

The Business of Barchester

Pete Hobson reveals the mystery of how Cathedrals manage to survive, and the tensions between business sense and spiritual priorities. Does the presence of tourists detract from the worship and sense of the spiritual? What is the right balance between Heritage and Faith? How can cathedrals proclaim the gospel? Why are cathedral Deans expected, on appointment, to do mini-MBAs?

The Cathedrals of England are both a familiar and an arcane world. Familiar because many of us love to visit them – for a whole range of purposes, ranging seamlessly along a spectrum from the purely tourist to the wholly spiritual¹. But also arcane in that few of us if pushed could give a convincing account of how they work, less still how they are paid for. We probably know that in this country, unlike much of the

continent, there is no state aid for cathedrals, and we will all have had a moan at entrance charges, or battled with our conscience over voluntary donations. But when it comes to the hard economics, let alone to a fully-fledged and road-tested Business Plan, I suspect we'd not know where to begin.

Certainly, that would have been me a few years back – notwithstanding a

career of over 30 years of ordained parish ministry in the Church of England. But circumstances brought me into closer contact with the cathedral of my own diocese, Leicester, and now I find myself charged with creating a Business Plan for it – and much like the reinterment of a certain long-lost and rediscovered Plantagenet monarch, wondering where the template is².



Leicester Cathedral:
lowering of Richard III's
coffin into the grave

Photo: Ian Davis



Peterborough Cathedral: Scene of the BBC series *Barchester Chronicles* featuring Bishop Proudly, Archdeacon Grantly and the aged and infirm Dean

Photo: ITV Anglia News

The life of English cathedrals has travelled a long way since the days of Bishop Proudly, Archdeacon Grantly and the aged and infirm Dean³, although arguably most people’s knowledge of it hasn’t. But we do currently live in interesting times, with an Archbishops’ Working Group charged with reporting back by the end of 2017 on their functioning. This in turn was triggered by notable financial mishaps in one or two places – Peterborough and Exeter among them – and a Commissioners’ confidential report that suggested no less than 13 cathedrals were hovering on the brink of a financial precipice, turning in significant financial losses for at least five years on the trot⁴. At the same time cathedrals are one of the success stories of the early 21st century post-Christendom Church of England. People come in ever-increasing numbers – not just it seems to sight-see (though that would be true of the majority) but also increasingly to worship, whether in private prayer and reflection, or corporately in services, both Sunday and mid-week. Unlike most parish churches, they are consistently open to the public, and with a range of both employed and volunteer staff ready to offer welcome and greeting to all those who attend,

for all those motives, and more. As Dame Fiona Reynolds, chair of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England⁵, recently told a meeting of their Fabric Advisory Committee chairs and members “these glorious buildings are more important than ever”. But what, exactly, *is* the business of a cathedral?

My current job is to lead on Leicester’s redevelopment plan⁶, building on the changes necessitated by the 2012 discovery and 2015 reinterment of King Richard III, and the massive increase in visitor footfall that resulted, but also implementing a longer-term vision for this parish-church cathedral with over 1,000 years of history behind it⁷. We’re not a grand foundation like Canterbury, Durham, York Minster or Winchester, but one of the smallest and least well-endowed, so the way the questions encounter us is different from such places. But the key issues are the same. What are we here for? And how do we ensure we can stay here, and keep doing it successfully? That, it seems to me, is the essence of a good Business Plan. It’s just that until the very recent past, the answer to the first would have seemed obvious, and the second would have seemed an

unworthy use of the time of the clergy charged with overseeing these places.

So business planning is not something cathedrals have been used to doing. But now it’s definitely needed. And if, as is the case for us and indeed for all bar eight of our counterparts, you’re into using Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) to help answer some of those questions, then producing a Business Plan, at least for the part of the operation that HLF is supporting, is an absolute requirement.

There is a whole series of creative tensions that underpin the question of how you go about constructing such a thing. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me set some of them out, before offering some final thoughts on what makes for a successful cathedral Business Plan – which must find some place for both ends of each of the following tensions.

Heritage v Faith

The HLF are very clear about one thing: they don’t fund faith. Whilst that may seem supremely ironic, given that to play the lottery at all could be viewed as an ultimate act of faith, it is clearly central to their

ethos. But once an institution has decided – with whatever accompanying internal debate and rationalisation – that it is appropriate to have recourse to lottery funds, then there follows a whole accommodation to be reached, which to be fair is at work by both sides involved in the conversation, the Cathedral and the HLF. Whilst HLF don't fund faith, they do fund buildings which for generations have stood for faith, and they are realistic enough to know that it would be both impossible to deny that and impractical to seek to compartmentalise it. On the other hand, cathedrals must ask themselves how the promotion of heritage sits alongside the pursuit of godliness, not simply as an academic exercise, but in the real day-to-day decisions that must be made on staffing, spending and priorities. Experience shows this is certainly possible, but not self-evidently simple. Those who believe every word or action in a cathedral must spring from direct evangelistic intent, or at the least be open to that result, will struggle to reconcile that with the no-strings welcoming of visitors whose principal reason for coming into the place is to “see Richard's tomb”. On the other hand, the fact that, at least in our cathedral, there are three times a day

when no tourist visiting is permitted – during Morning Prayer, Evensong and daily Eucharist – makes its own statement of priorities. And in between, on the hour, visitors are asked to pause, reflect, and (if they wish) join out loud in saying the Lord's Prayer. Most tell us how much they value that opportunity. Heritage matters. Faith matters. They don't have to conflict – unless you want to make them do so.

Congregation v Visitors

Cathedrals have regular congregations – something of which many visitors are barely aware – and usually more than one. Their engagement with the building is closer to that of worshippers at any parish church: the place where we come to meet God, and to be enthused, refreshed, challenged and possibly infuriated in equal measure. And they can be tempted to resent the many others who come in simply to sample the visual goodies, in much the same way as the all-year-round residents of coastal villages may resent the influx of summer tourists that nonetheless underpin their local economy. The visitors, queuing outside waiting to come in after a Sunday or weekday service, may feel impatient of people who seem to want to ‘own the place’. Yet

the meeting of the two can sometimes have profound results, as the visitor who wants to know what's going on here and now can meet with the worshipper who is genuinely seeking to serve God in this place at this time. Whether we come into a cathedral every week without fail, or just the once, we bring our humanity with us, with all its needs and joys. And we bring it into a place just about all recognise as ‘special’ – a liminal place where the bigger questions are allowed to be thought, voiced, and explored.

Centre v Parish

The purpose of a cathedral is clearly and legally defined⁸ as to be “the seat of the bishop and a centre of worship and mission”. It seems Bishops vary widely in how they interpret this in practice, but it clearly gives potential scope for significant tension in how the word ‘mission’ is interpreted, whether by the Diocesan Bishop, the Dean and Chapter or the clergy and congregations of the diocese at large. Furthermore, the significant degree of independence the Measure gives cathedrals can be seen as either opportunity or threat, depending on how it is exercised. Some might wish to rein in this traditional autonomy in favour of rule by bishops or diocesan Boards of Finance.





Mission
Coventry Cathedral's sense of Presence as a vehicle of Mission

Photo: Day Out With The Kids

Cathedrals usually act as a venue for large diocesan and episcopal occasions, which can tend to give them, in the minds of many clergy and the keener amongst the laity, something of the status of your team's home ground – there when you need it, but the rest of the time put back in the mental cupboard, only to re-appear for the next big event. Similarly, many and various civic and community groups may see the cathedral as a prestigious venue for their service or event, with little regard for its everyday life in between. But cathedrals are functioning as centres of worship and mission, and open every day, seven days a week, 52 days a year – not just on High Days and Holy Days. Literally.

Independence v Accountability

Unlike Roman Catholic cathedrals, where the Dean is essentially subordinate to the Bishop, and runs his cathedral under his direction, once in post a Dean has significant autonomy – matched in the C of E structures by the comparable autonomy a Bishop has when in post. Provided he or she can take their

Chapter with them a Dean can run the cathedral more or less as they see fit. The Cathedral Council is there in principle as both sounding board and wider input – its chair is appointed by the Bishop, who also has the right to attend all of its meetings – but the way this is exercised varies⁹. Also, cathedrals are charitable bodies, but not subject to the jurisdiction of the Charity Commission, and only to a small degree to the oversight of the Church Commissioners, who are required to provide them with funding for certain core posts (principally the Dean and two Residentiary Canons), but nothing much more. All of this means that the levers and controls from external bodies are light, which on the one hand makes external intervention difficult, and on the other can tend to a form of benign neglect on the part of both the wider church and society, on the assumption that “surely, they will always be there”. I'm told (though it could be interesting to test it) that it is legally impossible for a cathedral to go into liquidation, which makes for an interesting entry on the Risk Register of any Business Case.

Proclamation v Presence

How does a cathedral do its mission? How does that mission stand up against a Church of England increasingly anxious to measure its success by SMART objectives, and the making of more disciples? On the model of mission that uses the concepts of Presence, Proclamation and Persuasion, cathedrals may be thought to score highly on Presence, seem to do less well with Proclamation and register little in terms of Persuasion. Whilst this analysis may owe more to prejudice than observation, it does have some correlation to the way people actually choose to interact with us. If the majority of the people walking through your doors come looking for History or Architecture, it's probably quite a different starting point from a parish church model where far fewer just come, but those who do have already established a network of contacts with the core community or else come with explicitly presenting needs, looking for answers. Cathedrals do – of course – have such people too, but the overall balance is different, and hence the overall strategic approach will need to differ as well.

Doing the job v Raising the cash

Behind all of these tensions lies a more pressing one for anyone writing a document that is recognisable as a Business Plan – at the very least to those funders who require such a document. Who is paying for all this? And who is matching Income to Expenditure, by means of an effective Budget process?

Clergy are not traditionally trained for these matters – as the former Dean of Peterborough pointed out in a farewell sermon preached in 2016, following a departure widely seen as the price required to be paid for a Church Commissioners’ bail-out from major financial embarrassment¹⁰, it may be unfair to expect Deans to deliver what they were neither trained nor appointed for. However, they are now expected, on appointment, to do mini-MBAs, which to some observers is selling the spiritual pass, but to my mind seems only reasonable for a position which in the end, is where the buck stops.

As noted above, some of the cash for core revenue posts comes from the Church Commissioners, but that will never be enough to fund all the

activities expected, let alone maintain historic fabric. Other revenue streams clearly include congregational giving, income from historic endowments (for those fortunate enough both to have them and to keep them performing well in modern terms) legacies, grants – and that high-profile Aunt Sally of tourist income. Space doesn’t permit me to dwell on the first four of these but a word on the last one is clearly in order.

It would (would it?) be great if a cathedral could exist purely on the income generated without regard to tourist visitors. But for the most part they can’t, so the real question is not whether to focus on these opportunities, but how to do it in ways that remain compatible with the core purposes. First-order tourist destinations, such as Westminster Abbey and York Minster, long ago concluded that charging for tourist entry was the only possible route, and the challenge then becomes how to ensure those you don’t wish to exclude by such an approach can still see themselves as welcomed. That’s not an easy challenge – and not one

we in Leicester have to deal with. We, along with the majority, operate a Donations approach, where the challenge is rather to ensure that all those who can readily make a contribution are clearly shown how to, and given every opportunity to do so. For us, that should happen mainly as people leave, after a good visitor experience, of whatever sort, rather than at the threshold of arrival. Hence our script for our (volunteer) Welcomers to those coming in is something like: “Welcome to our Cathedral. We hope you enjoy your visit. There is no charge for entry but we would encourage you to make a donation as you leave.” This is matched by a corresponding Exit script: “We hope you valued your visit. Have you had a chance to make your donation yet?” – complemented by clearly visible Donations boxes, including the opportunity for Text giving and Gift Aid. Our suggested ‘ask’ is £3 per adult visitor, and our current average give is in the region of 80p/footfall – which we think is not bad, but capable of improvement without venturing into the theologically unhelpful territory of ‘hard sell’.



Planning for the Plan

How do you put all that together into a Business Plan that is recognisable both by secular funders (such as HLF) and faithful to core purposes? That is our challenge – and the challenge faced by cathedrals up and down the land, whether framed in that exact form or not. At this stage I can only suggest some key areas such a plan must address, and some serious pitfalls it should avoid.

A Plan that is going to be fit for purpose will need:

- Clarity about both the core and secondary purposes of a cathedral
- Clarity about the particular needs and opportunities of this cathedral in this place and this time
- To be backed by a Strategic Plan setting out priorities for the work of the cathedral over, say, the next 5 years (with sign-off from both Chapter and Council)
- Clarity about the separate areas of operating within the overall life of


the cathedral, with clear links to income and expenditure in each area

- Clear prioritisation linking areas of operation to the Strategic Plan
- Adequate Financial Controls – who is responsible in each area for constructing the budget, managing the budget, and authorising expenditure against the budget?
- Effective Financial Reporting – what reports are given to which operational and which governance bodies and how often?
- A process for review and if necessary adaptation of the Plan
- Effective training for all those involved in working to such a plan – which may also mean some humility both from those in receipt of said training and those giving it

On the other hand, it would be wise to avoid writing a Plan that:

- is so complex nobody who needs to operate it actually understands it
- is so simplistic it is impossible to tell if it has been achieved or not

- addresses the needs of only part of the cathedral's life
- is driven by external experts who don't really understand the life of the cathedral
- is compiled by a process that lacks genuine business credibility
- sits on someone's shelf and has no discernible impact on day to day decision-making

These things may sound obvious but still be challenging to produce in any given context. In the end, it is not spiritual to so ignore practical realities that we risk crashing and burning, nor is it business-like to establish as a going concern something that then achieves little or nothing of its true purpose. The modern-day Barchester Towers still dominate the landscape of English cities and countryside and we seek to use them to keep alive the rumour of God at work in our land. As Jesus said, it does nobody any favours if we fail to count the cost of doing that properly. 

- 1 *Spiritual Capital – the Present and future of English Cathedrals*, Theos and the Grubb Institute, 2012, explores this spectrum more fully.
- 2 See Pete Hobson *How to Bury a King*, ZaccMedia, 2015 for my account of the reinterment of Richard III in Leicester cathedral.
- 3 Key protagonists in Anthony Trollope's fictional depiction of mid-19th century cathedral life in his influential and widely-praised *Chronicles of Barsetshire*
- 4 Leicester incidentally, not being one such – sitting as it does in the slightly larger group of 'just about managing' cathedrals, with only a very few sitting high and mighty in apparent long-term financial sustainability.
- 5 The CFCE is the national body which oversees all proposed changes to the fabric of English Cathedrals, and the FACs are the individual committees which offer each cathedral local advice on such matters.
- 6 *Leicester Cathedral Revealed* is an £11.3m project to restore, renew and reimagine the building, and enable it to better tell the story of faith in Leicester for over 1,000 years. It is due for completion around the end of 2020.
- 7 St Martin's was made Cathedral church of the newly formed diocese of Leicester in 1927. It stands in long-term continuity with a church on the site since at least the time of the Domesday book.
- 8 The Cathedrals Measure 1999 is the current legal yardstick defining what cathedrals are for, and how they are organised. Most people barely know it exists – let alone what it lays down.
- 9 There is the 'nuclear option' of a Bishop's Visitation ordered by the Diocesan Bishop (or their nominee), which can, after due investigation, require that certain actions are taken by Chapter - although the law is opaque as to what might happen should a Chapter decline so to act.
- 10 The Church Times of 7 October 2016 reported: In his farewell sermon on Saturday, Dean Taylor dropped a strong hint that the decision to leave had been forced upon him. Despite hundreds of letters of support, he said, he had not made any public remark about "the circumstances surrounding my 'retirement' – although some have alleged that the manner in which it was effected was legally dubious, morally reprehensible, and pastorally disgraceful. Well, they might care to think that. I could not possibly comment."



***Pete Hobson** was ordained in 1977, and worked in inner-urban parishes in Manchester, London and Leicester up to 2008 before moving onto development work for Leicester Diocese, and then, in 2013, for its Cathedral. He has managed to stay married to Sue for all of that time, and they have a considerable number of children and grandchildren, most of whom still live within half a mile of them.*