

CATHEDRALS, MISSION, AND THE POWER OF 'PLACE', PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Introduction

This large 3-year interdisciplinary AHRC-funded project, 'Pilgrimage and England's Cathedrals, past and present', involves partnership with the Church of England (particularly Canterbury, Durham and York cathedrals), Westminster RC Cathedral, the Association of English Cathedrals, Cathedrals Plus and Historic England. The aim was to bring more resource to understanding key issues at an important time in cathedral history.

The project began in 2014 and brings together expertise and approaches from history, theology, literature, social anthropology, religious studies, and 3D digital recreation of historic sites.

We have considered 'pilgrimage' in its widest sense of openness to spiritual engagement, whether planned or spontaneous.

Team of nine: Principal Investigator Dee Dyas, Co-Investigators Marion Bowman (Religious Studies) and Simon Coleman (Social Anthropology), our two research assistants (historian John Jenkins and ethnographer Tiina Sepp); 3 archaeologists working on modelling shrines, and Louise Hampson, an archivist and art historian also working as our Impact Officer. The Executive Board includes Prof Grace Davie, Prof Eamon Duffy, Prof John Eade, Dr Alana Harris.

The project's aim is to allow the past to speak to the present and help shape the future through:

- Drawing on archival evidence, literary texts, pilgrim narratives, architectural developments, archaeological evidence and material culture, together with high level digital visualization of ways in which shrines were used, to identify the theological, sensory, cultural, and social dynamics of pilgrim experience within cathedrals in the past.
- Using the tools and insights of social science and religious studies to provide in-depth analysis of the experience of visitors, pilgrims, 'potential pilgrims', staff, and volunteers today.

Clearly our team are not claiming greater understanding than those who actually manage cathedrals! What the funding has allowed us to do is explore ways in which buildings, ministry, and response worked in the past – and essentially 'hang around' a lot in the present, observing what happens and interviewing a wide range of people about their own responses and those of others.

The PEC project was inspired by two main drivers:

1. The fact that both pilgrimage and engaging with sacred spaces, such as cathedrals, are now both more popular in England than at any point since the Reformation, with significant implications for mission, ministry and management.
2. Experience of the opportunities and challenges this brings on the ground, through working with a wide range of churches and cathedrals (including Canterbury, Coventry, Durham, Ely, Lichfield, Norwich, Ripon, Wakefield Winchester, Worcester, York) to develop *faith-centred* heritage interpretation.

Great changes, in terms of popular mapping of meaning on to special places and interest in pilgrimage have crept up on us, particularly during the last three decades. As an academic I have two key questions: 'Why is this happening now?' and 'What is really going on in people's thinking and experience?' As a priest committed to mission and ministry, I have a third: 'How can we understand and work with this – connecting with people at a point of openness - and often of acknowledged need.

Here are some of the key questions we have tried to address:

- How can cathedrals combine being heritage sites and civic resources with retaining their core role of offering worship and being places of spiritual encounter?
- Churches are places of 'spiritual heritage'. How can they explain their meaning to visitors who may come from any faith or none, possibly with little or no Christian understanding?
- Cathedrals have worship, welcome and witness at their core, yet are now welcoming audiences for whom both worship and witness may seem alien.
- We often use the terms 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage' today but what or who *is* a pilgrim?
- Most churches now offer much less visual or tactile stimulus than their medieval predecessors, yet human beings still learn and respond through their senses. Indeed, sensory experience has always been key to shaping and evoking spiritual experience. So what can we learn from the past and what can we offer today to enhance learning, encounter and response?

The growth in popularity of English cathedrals as sacred heritage sites, together with the wealth of archival and architectural evidence associated with them, make them ideal 'laboratories' in which to analyse and compare pilgrim experience past and present, and explore the current resurgence of interest in mapping meaning on to place. When we began work, these seemed timely things to do, as cathedrals face major decisions about their future direction, both locally and nationally, and consider their mission strategies. But we had no idea just how timely this project would prove to be. That has been very demanding but also very exciting as we have lived through the last three years with our partners and are now involved in wider conversations about the relevance and application of our findings.