

The Role of the Cathedral in the City

A Vision for Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio_ By the Very Rev. James A. Diamond, Dean, Christ Church Cathedral

On September 21, 2000, the Very Rev. James A. Diamond addressed the audience gathered in the Cathedral Undercroft for the opening of the 2000-2001 program year of the Community Forum. The year 2000 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Cathedral's Community Forum program.

Welcome and thank you very much. I am pleased to have been invited to inaugurate the twentieth year of the Community Forum by speaking about my vision for Christ Church Cathedral. To see over the mountain, one needs to climb it first, and so I will give you a very brief history of the mountain upon which we stand. There are two decisive moments in this institution's history, pivotal points, if you will—pathways up the mountain that led to the vision I now have for the future.

Pivotal Moments: The first of these pivotal moments came in the 1950's with a decision to remain downtown. Christ Church is an old congregation, founded in 1817. We are not the oldest congregation in the Diocese. That honor belongs to St. John's in Worthington, which was founded in 1804. But Christ Church is older than the Diocese of Southern Ohio, which was established in 1875.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the area on which this Cathedral now sits was a large basin filled with apartments inhabited primarily by members of the Appalachian community. Christ Church had a significant relationship with this community, offering after school tutoring, domestic arts, a bowling alley, and the gym, which we still use at the top of the Parish House. The mission work, which was carried on in the Parish House, was so effective that the original Parish House was torn down in order to make way for a much larger facility, the one that we occupy today.

At that time, Christ Church had a sizeable church building that faced onto Fourth Street. It abutted the Parish House. In the 1950's, the foundation of the original church was found to be so severely compromised that it was obvious that the building had to be taken down. Thus, the community faced the decision of whether to move to the suburbs or remain in downtown Cincinnati. The congregation and the Vestry made a commitment to Urban Ministry and completed the building of our current church in 1957.

The second pivotal decision came in 1993 when Christ Church Parish agreed to become the Cathedral of the Diocese of the Southern Ohio and executed the covenants between the Diocese and the Parish to create the new Cathedral. To comprehend the importance of this turn in our pathway, it is well for us to pause and clarify the term, *viz.*, "cathedral."

The Bishop's Chair: What is a cathedral? First of all, it is the site of the *cathedra*, the

bishop's chair. A cathedral is the bishop's church. This is where the bishop presides at principal festivals, diocesan functions and, particularly, ordinations. A cathedral is also the mother church of the diocese. This is the church in which all the other congregations of the diocese gather in order to celebrate the common ministry which we share.

Going back to its history in the Middle Ages, a cathedral is even more than the center of a diocese. A cathedral is sacred space in the middle of the city, an icon through which we understand our own individual meaning. Most cathedrals are built so that, if not awe-inspiring, they are at least sufficiently large and beautiful that when we enter a cathedral we tend to become quiet, and to draw into ourselves, if only for a moment. When we make that passage from sidewalk to nave, we cross into a different dimension of life. It is for this reason that one of the first things I did as Dean was to open the doors of this Cathedral to those who pass by. Today, supported by many of the congregations of this Diocese, the Cathedral doors are open at lunchtime from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. Our hope is that we will be able to extend this open door period. We have also lighted the cross above the altar. Those who passed by this cathedral and looked into a dark space received a message that was not what we intended to communicate. Now the cross is lit 24 hours a day so people who walk by are able to see who we are and why we are here.

Becoming a Cathedral: The benefit of Christ Church Parish's becoming Christ Church Cathedral was the expansion of mission. The consequence of the Parish's becoming a Cathedral was a division of focus. Once Christ Church became a cathedral, its expanded included a mandate to serve the Diocese and the City, which now had equal claim, with the congregation, upon its ministry. One piece of my vision for Christ Church Cathedral is to live into the challenge offered by my predecessor, the Very Rev. James Leo, at the conclusion of the third and most recent renovation of this Cathedral space. Dean Leo said, "We have built a cathedral and now we must become one." That is, indeed, the challenge that is before us.

For the Cathedral congregation and for the Diocese of Southern Ohio, I believe that this challenge means several things. (I offer my gratitude to the Rt. Rev. Terence Finlay, Bishop of Toronto, whose concepts I have found very helpful in organizing my own thoughts.) A cathedral should be a center of excellence. Worship is the most important thing we do. It is our only unique activity. Every other institution around us teaches, aids the poor, offers music, and creates venues for socializing and recreation. But worship is what the Church, alone, does. A cathedral liturgy, including preaching and music, should set a standard of excellence. Episcopalians rarely agree on the particularities of liturgy, but the liturgy ought here to hold the highest standards. The excellence of that liturgy should also reflect the population whom we are serving, in the music we sing, in the words we use, and in the concerns we voice from the pulpit.

A cathedral should be a center of renewal. This is the place where the Diocese of Southern Ohio gathers together for worship because the people in the congregations of this Diocese have a claim on this place and upon those of us who serve from it. Those who come in from the various congregations of the Diocese do not come in as guests but

as fellow travelers. Our gatherings in this Cathedral are for renewal of our common ministry. But we should also be able to leave, commonly refreshed, with the ability to demonstrate God's love to others.

A cathedral should be a center of spirituality where people can come and feel the presence of God, not just from the architecture, the music, or the words from the pulpit, but because of the way they are treated. That is to say, the faith of those of us who are here, which is renewed in this community, must make a palpable difference in the way we treat the strangers among us.

A cathedral should be a center of education where we use some of our resources to bring to this city those that can wrestle with the great questions of our day and give the public ample opportunity to interact and respond. We also need to help make the word of God, Holy Scripture, more accessible to those who seek to understand the Bible. As this Forum is going on this afternoon, there is a Bible study going on the third floor of the Parish House. On alternate Tuesdays, we offer the beauty, respite, and education of "Music Live with Lunch." There is a need to do many more of these offerings for our weekday constituency.

The Public's Church: A cathedral should be a center of civic ministry. The theologian, Martin Marty, talks about the cathedral as "The Public's Church." We need to be open in ever expanding ways to the rich texture of religion, race, orientation, and point of view that defines "the public." We are somewhat new at this. It is going to take time to learn the skill of it, but my vision for us is that we will get better at becoming the public's church.

A cathedral should be a center of compassion and justice that translates into mission. The history of this congregation is deeply rooted in concern, care and action attending to the rights and the needs of those who are poor, who are in need of food and shelter, who are dispossessed of their rights, or who are oppressed economically and sometimes, politically. To this day, Christ Church Cathedral is generous in terms of its human and financial resources, through the Plumb Line program, our Outreach Committee, and numerous projects and other programs. I have a vision that someday this Cathedral will bring its considerable resources to bear at a new order of magnitude that will make a significant difference in the lives of those who turn to us and those who need us to walk with them. But before we can do that, we here at Christ Church Cathedral need to revisit Scripture on the subjects of initiative and risk.

I want Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati to be known as a center of advocacy, sanctuary, healing, and reconciliation. Our model for advocacy comes from Jesus, himself. Jesus was often on the outside of "polite" society would because he wished to be with those who were at the very fringe of society. He was never popular for this, and often put himself at risk. By doing so, he tried to teach us what he meant by the first being the last and the last being first, the high being brought low and the low being raised up. I am sometimes asked if advocacy includes politics. We have to remember that Jesus,

himself, was a highly political figure. He spoke pointedly against the values of both the ruling Roman society and the Temple officials. He was finally executed, not as a religious figure, but as one who was held in the eyes of those in power as politically dangerous.

A cathedral has also traditionally been a place of sanctuary, of safety. We must be a place where people can come, knowing that their needs will be attended to and that they will be safe. This may mean safety from the demands of a harsh world but it must also include safety in terms of the attitude and actions of those who serve here in any capacity. No one coming to this Cathedral should ever feel his or her dignity or integrity potentially compromised either by our actions or by the use of our words, whether gossip or any other language that devalues another person.

I want us to be known as a center for healing. The Episcopal Church is slowly rediscovering the sacrament of healing and we find growing interest in the idea that, through the action of God, what is broken can be made whole again. We are now holding healing services on the second Sunday of the month at 5:00 PM. The services will deliberately be without Holy Communion. We do this so that people from a variety of Christian traditions, as well as those of many other faiths, will feel welcome. We are learning about the healing ministry in the cathedral congregation, and we now house the National Healing Ministry of the Episcopal Church.

A Center for Reconciliation: My highest ambition for this Cathedral is that it be known as a center of reconciliation. I wear the Cross of Nails, which is the symbol of The Community of the Cross of Nails emanating from Coventry Cathedral in England. I understand reconciliation to be the process of assisting those who have lost one another to find each other. This is done through truth telling, forgiveness, and reaching a sense first of reconciliation and then of peace. I believe that God calls some of us to Christian witness through attempts at reconciliation. I am also beginning to realize that there may be circumstances in which there is an incompatibility between advocacy and reconciliation. As an institution of people who are committed to their faith and to the city, we can embrace both advocacy and reconciliation. But for an individual, it may be necessary to be an advocate or a reconciler. I believe that advocacy is a necessity for communities of Christian women and men, but as the Dean of this Cathedral, I do not want my ability as a reconciler to be compromised by my advocacy.

My vision of a *great* cathedral is one which, while embracing all the ways it is called to serve, does not forget those who worship faithfully every Sunday. Were it not for their commitment to the city, we might today have been well ensconced in the suburbs. Were it not for their vision of a cathedral, we might well be simply tending to our own needs. Those who worship here on Sunday, whether it has been for decades or a week, are part of the core of this Cathedral. They help to allow Christ Church Cathedral to hold high aspirations and broad visions for its ministry in the City of Cincinnati and in the Diocese of Southern Ohio.

Thank you very much.