

TO BE A CATHEDRAL

by Reverend Canon Wes Jagoe

Every man and woman in England has a birthright. Walk into any Cathedral around about teatime, just about any day of the week, and you hear the most exquisite music beautifully sung. In the streets outside, people are scrambling to get to the shops before they close, unaware perhaps that behind this decorative medieval façade a religious event of the most timeless beauty is about to take place... The choir and clergy at York Minster [Cathedral] are part of a religious college, a group of people whose job it is to offer worship to God on behalf of the whole community... Though it's well-rehearsed and strictly ordered, this is not a concert. It's an offering of praise to God.

-BBC Reporter Joanna Trollope¹

They've been called *Ships of Heaven*, *Shopwindows of the Church*, and *Supermarkets of Religion*.² Whether the ancient grandeur of the Hagia Sophia, the heavenly mystery of York Minster, or the humble diocesan centers in the developing world, cathedrals have had a prominent role in the life of the Church and the spread of the Gospel for two millennia. By definition, a *cathedral* is simply the house of a bishop's seat, or *cathedra*. Historically, it is much more than that. Being a cathedral church, especially one that also serves a parish congregation, is less a privilege than it is a great responsibility. It often requires sacrifice to best serve the city and diocese. As an avid student of cathedrals, I contend that new cathedrals, particularly in the Anglican collegiate model, may just be what is needed in this moment of American history.

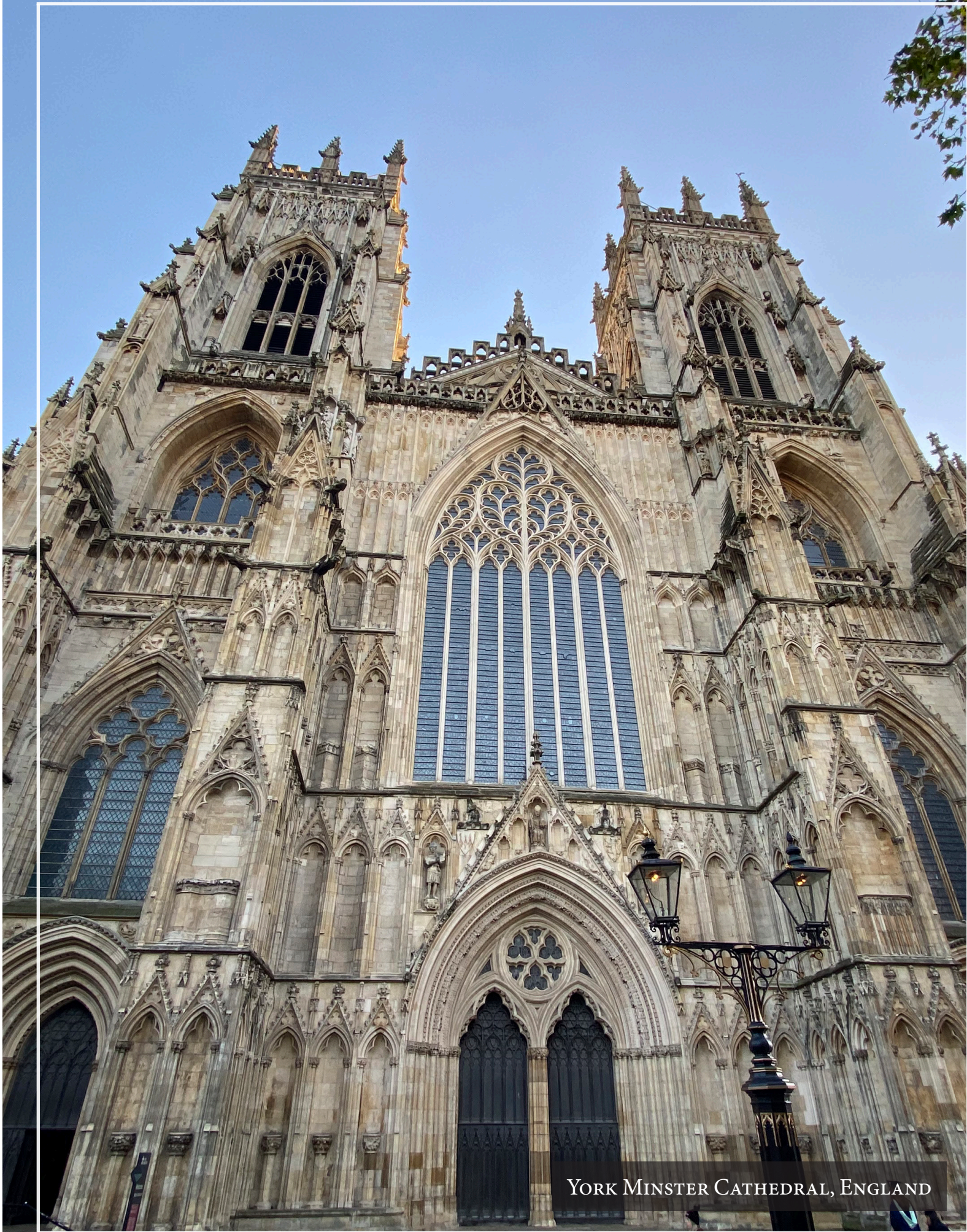
HISTORY OF CATHEDRALS

In the early church, bishops were effectively the senior priest over the city's small underground Christian community, with whom he could personally pastor. When Constantine Christianized the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the office of bishop became a distinct and powerful influencer in the spiritual and civic life of every metropolitan area. Bishops were given Roman town halls called *basilicas* from which to minister. Like all civil magistrates, he exercised his duties in the hall from a large *cathedra*. The *basilica* in each metropolis was the hub of Christian life and the base for traveling missionaries who ministered to the rural areas. To assist with ever-expanding day-to-day ministry and administration, a bishop's household included scores of clergymen and laymen, women, and children collectively called his *familia*.

The early Christians in the British Isles lived in similar church-centered communities, though not centered around bishops, who held very little status or authority. They were called *minsters*, an Anglo-Saxon word loosely applied to any Christian community of lay and ordained who lived some form of Christian life together. When Augustine of Canterbury arrived in the sixth century, he brought with him papal jurisdiction and the hierarchical church structure from Europe. His first project was to plant Canterbury Cathedral and found a *minster* to operate it. As new dioceses and bishoprics were created, so too were more purpose-built cathedrals. After the Norman Conquest of England, William the Conqueror moved all rural cathedrals inside the walls of major cities, erecting the fortress-like structures that stand today in the heart of cathedral cities today. Later, Medieval feudalism ushered in the parochial system, that is the individual village parish churches each with a dedicated priest. While daily ministry shifted to these local congregations, every parishioner and cleric had "their cathedral" that remained essential to the diocese and community.

As strict monasticism became popular, some bishops converted their cathedrals and *minster* churches into monastic, or *religious*, chapters under a rigid rule of life, such as the Rule of Saint Benedict (Benedictines). Those that did not, called *secular*, continued to maintain a common rule of life, or *canon*, more amenable to the non-religious. These clergy came to be known as *canons* and created formal corporate governing bodies called a *College of Canons* at cathedrals and other large churches (*collegiate churches*). At the Reformation, all monastic cathedrals in England were secularized. All 42 British cathedrals and countless other collegiate institutions, bodies of clergy, lay *ministers* and singers maintain daily morning and evening prayer and observances of the Christian year.

The English cathedral model spread with the British Empire. However, because the cathedrals were associated with the monarchy, they were not popular among post-Revolution Americans. It wasn't until the late 1800s that Episcopalians realized the benefits cathedrals can play in the life of the Church, community, and nation. Though some dioceses never designated a cathedral, many did simply by elevating their largest parish church, though most have never had the collegiate life. Several purpose-built cathedrals were erected in the United States, though only a few come close to the choral and collegiate foundations of those in England, namely Washington National Cathedral and The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City.



YORK MINSTER CATHEDRAL, ENGLAND

CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHEDRALS



The historic collegiate cathedral model can do what most parishes churches cannot. Perhaps even better than monasteries, they can best exemplify the fullness of the Christian life and Anglican tradition for the life of the average Christian. While I am not advocating for all cathedrals to mimic the formal and medieval character that typifies most in the Anglican tradition, it would be profitable to consider their historic character as we look to the future.

Liturgically

Even though the 1662 Book of Common Prayer expectation was that all parish clergy publicly pray the Daily Office in their churches, most cathedrals are staffed to do it corporately and musically every day. Frankly, the people have the right to expect it from their cathedral. A cathedral without such a daily life is like visiting your favorite camp or retreat center when there are no sessions or guests. Aside from perhaps the daily office routines of staff, it feels empty and lifeless. As one would expect the Divine Office to be prayed in a monastery, such has been the expectation of cathedral churches through the ages. Such a shift must happen gradually and with the dedication of the clergy and staff, lest it becomes a burden. In addition to the great spiritual benefits, daily corporate prayer (particularly with music) will draw parishioners and visitors during the weekday and give them touch points with ministry staff. Furthermore, Christians are being urged in books like *The Benedict Option* to move near and interact more with their churches. It is not uncommon for some to dream of spending retired life living near their cathedral volunteering as stewards, docents, gardeners, “holy dusters,” broderers, or simply being a part of the worshipping community. It is far more appealing to move near a church

with beautiful daily worship in a sacred space than a church that, apart from Sunday morning and Wednesday evening, is empty.

Cathedrals have always served as an example for all aspects of liturgy and music. They serve as laboratories for music and liturgy and training grounds for new clergy and music scholars, all while maintaining fidelity to the prayer book rubrics and established norms. They have high standards of training, rehearsal, and dress for their servers, lectors, and singers. For better or for worse, what a cathedral does is assumed to be acceptable within the diocese. This typified elaborate and formal worship is commonly called *cathedral worship*. It is not necessarily synonymous with High Church or Anglo-Catholic churchmanship, but rather a style naturally fitting of such grand spaces with a large body of ministers and singers.

Cathedrals should embody the fullness of liturgical and musical expressions of the diocese, exceptionally for what can be referred to as *cathedral occasions*. These are the times when the parish will be filled with visitors from the diocese or greater community, such as diocesan synod, consecrations, ordinations, Lessons and Carols, Christmas, and Easter. At my former cathedral, which was grounded in organ and choral music, we brought in another parish’s praise team to sing communion music at diocesan synod, knowing that it would greatly edify the people and make them feel at home in their cathedral. It is not unusual for people (like me) to seek out and travel in search of traditional worship on major holy days, times when one might expect beloved seasonal hymns and a prayer book service. When there is none to be found at one’s parish church, they look to their cathedrals. Furthermore, on such visitor-heavy occasions, well-done timeless choral music is far more likely to attract the unchurched. While this is what many come to expect of cathedrals, parish-cathedrals should not seek to become something they are not. A more informal and contemporary setting can also bless people in a unique and personal way, but it is important to remember that the cathedral belongs to more than just its attached parish.

Physically

Cathedrals are sacred spaces. Their very edifices point one to the majesty, mystery, and transcendence of God. Side chapels, prayer rooms, stained glass, carvings, tapestries, votives, stations of the cross, paintings, libraries, banners, gardens, courtyards, artifacts, columbaria, and memorials--there is plenty for the pilgrim to take in. They are living museums and bastions of the sacred arts. Not all can, nor should be, reminiscent of the gothic cathedrals of old. For example, the natural beauty and more rural character of Church of the Redeemer serves as sacred space and a reminder of our Creator in ways classic cathedral settings can’t.



Educationally

The early collegiate and monastic cathedrals and churches were at the forefront of modern education. In fact, the ancient colleges like those at Cambridge and Oxford began as collegiate churches whose priests educated new clergy and “poor boys”—all of whom shared in their daily prayer life, often serving as singers and acolytes. Cathedrals host regular public lectures, special workshops, and bring in keynote speakers and preachers. They are home to some of the finest libraries and archives in the world. From traditional liberal arts colleges, theological institutes, and boarding schools to homeschooling co-operatives, technical training centers, and lay ministry, the boundless opportunities for education immersed in the Christian (and Anglican) life are exciting.

Missionally

Mission-minded hospitality has been a priority at most cathedrals because they naturally bring the mission field to their front porches. People inherently know that cathedrals are always open to the passerby. Whether they come to pray or simply sight-see, they know that a visitor is just as much at home in a cathedral as a regular worshiper. Even many unchurched instinctively look for such public churches to go after times of tragedy, such as 9/11. My childhood cathedral volunteered to hold funerals for two victims of a mass shooting, bringing in hundreds of non-believers. Memorial Day, Veterans’ Day, baccalaureate services, services honoring specific groups (emergency personnel, teachers, doctors, etc.), and funerals for public officials—these missional liturgies bring people into the church who otherwise would not find themselves in such a space.

Many cathedrals, especially in the developing world, have guest houses, cafes, and bookstores, such as I have experienced in Nairobi and Cairo. Like daily prayer, this brings life to a place. Cathedral campuses are trusted physical and spiritual safe havens for foreign travelers. Many, including Anglican clergy, frequent Roman Catholic and Orthodox monasteries for personal or small group retreats. They are drawn to them over a hotel or resort because they are invited into the prayer, rest, work, study, and meals



GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL, ENGLAND

truths and traditions of the Church. They are longing for community, especially within the Church, more than just a Sunday morning service or attractive programs. The idea of living life liturgically with fellow believers in the ancient patterns of our Christian ancestors is prompting people to leave their non-liturgical and “modern” churches for Anglicanism and like traditions.

As the Anglican Church of North America moves out of its infancy and are focused on parish church planting, we should consider the founding of other timeless church institutions, like cathedrals, that can better embody this spiritual life many people are seeking. Whether an inherited old cathedral, an elevated parish church, or a temporary pro-cathedral designation, simply having a dignified title and fancy chair does not do justice to the purpose of cathedrals in the life of the Church. Nor does a gorgeous edifice and professional choir prevent a place from being legalistic, fussy, and spiritually dead. Nonetheless, the Lord has used cathedrals to carry out the Great Commission all over the world for over 2000 years and will continue to do so as long as they seek to glorify Him. As you enter this new and exciting season, I pray the Lord will use Redeemer for his Glory and to bless Greensboro, the Diocese, and the whole Church.

CANON WES JAGOE has studied cathedrals for many years, visiting dozens in the U.S. and abroad. He previously was Canon for Worship at Saint Peter’s Cathedral in Tallahassee and his father was a canon at an Episcopal Cathedral. Canon Wes lives in Greenville, South Carolina, and currently serves as Canon and Chaplain to Archbishop Foley Beach. For more information about the history and role of Cathedrals and Collegiate Churches, please visit <https://thecloisterblog.com/resources>

