will only be able to reclaim them as cathedrals when those who love, serve, and lead them close their eyes and envision new ways of being together in the world.

Near the end of Carver’s story, as they have finished drawing the cathedral together, the blind man says to the narrator, “Put some people in there now. What’s a cathedral without people?” When the narrator finally pauses to consider what they have achieved, all he can say is, “It’s really something.”¹² Putting some people in there and imagining a cathedral is really something. It’s what God is up to. It’s what cathedrals are for.

¹¹ Gary Hall, “But We Thought We Were So Normative! A Male Perspective on Women, Authority, and the Church,” in Fredrica Harris Thompsett, ed., *Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Forty Years of Women’s Ordination* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 149.

¹² Carver, “Cathedral,” 374–375.