

## **The English cathedrals since 1945**

[One of a series of short articles contributed to the DVD-ROM *The English Parish Church* (York, Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, 2010).<sup>1</sup>]

The story of the cathedrals of the Church of England since 1945 is one of widening roles in relation to the nation at large, but of narrowing significance within the church itself.

The changes that occurred after 1945 should be seen not as isolated, but as being continuations of developments that began in the inter-war period. Enterprising deans, such as F.S.M. Bennett of Chester and George Bell of Canterbury, began in the 1920s to turn their churches outward to face the communities in which they were situated. Canterbury saw the implementation of extended opening hours, the abolition of entry fees and the relaxation of the rule under which visiting ladies should wear hats even when not attending service. Canterbury also saw the establishment of the first body of cathedral Friends (an example almost universally followed) and the advent of BBC radio broadcasting. Despite these early ventures, cathedrals still remained relatively closed institutions, existing to maintain a ceaseless round of worship in semi-monastic seclusion. It was the dean of Wells, Armitage Robinson who thought in 1917 that to be appointed to a Deanery was something 'that gave a man leisure to think.'

Probably the most significant effect of the Second World War itself on the cathedrals, apart from the considerable physical damage, was symbolic. Herbert Mason's famous Daily Mail photograph of the dome of St Paul's, undamaged yet surrounded on all sides by the clouds of smoke caused by German bombing, both reflected and helped to create a sense of the centrality of the cathedrals in the national self-image. The more melancholic images of the ruined Coventry cathedral, its gaunt walls standing blackened after a bombing attack in 1940, served a complementary iconic purpose; as representative of what it was that the war was being fought to counter.

In the years following the war, the cathedrals continued to grow in popularity as tourist destinations. Continuing the trend to which Bell and others had responded in the 1920s, profound social changes including greater leisure time, disposable income and car ownership led to increased tourism, and the cathedrals more and more became fixtures on the 'tourist trail'. Chief among them was the new Coventry cathedral. Rebuilt to a design by the modernist architect Basil Spence, it excited great interest, praise and criticism alike, before being consecrated in 1962. For years afterwards it attracted many thousands, if not millions, of visitors, travelling from all over the country, to see the martyred church rise again, and in a startling contemporary style.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianityandculture.org.uk/resources/epc>

This trend of growing visitor numbers, quickened as the century progressed by the availability of inexpensive air travel and the building of the motorways, did not pass the older cathedrals by. It did, however, shift the balance of cathedral life away from its collegiate members and regular congregations, and firmly towards the visitor. Whatever opposition this may have encountered to begin with, the 1960s saw an increased embracing of that change as an opportunity rather than as a threat. Central to this was the so-called 'problem of communication'. The period saw a profound crisis in confidence in religious language, and its ability to communicate the Christian message in a form intelligible to "Modern Man". If the traditional verbal media of sermon, reading, tract and theological tome were thus rendered ineffective, some in the cathedrals saw an opportunity. These vast and impressive ancient buildings were thought to somehow "speak" in a different, non-verbal way, and as such were regarded hopefully as the most eloquent remaining witnesses to the Church's message. This remains a component part of contemporary discussion of the role of the cathedrals, even though scepticism has been expressed both at the time and since about the degree to which most visitors are truly attracted by a religious interest, narrowly defined.

The solution to the "problem of communication" was not only to be found in the architecture of the cathedrals, but also in what was to be found within them. The period from the 1960s onwards saw a growing number of commissions of new painting, sculpture, tapestry and stained glass, as well as new religious music. If the architecture could speak of the Christian message in the abstract, then how much more so might paintings and sculptures of the key episodes of the life of Christ, made in the most contemporary styles? By far the most prominent cathedral in the early days of this movement was Chichester, under its dean Walter Hussey (1955-77). In that period, Chichester saw the installation of new work by artists of the stature of Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Marc Chagall. Hussey also succeeded in obtaining new musical works from William Walton and Leonard Bernstein, amongst others. The rebuilt Coventry cathedral was also instrumental in demonstrating what was possible, with works by Sutherland and Piper again, as well as sculpture by Jacob Epstein. By the end of the century, there was hardly a cathedral in the land that did not boast at least some contemporary art.

There was one function of the medieval cathedrals that received new significance in the period from 1945. The ideal of a community of worshippers, maintaining a ceaseless round of prayer on behalf of all the faithful was central to the medieval order. In the twentieth century, as the process of secularisation proceeded in the west, this aspect of cathedral life assumed a new role as part of what Grace Davie has called 'vicarious memory.' In a secularised society, some of those who play no active part in any church nonetheless value the church's continuing to worship vicariously on their behalf. The cathedrals remain important repositories of significant artefacts and as specialist centres of worship. If Davie is right to argue that this expectation among non-churchgoers is activated and sharpened only when continuity in liturgy or history is threatened, then the increased liturgical diversity in parish churches has shifted the burden of expectation more firmly onto the cathedrals than ever before.

As the relationship between the cathedrals and their surrounding communities has changed since 1945, so too has that between the cathedrals and the faithful. One such change was in the area of education. The years since 1945 saw a significant contraction in the number of candidates coming forward for ordination in the Church of England, and a significant shift away from full-time residential training for those who did present themselves. The rationalisation of the theological

colleges that this entailed, added to a secularising movement in university faculties of theology, constituted a contraction in the educational activity of the church amongst adults. The cathedrals have in the latter half of the period stepped into the resulting gap, with an increased provision of exhibitions, series of lectures and the like, with new members of staff with specific responsibilities for education.

Perhaps more profound has been the change in the notion of the cathedral as the diocesan 'Mother Church.' It had been hoped, amongst those who most valued the visible uniformity of the institutional church, that each diocese might have an exemplary cathedral, in which occasions of significance for the whole diocese might be held, and that might act as a leader in the best of liturgical, musical and artistic practice. Much research remains to be done to the degree to which this was achieved, if ever. However, the increased divergence in worship styles in the parish churches which was increasingly visible from the 1970s onwards meant that the cathedrals have been models for the worship of perhaps only a small minority of churches. At the same time, however, there was nonetheless an increase in attendances at cathedral services at the very end of the century, paralleled by the success of other religious 'events', such as the Spring Harvest and Greenbelt festivals. It may be that cathedrals retained an attraction for some due to their capability to stage the most impressive events; events that the majority of parish churches have neither the space nor the musical and liturgical expertise effectively to present. Whether these new congregants were committed parishioners visiting the Mother Church, or those who would not otherwise attend, is difficult to determine, but the numerical effect is clear.

### **Further reading**

Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe* (Oxford, OUP, 2000)

Mary Hobbs (ed), *Chichester Cathedral. An historical survey* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1994)

R.C.D. Jasper, *George Bell. Bishop of Chichester* (London, OUP, 1967)

Derek Keene, Arthur Burns and Andrew Saint (eds), *St Paul's: the cathedral church of London 604-2004* (New Haven and London, 2004)

Stephen Platten and Christopher Lewis (eds), *Flagships of the Spirit. Cathedrals in Society* (London; Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998)

Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry. The building of a cathedral* (London, Bles, 1962)