

Why So Big? The Idea of An American Cathedral

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In the Anglican Study Series book titled, *What Is Anglicanism?*, Urban T. Holmes II wrote:

“We Anglicans are not given to writing great theology. There are notable exceptions, but they are difficult to remember; but when Anglicanism is at its best its liturgy, its poetry, its music and its life can create a world of wonder in which it is easy to fall in love with God.” (p. 5)

Holmes defined Anglicanism as a unique way of looking, making sense, and acting in the experience of God disclosed to us in the person of Jesus Christ (Ibid., p. 2). More poignantly, Holmes argued that such an approach required openness to the experience God discloses even when it is ambiguous, incongruous and obscure (Ibid., p. 3). Anglicans have sacramental eyes, as it were, through which we dare to be “aware that the extraordinary love of God is to be found within the ordinary...[as we see] beyond the common sense reductions of the cynic, who can only see outer appearance” (Ibid., p. 3) James E. Griffiss put it another way in *The Anglican Vision*, when he said that:

“[T]o believe that God’s Word is spoken not just to us who believe, but to all those who live in the world and who share in God’s world with us is the essence of incarnational theology. It means that we who hear God’s Word in scripture and in the tradition of belief in the church must always be ready to hear the Word that God speaks to us in our neighbors, in those who may not yet know the God who speaks.” (p.127)

Louis Weil in “The Gospel in Anglicanism,” a chapter in *The Study of Anglicanism* by Sykes, Booty and Knight, argued that “the whole idea behind the sacraments for Anglicans is that God acts through persons, events and things” (p. 72). For us as Anglicans, the physical and material world is God’s creation, not alien: the will and purpose of the Creator are exemplified in the Incarnation, by which the life of Jesus brings redemption to the world (Ibid.). Perhaps we might best pose the question “Who so big?” by placing the Cathedral of St. John the Divine within a sacramental context. To do so requires that we take our catechism seriously enough that we look beyond the outward and visible sign of the size of the cathedral to its inward and spiritual grace. Can we trust that things truly are not what they seem, and that God is at work in the ordinary, transforming it into the sacred?

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine is New York’s version of the Grand Tetons, as it seems virtually to erupt from the earth. It is massive – so much so that you cannot appreciate its size until you come upon it, stand near it, and see it in relationship to something else. It is just over two football fields long (plus one football). The National Cathedral and St. Patrick’s Cathedral would fit in it (not at the same time!!) and come only to the steps of the Great Choir. The Statue of Liberty could stand under the roof at the Crossing and fit upright.

I have always respected the enormity of the building and the brilliant way that it seemed to take me in, to hurl me into the heavens, in awe and reverence for the mystery of God and the real presence of Christ, without diminishing me. I have always loved how I felt in it, over the past thirty years as a visitor. When it is empty, its architectural messages and various artifacts inspire me or shake me up. When it is full of people, for worship or a cultural event, the “Word incarnate in stone” somehow becomes enlivened. That Cathedral is made for people – built big enough by a visionary Diocese that dared to say that its Cathedral would not be only for them. That was the intention from the beginning: to build a mother church that would be more than denominational – to put in the heart of the expanding international, multi-faith and multi-cultural

City, creating a religious and civic institution that could host under its roof the great conversations of the day.

How would you design a Cathedral whose 1894 constitution envisioned it as “a house of prayer...for the use of all people”? How big a roof would you need to build to risk trying to “fit under it” the diversity of God’s creation? How would you stay rooted in who you are, aligned to a mission that includes a newly formalized, resident congregation as well as others who come to that place for Christian nourishment? Can that rootedness be the grounding from which we reach out with respect and genuine learning across faiths?

In 1929, The Laymen’s Club of New York published the first guidebook for the Cathedral. It was a “little book...designed to assist visitors to understand the meaning and purpose of the Cathedral.” (p.9). In the first part, titled “the Spirit of the Cathedral,” the authors wrote:

“On Morningside Heights, in the City of New York, on grounds consecrated by the blood of our forefathers in the War for Independence, stands a trinity of institutions which represent with singular completeness the three-fold nature of man: Columbia University, which ministers to the Mind; St. Luke’s Hospital, which ministers to the Body; and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, which ministers to the soul.” (Ibid., p. 9)

To many these institutions came to be seen as the Acropolis of New York, as the City expanded and moved north.

The Cathedral itself was described as “The Word in stone.” The guidebook writers spoke of it as “a sacred book, written in massive pier and ponderous arch, in sculptured marble and carved oak, in stained glass window and inlaid mosaic, in embroidered fabric and woven tapestry, whose pages are full of delight, inspiration and help for those who will take the trouble to read them.” (pp 9-10)

Since its cornerstone was laid in 1892, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine’s story has covered 110 years of some of the most defining chapters of this country’s history. Not surprisingly, as the Diocese of New York had existed for some time before it decided to build a cathedral, certain risks were involved. No wonder it took decades before the decision was made, a site purchased, and ground broken. They certainly wondered: would people who were opposed remain ambivalent and withhold support? Would the Diocese build a tower in the middle of the City, only to have people ask, when it ran out of supplies, “Why did they not first count the cost?” Later a bishop would declare the funding of further construction immoral given the poverty in the Diocese. An effort to jump start construction made in the late 1970’s and 1980’s focused on the incomplete south tower: it captured peoples’ imagination by offering to create a new generation of stonecutters from the neighborhood and to get back on the path that would lead to the completion of the Cathedral. But it was not an economically viable model, and the forty feet added turned out to be expensive in many ways – raising questions about priorities and draining support from capital repair and operating budgets.

How do you build what is, by definition, a denominational cathedral, and get widespread and ongoing support? Franklin Roosevelt, even before he was Governor of New York, signed on as chair of the capital campaign. (We all would love an FDR chair today, wouldn’t we?) I wonder whether or not the founders imagined that a cathedral chartered as a house of prayer for all, which is intended for everybody, would create some interesting paradoxes? Could it be built with real Diocesan ownership? The support by parishes was mixed and still is, especially when they feel that the decisions about what goes on in the Cathedral – especially around controversial art exhibits or political statements from the pulpit – do not include or represent them. Under FDR’s leadership, a huge to-scale model was built and placed at Grand Central Station, and thousands of people placed coins in it to support this venture. Some people in the neighborhood, whether they agree with what we are doing or disagree, remind me that they remember their grandparents saying, “We helped pay for that cathedral.” If the Cathedral belongs to everyone, then who really is responsible for it? To say everyone could mean no one. Our Cathedral story includes on and off again support over several generations.

Yet the dream that led to the cornerstone finally being laid on St. John’s Day, December 27, 1892, has not died. That was the time when this country’s doors were flung open, and Ellis Island as a gateway welcomed over 70 percent of the immigrants who would seek opportunity in

and bring talent to this country. As we struggle with what it means to be secure, after September 11, 2001, in a society intended to be porous, do we need that dream less? My forebears came through that gateway. I cannot tell you what it means to me each time I see the great bronze doors of our Cathedral and know that they were cast in the same studio that created the Statue of Liberty. Did we reach too high, build too big? Or did we position ourselves to live into a dream that deservedly requires the support of generations, and which requires that each generation do its part?

It has been painfully clear to me that religious institutions that do not attend to their financial health cannot sustain their own internal responsibilities. If they cannot care for the needs of their own congregants, those institutions decline from within. Without a base of ongoing support, they discover, sooner or later, that they cannot sustain their responsibilities in social ministries and outreach. My generation of clergy has built fewer new buildings than other generations; our leadership has been measured more in terms of how we respond to years of deferred repairs. I have seen that focus as integrally related to what I was ordained to do. No sponsored or subsidized program or ministry can be strong for long, unless its sponsor or parent organization is also strong.

How can we channel the support the Cathedral deserves and requires, across time and over generations? We struggle to find ways to enhance ministries and beautify the buildings and grounds that enfold and anchor them. We challenge ourselves to be stewards, fiduciaries, both financially and architecturally, knowing that we will be judged by whether or not we did our part and what is best for the Cathedral and its constituent communities, in our generation.

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine is the mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, and serves as the seat of our Bishop. But it was built to be more than that. As the 1919 preamble to its constitution states, "As a house of prayer it is for the use of all people who may resort thereto," and is in addition "a unifying center of intellectual light and leading in the spirit of Jesus Christ." That mission statement articulates the very soul of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The Cathedral serves the many diverse people of our City, Nation and World: liturgically, culturally, pastorally, educationally, and as the great architectural and historic site that is its legacy. Its beautiful and peaceful grounds and gardens offer respite and nourishment to residents of and visitors to our neighborhood. The Cathedral is a religious institution, of course. But it is also most assuredly a great civic and community institution whose events and programs, public buildings and spaces, have the reach fitting of a cathedral built in the nation's largest and most international City. Consider the following:

- Adults and Children in Trust served nearly 500 young people last summer, and over 1,500 in "Holiday Camps" during school breaks.
- After School programs serve up to ninety children each day at the Cathedral.
- Some 114 children benefit from pre-school programs at the Cathedral.
- Cathedral Community Cares offers emergency responses to walk-in clients each day, totalling 1,361 last year.
- At any given time, 8 male clients live in our shelter, as they move toward self-sufficiency, and 38 different clients were sheltered last year.
- Our Soup Kitchen is one of few open on Sundays, and it serves 23,460 meals a year.
- In partnership with Episcopal Charities, Cathedral Community Cares has provided crisis counseling and eviction mediation since many in our neighborhood were affected by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.
- Our Public Education and Visitor Services department offers exhibitions, tours, hands-on-workshops, and special events that usually attract hundreds of thousands of international tourists. (Those numbers were down after 9/11 and our own fire in December 2001). Some

23,360 people from schools, church groups, and groups on cultural tours from the greater metropolitan area and all over the country came to the Cathedral last year.

- Because the Cathedral is one of the most visited tourist attractions in the City, stores and restaurants on the Upper West Side notice each time a recession impacts tourism. □ New York's dean of the Congressional delegation, Congressman Charlie Rangel, has made it clear to me -- one dean to another, as he said it -- that the Cathedral is depended on as the gateway to Harlem.
- The Cathedral School, a K-8 Episcopal School for children of all faiths, was among the first private schools to work hard to build diversity, offering scholarships to 40 percent of the 259 students. □ These students and their parents benefit from the special environment of the Cathedral, in a rigorous academic and value-based teaching environment. □ They learn religious understanding and tolerance across faiths, something surely not needed less today than when the school was first part of the Cathedral's mission.
- Cathedral Productions and art exhibitions offer a wide array of performing and visual art. □ They are cultural and spiritual opportunities, both interfaith and cross-cultural. □ Few religious institutions in the world could match the Cathedral's tradition of supporting the arts.
- Each year some of New York's most popular and best attended arts events happen at the Cathedral: the free New York Philharmonic Memorial Day concert; the New Year's Eve Concert for Peace; and the Feast of Saint Francis: Celebration of Creation, or the blessing of the animals.
- The extraordinary "Time to Hope" art exhibition, a gift to New York from Spain and their cathedral foundation on the anniversary of 9/11, attracted up to two thousand visitors a day. □ It also strengthened the City's relationship with Spain and its cultural communities.
- Last year's 12th Interfaith Holocaust Remembrance concert drew 1,200 people.
- We have an internationally renowned textile conservation and repair and cleaning laboratory, used by museums all over the world, including clients such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Getty Museum. □ The laboratory serves also as a training and internship site for apprentice conservators from universities throughout this country, Canada, and Europe.
- Our Nightwatch overnight retreat program draws nearly 2,500 youth a year and another 340 for a Diocesan "Super Night watch." □ They may not all be explicitly religious, or attached to a particular denomination or parish, but those who come to the Cathedral for such a weekend retreat often come back and speak for years about the impact of the experience.

About ten years ago, as the retirement of a Dean of twenty years approached, the Bishop and Trustees began an extensive strategic planning process for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Endowments had declined from 14 to 7 million dollars. Twenty million dollars of deferred maintenance had to be addressed because emergent repairs easily outstripped operating budgets. An interim Dean came to the Cathedral in 1997, cut the operating budget by 1 million dollars, and helped to oversee the plan and preparation for the Bishop Coadjutor to nominate a new Dean when the Diocesan Bishop retired. That retirement took place about a year and a half ago, and I stand before you as the new Dean, interviewed for the position with the objectives of a strategic plan carefully held before me as a major part of my job description for the next decade. I suspect that until church polities, no matter how different they may be, are able to embrace that kind of planning process and that kind of leadership search, we may not be positioned to face the challenges ahead. Now I hasten to add, I pray God that this process really was inspired by the Spirit, and that I am meant by God to be the Dean at this time. I want to serve this Cathedral

ably, but only time will say. I am working with a Bishop whom I deeply respect as a transparent leader who does not draw attention to himself, but rather seeks to serve the Diocese. He sought a Dean who would be his partner, focusing on the Cathedral as a key mission of that Diocese, to the Diocese and beyond. When we offer ourselves beyond personalities, great things are possible. We shall see – please pray for us!

A major part of the strategic plan is a real estate initiative. We have studied a variety of possibilities of putting to better stewardship some of the nearly 13 acres of land that we have on the Upper West Side of New York City! Careful study led to requests for proposals from developers regarding the unused, perimeter parcels that run along the north section of the Cathedral property. A smaller parcel on the southeast corner is included in the concept. To give you some sense of proportions, The General Seminary of the Episcopal Church is in the Chelsea section of the City, and sits on an entire block from 9th to 10th Avenues, from 20th to 21st Streets. You could easily put three General Seminaries onto the Close of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

This plan asserts that such real estate stewardship is directly connected to our mission as a Cathedral. These initiatives, I believe, are directly connected to what it means to be good stewards of the Close, not only because of the positive impact the ongoing ground lease rents would provide to fund core mission programs. That stewardship also will reach to capital repairs of buildings already on the Close, some of which are older than the Cathedral. That stewardship will impact the grounds as well, building the capacity to beautify and to respect with even greater care these important structures and spaces. I share the commitment of the Trustees that not all revenues would be spent on operating budgets. We also will distribute funds to capital repairs and to the repayment of drained endowment principal. The possibilities along the north and south perimeters, the Bishop and the Cathedral Trustees and I pledged, will be:

- congruent with the mission of the Cathedral and the Diocese;
- aesthetically consistent with the magnificent Close (may I emphasize here that there are various configurations, densities, heights and approaches that could be used in any development; out of respect for the architectural importance of the Cathedral, the Trustees, the Bishop and I have made the commitment to restrict such development, and to insist that future design review will ensure that any buildings would literally be "in dialogue with" the Cathedral and the existing spaces and buildings on the Close);
- and, as the third principle, that what is developed must significantly accrue to the long-term financial benefit of the Cathedral.

Certainly such development is necessary for us to move considerable steps toward financial stability and away from what is now a hand-to-mouth existence. Such construction also will give us ways to think together about how we will rebuild and then finish the north transept, which will connect creatively with whatever is built on the north edge and offer additional street access to the Cathedral (in this case directly across the street from a main entrance to St. Luke's Hospital). I believe thinking strategically, with a solid financial foundation built and 20 million dollars of deferred maintenance addressed, we will then – credibly – be able to raise the funds necessary to complete the Cathedral. To challenge people all over the world with the opportunity to support the Cathedral of St. John the Divine's completion could, I believe, offer a galvanizing hope because this Cathedral has credibly been part of an interdenominational, international, interfaith ministry that causes people from all over the world to call it "their cathedral." We must further develop a spirituality that helps people read cathedrals, as Robert Barron has asserted in *Heaven in Stone: Experiencing the Spirituality of the Gothic Cathedrals* (Crossroad, 2000, pp.12-13), saying that, "[i]n a spiritually hungry time...cathedrals can do what they have always done for those who are open: teach the faith and focus the journey of the spirit."

I come on board as Dean at a time when marvelous attention has been paid to developing a strategic plan. Two Bishops; my immediate predecessor; an Executive Vice President; and the Trustees have exercised this thoughtful leadership. We have sought neighborhood, City, and State support as we build the fiscal credibility of the Cathedral, by developing a solid infrastructure that will take us into this new century better capitalized than ever before in the

Cathedral's history, and also by sustaining the architectural legacy of these important and sacred spaces. □ We also have built up our capacity to care for and beautify the kind of urban village on the Close the founders envisioned, and which we cherish and want to preserve as well.

Cathedrals are meant to create a special kind of village, I believe, beyond their property lines or the borders of the Close. They are places where the secular and sacred meet. The Anglican Tradition believes that the Spirit imbues all of creation, and the entire body politic. Dr. Jean Bethke of the University of Chicago Divinity School has written:

“Within the Christian tradition...believers are called not to conform to the world but to be formed in such a way that they transform the world. The world is wounded in so many ways: by nationalism, racism, violence. Beginning with the dignity of each and every human person, the civic and hopeful model lifts up human dignity by recognizing the religious dimension of every person: that we are made in God’s image... [and] promotes a dialogue between faith and culture and civic struggles, striving to prevent the final triumph of the highly individualistic, isolating, and excessively consumer-commercial spirit of the age as citizens are enjoined to think, speak, and to act toward the common good.”

(Azizah Hibri *et al.*, *Religion in Public Life: Living with Our Deepest Differences*, W.W. Norton, 2001, p. 59.)

As the size of cathedrals grew, they were literally able to embrace the entire population of their villages. Under their roofs could be placed great liturgy and private prayer, education of the illiterate by tapestry and window narratives, even the activities of the market place or village common given shelter from bad weather as the community gathered. Cathedrals gave birth to schools, art galleries, hospitals, orphanages, theater, music, and public conversation. Do we need to create safe places for those public endeavors less today than in ages past? I think not. Because of its size, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine has provided a roof under which the Diocese has met in prayer and in council, elected and buried Bishops, voted on budgets and debated resolutions about war and economic policy. The polity and customs of this particular cathedral may be as different from other cathedrals as its size. But the question remains: what are we willing to allow under the roofs of our cathedrals? Whatever the size of the space, what are we willing to engage and to embrace as we participate in and shape the public debates that inspire, alienate, unify, weaken, energize, educate, sensitize, or marginalize those we say are our brothers and sisters because we share the same parent God? Who feels comforted, welcomed, loved, known, respected, and fed in the various ministries made possible, prayed for, dreamed about, and supported by what happens under our roofs?

Two thousand years ago some friends had a very ill friend. We do not know what his illness was, and perhaps they did not understand what made him sick either. They knew two things: their friend was no longer mobile, and rumors were spreading that a Jesus of Nazareth had been healing people. That’s all. Those friends rigged up a stretcher and hauled their friend to Jesus. When they got there the crowds were enormous. So big, in fact, that they could not even get to the front door – and even if they could, the house in which Jesus was would have been too packed for them to get by with the stretcher. We all need friends like those guys – they refused to give up. Faced with an obstacle to what they believed could be a new beginning for their friend, kept from getting for their friend what he needed most, they dared to take the roof off that house and drop their friend into the house.

I dream of a day when all sorts and conditions of people can get what they really need in our cathedrals and churches, and that no obstacle will keep them from coming in. Do we believe we have that kind of new life to offer to people? How would we react if people believed so much in what we are about as the Body of Christ in the City that they would take the roof off to get in? Are we willing to risk finding ways to help take the obstacles out of their way – to help remove the roof, if needed, to make it possible for healing and new beginning to take place? We are blessed to have this ministry at a wonderful time in the life of the Spirit. More and more people are looking to find water. May the glorious structures entrusted to us as tributes of thanksgiving to God be sources of thirst-quenching refreshment, and may God help us never to raise up those structures in ways that hide the water we have found and are meant to share with the pilgrims who come our way. Then we will see the holy city, the new Jerusalem, and heaven

on earth, as it is in heaven, and we will hear the Incarnate One saying to us, “Come, blessed of God, and inherit the Commonwealth prepared for all.” That is our vocation as Anglicans: to use our traditions to help create a world of wonder, in which all people fall in love with God.