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Storying Cathedral Ministry

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“Storying Cathedrals: Developing a Narrative Approach to Cathedral Ministry”

This paper is based upon a piece of inter-disciplinary research that I undertook on my last sabbatical study leave in 2015, bringing together theology, ecclesiology and organizational behaviour. Let me start by saying, briefly, upon whose shoulders I am standing. From a theological perspective: Anthony Thiselton’s writing on hermeneutics (Thiselton 1992), Tom Wright’s work on the historical Jesus (Wright 1992, 1996), Robert Bellah’s ideas on religion in human evolution (Bellah 2011), James K A Smith’s analysis of cultural liturgy (Smith 2009, 2013), together with the theology of Sarah Coakley (Coakley 2013), Ann Morisy (Morisy 2004) and Graham Ward (Ward 2009, 2014) have all shaped my approach. In terms of organizational thinking: Karl Weick’s work on sensemaking in organizations (Weick 1995, 2001), Yiannis Gabriel and David Sims’ research into organizational storytelling (Gabriel 2000, 2004; Sims 2004, 2005), together with Donna Ladkin and Geoff Mead’s writing on leadership have been important (Ladkin 2010; Mead 2014). Given time constraints I will not be looking in detail at these foundations. Instead, we’ll look at the building itself and how it relates to other ‘constructions’: specifically a cathedral sermon by Professor David Ford and last night’s lecture by Professor David Brown.

My own doctoral research was on the use of organizational narrative and metaphor in two anomalies to the Church of England’s parochial system – a university chaplaincy and a proprietary chapel. During my sabbatical I explored organizational stories in another anomaly to the parochial system – cathedrals. Specifically I visited ten cathedrals in this country and two in the United States (Birmingham, Bristol, Canterbury, Coventry, Gloucester, Leicester, New York, St Albans, Salisbury, Washington DC, Wells and Worcester) where I engaged in participative observation, attended services and interviewed laity and clergy. What I’m presenting today are some theological reflections from that qualitative study.

I start from the position that we are storytelling creatures who make sense of the world – personally, organizationally, politically, culturally, etc – through the narratives we tell
individually and communally – Michelle Gonzalez’s presentation today is a good example. In this study I set out to explore what forms of storytelling are happening in cathedrals.

I identify three storytelling arenas or narrative frames, which I’ve called: (a) Interpretive Stories; (b) Identity Stories; and (c) Improvised Stories. Since this is SST, I’m going to focus on the Interpretive Stories because that’s where the principle theological attention is.

The Interpretive Stories are those which we tell or enact to frame the lives of cathedrals, churches and all who are involved in those communities within the context of the culture and society in which they are set. And I think there are three which are very significant: (i) Theological Stories, (ii) Ecclesial Stories, and (iii) Liturgical Stories (figure 1).

Figure 1: Interpretive Stories
(i) Theological Stories – are the communal theological narratives being told and rehearsed within cathedrals and churches, which shape how the outside world is perceived as well as framing some of the internal conflicts. Good examples are stories found at denominational levels – for instance the theological stories told by Anglicans and Catholics about the nature of authority in those two churches have similarities but also some significant differences (e.g. the Reformation). I would argue that in yesterday evening’s lecture David Brown gave us a good example of how theological narratives relating to Jerusalem, Jesus, Ezekiel and the Psalms can be used to frame an understanding of cathedral ministry. Moving on:

(ii) Ecclesial Stories – something similar is true regarding the narratives told by different churches about their own organizational autobiographies. So, although Methodism and the Church of England are close siblings – the stories they tell about themselves and each other unavoidably shape their interactions (or lack of them). Of course this narrative strand goes back much further – not only through the whole history of the Church, back to the New Testament, but beyond that. In the introduction to his account of Christianity, Diarmaid MacCulloch writes of having ‘two thousand years’ worth of Christian stories to tell’ (MacCulloch 2009: 1). Yet even that feat of storytelling has an earlier genesis: ‘The story must therefore begin more than a millennium before Jesus, among the ancient Greeks and the Jews, two races which alike thought that they had a uniquely privileged place in the world’s history’ (MacCulloch 2009: 2). The story of the People of God, the organization of the Church is a long and complex one.

(iii) Liturgical Stories – churches and congregations rehearse their theological, ecclesial and other stories through their liturgy. Those churches that have a weekly Eucharist focussed on an altar and those that have a weekly Service of the Word or Praise Worship focussed on projector screen are saying something very different about their understanding of the Church and its mission. One philosopher and theologian who has written extensively about the storied nature of liturgy in the Church and in non-ecclesial culture is James K. A. Smith (Smith 2009, 2013). He writes: ‘Liturgies are compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they “tell” by showing, by performing. Such orientating narratives are not explicitly “told” in a “once-upon-a-time” discursive mode … these stories are more like dramas that are enacted and performed’ (Smith 2013: 109).
I’m going to look more briefly at the other narrative strands before seeing how they interact in a sermon preached by David Ford. Identity Stories are those at our core understanding of who we are, and here we start to address cathedrals (and churches) themselves. Again I think there are three narratives that are key: (i) Personal Stories, (ii) Historical Stories, and (iii) Organizational Stories (figure 2).

Figure 2: Identity Stories
(i) Personal Stories – are the autobiographical narratives of those presently working at cathedrals (deans, vergers, volunteers) and those who use the buildings (worshippers, tourists, local stakeholders) but there are also the biographies of previous deans, past bell ringers, even former animals or pets. One tiny instance I came across at St John the Divine, NY can stand for much bigger examples. In that vast building the symbol for the Anglican Communion, the compass rose, is set into its floor (figure 3). It was designed by a venerable priest of the Cathedral, Canon Edward West, who is now buried beneath it. In talking to the Canon Precentor she remarked how she would instruct processions to turn right at the compass rose whilst longstanding members of the serving team would relay that instruction in the form of: ‘turn right at Canon West.’

![Compass Rose in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York](image)

**Figure 3: Compass Rose in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York**

(ii) The Historical Story (which is different from the Ecclesial Interpretive Story) – it is the specific historical story relating to a particular place (again from yesterday evening, the narrative of how the Anglo-Saxon church here was replaced by the Norman cathedral was a
good illustration) and it is not unusual for forms of it to appear in literature: Trollope’s Barchester chronicles; Goulding’s novel The Spire, Carver’s short story ‘Cathedral’, Follett’s The Pillars of the Earth and sequel; Howatch’s Starbridge series and Catherine Fox’s ongoing Lindchester chronicles. But outside fiction each cathedral and each church tells at least one story (and quite often more, sometimes competing stories) which locate its identity within an historical narrative.

(iii) The Organizational Stories about a cathedral or a church – these will range from the application of (say) Avery Dulles’ Models of the Church (Dulles 1987) which has subsequently been applied to cathedrals by David Stancliffe (Stancliffe 1998) or the typology provided more recently by Helen Cameron (Cameron 2010) to the folk wisdom which amasses around a community, all of which shapes and informs the stories being told in that particular place.

Finally, in the space between the Interpretive and Identity Stories there are the Improvised Stories that are regularly being reworked and rewritten through the daily life of the cathedral or church. My last diagram shows eight of these: (i) Finance, (ii) Architecture, (iii) Governance, (iv) Pastoral, (v) Mission, (vi) Education, (vii) Media; (viii) Art (figure 4). But I would argue there are nine of them because we have to take into account those unmanaged narratives such as gossip, jokes and untold stories which are always part of church and organizational life, operating in the narrative gaps. And David Brown's story at the end about the cathedral guide’s comment about the picture is a good example of this form of narrative.
So, how do these forms of storytelling interact? A good illustration was provided at Birmingham Cathedral which, on the day I visited, was holding its patronal festival, celebrating the cathedral’s 300th anniversary. The preacher was David Ford, Lay Canon at Birmingham and at the time Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, [who was speaking on Isaiah 30: 15-21, Ephesians 1: 3-10 and John 14: 1-14.] His sermon provides a helpful demonstration of how interpretive storytelling works. He began by making a direct connection between the theological and ecclesial interpretive stories and the historical and personal identity stories.
Thus he said: ‘It is a great delight to be here with you today to celebrate the patronal
festival of this Cathedral in its tercentenary year. For fifteen of those three hundred years I
lived here in inner city Birmingham, and I developed not only a love for this wonderful city
but also a great respect for the way this diocese has combined following Jesus Christ and
serving the welfare of the city and the region.’ Those two sentences immediately link the
story of the cathedral and his personal story with the historical narrative of Jesus and the
theological narrative of Jesus’ messiahship (Christ). Ford strengthens all of those
connections when he continues: ‘In our fascinating readings from scripture today the
orientation and horizon for what this cathedral church is about is set by the glorious first
chapter of the letter to the Ephesians.’

The sermon goes on to make a connection between the interpretive narratives of theology
and liturgy, whilst explicitly placing the present life of the cathedral and city within the circle
of the Christian theological story. Thus, he says: ‘the first priority is what we are doing here
this morning, blessing God, praising God, thanking God, affirming that this cathedral is here
thanks to God, that this city is here thanks to God, and that the basic motivation for all we
do is that we do it for God’s sake.’ Ford also places the whole of creation within that story,
which: ‘includes all people, all religions, all cultures, all academic disciplines, all industries,
all areas of life and society, all parts of ourselves. God is committed to all that in love and
compassion, and so, therefore, are we called to be too.’

Then he turns to the challenging statement from the Gospel reading where Jesus says, ‘I am
the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ Ford
argues this means that Jesus is already in relationship with all people, all religions, all
creation, just as God is. This open relationship to creation is modelled by Jesus when he
takes the role of a slave to wash his disciples’ feet and Ford once again uses the theological
narrative to shape what I am calling churches’ Improvised Stories when he asks: ‘What
would Birmingham Cathedral look like in its fourth century if it imaginatively developed
more ministries that had the DNA of Jesus’ action in washing feet?’

He concludes by returning to his own personal story, specifically his experience of sharing in
the practice of Scriptural Reasoning where Jews, Christians, Muslims and other traditions
have come together to read and dissect passages from their scriptures. He describes this as
a process of deepening which involves: ‘going deeper into my own scriptures, deeper into those of other traditions, deeper into our commitment to the common good of our world beyond our own communities, deeper into our disagreements as well as our agreements’. That aspect of his own story has led him to reflect further on the Christian theological and ecclesial narratives – in particular, Jesus’ saying that: ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.’ So Ford concludes: ‘That house sounds rather like a pluralist place. What surprises may be in store for us as we go from dwelling-place to dwelling-place meeting other members of the family to whom God is our Father?’

Although David Ford does not use the terms ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ in this sermon, I would contend that his homily provides good examples of how the Interpretive Stories located in theology, ecclesiology and liturgy shape the space for, and interact with, the Improvised and Identity Stories of the Church and churches.

In conclusion, these are some of the organizational stories that I believe are being told and re-told, written and re-written around Anglican cathedrals and churches, which in turn are shaping their ecclesial organizational lives.

References:


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1. A version of this paper was also given at Sarum College, Salisbury for the MODEM: Hub for leadership, management and ministry conference on ‘Faith in the Future: Organization, Power and Trust’ (4th December 2015).


3. Michelle A. Gonzalez paper was entitled ‘Redeeming Race: A Theological Construction of Racialized Humanity’. The presentation and discussion included a great deal of personal narrative about her Latina-Catholic background. In addition, Al McFadyen’s paper on ‘Redeeming the Image’ included reflections on his personal story as a theologian and police constable. Both papers can be found here [http://www.theologysociety.org.uk/documents.asp](http://www.theologysociety.org.uk/documents.asp)