

<http://www.episcopalcafe.com/the-magazine-what-cathedral/>

The Magazine: What Cathedral?

December 28, 2014 / 0 Comments

by The Rev. Anne Largent Smith

The Episcopalians of the Diocese of San Joaquin in California don't have the use of a cathedral. There's one within our borders—it's in Fresno. But it is currently in the hands of former Episcopalians who now identify as Anglicans of a different stripe.

The absence of a cathedral is one of the differences our bishop, the Rt. Rev. David Rice, has experienced between this diocese and his previous diocese in New Zealand. When he became a bishop in the Episcopal Church in March of 2014, Bp. Rice experienced a dramatic change of scene in the most literal sense, as he moved from the lush beauty of New Zealand to the sparser landscape of California's Central Valley, but also in terms of ecclesial realities.

What difference does it make? In a diocese as big as San Joaquin, it has been easy to joke that the cathedra is really in the bishop's car as he travels many thousands of miles each year to his far-flung parishes. His Honda has been nicknamed the "car-thedra." It's a far cry from the Cathedral Church of St. John the Evangelist in Napier that serves the Diocese of Waiapu, and from Dunedin Cathedral, of which Bp. Rice was formerly Dean and Vicar.

In Bp. Rice's estimation, cathedrals are wonderful places that "by definition and nature should have a rich liturgical missional and social life." They can play a particular role in a diocese as a centerpiece of diocesan life, "a place where people have fun, remember who they are, and from which all sorts of wonderful missional ministry takes place." For the Diocese of San Joaquin, again having a place called cathedral would likely enrich the life of the church in this place—though even if it's the cathedral space in Fresno with which so many San Joaquin Episcopalians are familiar, it almost certainly won't be the same in this new day, however much people may want to recapture what they knew before.

As a former cathedral dean, Bp. Rice has a vision for what a cathedral could be for us. It's a "space and opportunity for the church to try things," he says—whether that's liturgically, socially, politically, or what have you—"that we might be uncomfortable trying otherwise." It's a place where we can be uniquely entrepreneurial and innovative, trying new things in this "brave new world" in which we find ourselves. If we want the church to be creative, missional, and socially and politically influential, a cathedral can play a leading role in that. Bp. Rice has seen cathedrals operate this way elsewhere in our communion; I'd venture a guess that within the Episcopal Church this happens to different degrees in different dioceses—and that most of us only know our own or a small handful of cathedrals if any.

Whatever role a cathedral plays in a diocese, some aspects of its existence are necessarily at odds with each other and therefore require particular attention and care. The kinds of tension that inhere to a cathedral are rife in the Episcopal Church, though—it's part of our ethos to hold the tension between ideas rather than allowing one to predominate. Or at least to try.

For instance, a cathedral may offer both a parish home to worshipers and a place to visit for other members of the diocese and quite often for tourists. Bp. Rice recalls the "constant struggle to be a parish church where it's a nurtured community but also to work as a cathedral dean with transient movable feast communities." Because they are two such "different functions of the cathedral, it takes a lot of creative innovation from lay and clergy leaders to make that happen." As dean and vicar at Dunedin, Bp. Rice recalls being asked to wear "two hats rolled into one." And while the cathedral was certainly there to facilitate worship and gatherings in the diocese, Bp. Rice "spent more time with the mayor, the chancellor of university, chief of police, etc. than with the bishop of the diocese." His core relationships centered in what might be considered his parish community, Dunedin.

Bp. Rice's engagement with the community as dean and vicar didn't just serve the cathedral congregation; in the bishop's view, "cathedrals are sort of a model for behavior the rest of the diocese should engage in." As a diocesan bishop, he has continued to encourage such engagement throughout his sees. And not just to model from afar; Bp. Rice understands that the cathedral has a

“responsibility to engage with all other parish churches in that modeling role—to go to parishes to develop relationships, or bring in clergy to chant evensong,” for example. In fact, says Bp. Rice, “If we don’t have parish communities sharing resources together, we are dishonoring our ecclesiology.”

Our perception of ourselves as congregations in competition can easily mitigate against such mutually enriching engagement between cathedrals where they exist and other parishes in a diocese. Perhaps cathedrals are uniquely positioned to help shift relationships among congregations—certainly there are other ways—but if cathedral folk are “graciously aggressive in terms of relationships,” as Bp. Rice suggests they need to be, they can play a role in the diocese that is perhaps broader than the typical parish’s.

Naturally things can go wrong; fictional portrayals of dysfunctional relationships between bishops and deans are “novel fodder,” as Bp. Rice points out, and have their basis in reality. But, says Rice, “that is a crucial substantive relationship; the dean’s actions must reflect the bishop’s vision for the diocese. They can’t work at cross-purposes; it doesn’t work to be at odds with others in the diocese.” More easily said than done, but then again perhaps it’s not said often enough. We can’t strive for our ideals if we haven’t articulated them.

In San Joaquin, Bp. Rice would certainly “want to ensure to the extent that [he] could that clerical leaders and the cathedral core community reflect all this” if we were to get the cathedral back. Again there’s that tension: “it requires so much intentional work so that the cathedral isn’t perceived as part of diocesan life” only when events occur that affect all members. Bp. Rice speculates that “if you were to poll people, they would probably say they and the cathedral don’t have anything to do with one another.” That’s why Bp. Rice considers his approach “inordinately important.” For him, “persistent, diligent relational clerical leadership are non-negotiables” in a cathedral context.

Until then, the spirit of the bishop’s vision for the cathedral is alive in San Joaquin’s present reality. The “car-thedra” gives the diocese “basically a portable cathedral life.” Glimpses of that life are apparent all over the diocese

at different times; an ordination in a “cathedral-esque place,” convention in a parish hall, events shared by congregations to which all are invited such as a Pentecost Evensong sung by choir members and clergy from multiple congregations. No building is required for the development of clergy leaders focused on relationship-building and mutual support. As Bp. Rice says, “We change perceptions by fostering relations. We can’t act like islands.”

Episcopal Café Magazine editor the Rev. Anne Largent Smith is priest-in-charge of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Elk Grove, California, and also serves at the Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist in downtown Stockton.

Image above: The Car-thedra

*By Stephen Bentley
Creator, “Herb and Jamaal”,
Episcopal Deacon, Diocese of San Joaquin*