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**The Greater Church as 'sacred space, common ground':**

**a narrative case study in a rural diocese**

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**The Greater Church as 'sacred space, common ground': a narrative case study in a rural diocese**

**Abstract**

The profile of 'Greater Churches' in the Church of England is rising, as attested by the expanding interest in the network to which many of these abbeys, minsters and significant parish churches belong. Yet, save for the report of the Church of England Church Growth Research Project (Strand 3a of which compared cathedral-like greater churches with cathedrals), empirical work on Greater Churches as a particular class is sparse. This article responds to that lacuna in the literature, presenting a narrative case study conducted within the framework of symbolic congregation studies pioneered by Hopewell. It explores the values expressed by a Greater Church working under the banner 'sacred space, common ground', a metaphor which has shed light hitherto on the ministry and mission of cathedrals. Through analysis of (i) the narrative of a pioneering Christmas Tree Festival in the church and (ii) the congregation's own narrative (stimulated by a time-line exercise at a subsequent parish conference), the symbolism and potential consonance of sacred space and common ground are discussed.

**Introduction**

The profile of 'Greater Churches' in the Church of England is rising, as attested by the expanding interest in the network to which many of these abbeys, minsters and significant parish churches belong (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013). There has been a tendency to compare the ministry and mission of the greater churches with that of their diocesan mother churches, the cathedrals, on account of the similarities between the two and the challenges and opportunities both face. Comparative studies of parish churches and cathedrals exist in the emergent field of Cathedral Studies, which brings rigour to the evaluation of the impact of cathedrals as key points of growth in the Church of England (Francis, 2015)[1], but work on greater churches as a specific type is relatively sparse. By means of a case study conducted within the narrative framework of symbolic congregation studies pioneered by Hopewell (1987), this article turns attention to one particular Greater Church, situated in the heart of a market town within a rural diocese. Through the narrative of a six-day festival held there, which attracted over 10,000 townspeople and visitors and blurred the boundaries of the sacred and secular, the article explores the values expressed by the church's adoption of 'sacred space, common ground', a metaphor which has hitherto shed light on the role of cathedrals (Muskett, 2016).

It is not unusual to employ a narrative approach in scholarship on cathedrals. Examples are Danziger's (1989) narrative of lives devoted to Lincoln Cathedral and Roberts' (2015) exploration of stories told within cathedrals as they engage in the process of organizational sense-making. This article will go some way towards addressing a lacuna in the congregation studies literature, by adopting the narrative approach to examine the values of a Greater Church. In the discourse of that field, the nature of the present investigation would be characterized as both intrinsic (that is, carried out for its own sake and for the sake

of understanding the church concerned) and extrinsic (that is, serving a broader good) (see Guest, Tusting, & Woodhead, 2004, on the distinction).

The present article stands as a companion to an analysis of cathedral metaphors (Muskett, 2016), where reflection on the relatively new figure of speech 'sacred space, common ground' was inspired by the Wonderland adventures of Lewis Carroll's Alice and conducted in whimsical manner through the lens of Carroll's 'Looking-glass room' in order to make the component words come all alive. In deconstructing 'sacred space, common ground', it was not easy to eschew Humpty Dumpty's notion that words can mean whatever one wants them to mean. Alluding to Humpty Dumpty's fanciful idea of paying extra to words that do a lot of work for him, the article reached the conclusion that it would be reasonable to reward the dyads 'sacred space' and 'common ground' for added value on account of their potent symbolism when conjoined.

Reference will be made to a report of the Church of England's Church Growth Research Programme, Strand 3a of which focused upon cathedrals, greater churches and the growth of the Church, and was conducted by Canon John Holmes and Ben Kautzer of Cranmer Hall, Durham. The report (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013) presents a detailed consideration of greater churches. The researchers' brief was to analyze the reported growth of cathedral congregations and to compare the findings with 'a selection of greater churches and other large city centre churches'; in particular, they were directed to make comparisons with those churches that were recognized as being 'comparable to cathedrals' in terms of their context, ministry and mission (p. 59). Their report employed the adjective 'cathedral-like' to illuminate the role of greater churches. The attention of other writers has also turned to greater churches as points of comparison with cathedrals (Burrows, 2016; Davie, 2015; Jackson, 2015). Dialogue with Cathedral Studies is hard to avoid when assessing the ministry and mission of greater churches.

The present study will now proceed in six distinct steps. The focal point of the first section is the network of Greater Churches: its foundation, function and impact; the distinctive characteristics of the member churches; and reasons why these places of worship may be compared with cathedrals. The second section summarizes the theory of symbolic congregation studies pioneered by Hopewell (1987) and describes the narrative approach, looking in particular at how a time-line exercise can enable a congregation to understand its vocation. In the spirit of the symbolic research method adopted for the study, the notion of metaphor is introduced as a focus for developing the narrative approach. The third step is to outline the method underpinning the narrative. The fourth step is to present the narrative about the chosen greater church. Two distinct stories comprise this section. First, there is the chronicle of a Christmas Tree Festival held in the church over six days in November 2015. Second, there is the congregation's own narrative, developed at a parish conference in February 2016. Stimulated by a time-line exercise to plot its activity over several decades, the congregation reflected on how its values, identity and engagement with the town –as embodied in the festival− were captured by the banner 'sacred space, common ground'. In the fifth section, the implications of the narrative are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

**Greater Churches**

*Greater Churches Network*

The foundation of the network of greater churches lies in 1991, when a group of incumbents who shared common concerns of large church buildings gathered for mutual support. Their association later became the Greater Churches Network, and this grouping welcomed further member churches in subsequent years (Jackson, 2015, p. 219). The number of churches in the network has grown recently (for example, from 41 when Jackson wrote *What*

*makes churches grow?* published in 2015, to 56 early in 2016) [2]; and it now offers 'associate' status to Major Parish Churches (as defined by the Church Buildings Council) [3]. The main emphasis of the network has broadened beyond fabric, to mission and outreach and how these churches can best serve their communities (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013, p. 59).    Historic England's recent report on Major Parish Churches called for research on the role and efficacy of the Greater Churches Network (Burrows, 2016, p. 59).

The churches of the network share five defining criteria: size of building; large number of visitors; paid staff in addition to clergy; being open on most days, all day; and fulfilling a wider ministry than a regular parish church (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013, p. 59-60). Despite these commonalities, the greater churches that constitute the network can differ markedly: they range from historic churches (notable landmarks such as Bath Abbey, Selby Abbey, Tewksbury Abbey and Wimborne Minster), through tourist destinations (such as Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon and Bolton Abbey), to growing numbers of urban minsters with a public ministry at the heart of towns or cities (such as Doncaster and Leeds). The latter category is relatively recent (the first new minster established since the Reformation having been created at Dewsbury in 1993).  Michael Sadgrove (Dean Emeritus of Durham, and former Rector of Sunderland Minster) defined a minster, and by extension a greater church, in this way: 'a diocesan church that functions as an historic representative focus of public faith in its locality' (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013, p. 62).

Holmes and Kautzer (2013) attempted to profile attendance trends in greater churches, and found that the scope of their research was limited by the incomplete nature of annual mission statistics gathered by the Research and Statistics department of the Church of England.  They used a questionnaire to elicit information from greater churches, but the response rate (52%) was relatively disappointing.  Twelve respondents (48%) reported a growth in the number of regular worshippers over the last five years; two (8%) reported

experience of decline; and 10 (40%) reported figures which had stayed about the same over the period.  A striking finding from the available data was an indication that weekday services at greater churches played a less significant role than they do in the better-staffed cathedrals, though many greater churches did appear to be working hard to increase the impact of their daily ministry.  In his study of church growth, Jackson (2015) claimed that, even though greater churches have lacked the capacity of cathedrals to plant and develop weekday congregations, data over the last five years suggest that the dynamic has started to change: as compared with 2007, weekday attendance at greater churches in 2012 was around two-thirds higher (p. 220).  Holmes and Kautzer's consultations with representatives of greater churches revealed a range of factors related to growth: initiating new services and congregations; increasing the civic profile; improving welcome and hospitality; developing educational programmes; cultivating mission intentionality; and promoting inclusion and diversity in worship, membership and outreach (Holmes & Kautzer, 2013, p. 72).

So what has been the impact of the Greater Churches Network?  Notably, Jackson (2015) wrote: 'It may be no coincidence that greater church [attendance] numbers began to turn around as the network started to focus more on common mission issues' (p. 221).  This claim was based on the observation that congregations tend to grow when their clergy make connections with each other, learn from and support each other, and develop strategy and intentionality together.

*Greater churches and cathedrals*

The profile of greater churches was highlighted by Davie (2015) in the second edition of her landmark volume *Religion in Britain*.  She suggested that many greater churches 'fulfil similar roles to cathedrals but on a smaller scale … and attract similar types of people' (p. 140).  Aware of a measure of bewilderment in the public mind about the different categories

of churches, she argued there that 'the definition of a cathedral should not be considered too rigidly' (p. 140)[4]. This is a fair point. Confusingly, the word cathedral can be used of any large church (for example, Thaxted in Essex and Altarnun in Cornwall); but it is properly used of a building that houses the bishop's throne, the *cathedra* (Harvey, 1974). Anecdotally, the non-churchgoing British public can be challenged sometimes to distinguish between a rather grand parish church and a cathedral (Archbishops' Commission on Cathedrals, 1994, p. 6). A factor that might also cause a measure of confusion is the origin of certain Church of England cathedrals, built as parish churches but elevated to cathedral status when new dioceses were created in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries (Beeson, 2004). The evolution of these 'parish church cathedrals' has been judged problematic (Morrish, 1998; Sadgrove, 2006).

Theory suggests that cathedrals may fulfil a role in vicarious religion, acquainting the passive majority with the action of the religious minority (Muskett, 2015); and there is no reason why cathedral-like greater churches should not have the potential to perform a similar function. Despite being immobile, buildings are not passive and have power to exert a force on the world (Wharton, 2015, p. xix). Greater church buildings, just like cathedrals, can be powerful iconic landmarks that communicate the action of the faithful by non-verbal means. Indeed, analysis of Census data on religion has demonstrated a 'proximity effect' of big church buildings, in so far as wards closest to them returned more Christian affiliates than expected after controlling for social demography (Village & Muskett, 2016): the finding raises intriguing questions and the reasons for the effect need to be explored. In addition, just like cathedrals, the greater churches showcase the creative arts and modern culture; and they too host major civic events and engage with the general public on a significant scale.

**Symbolic congregation studies**

*The narrative approach*

We all tell stories, and such stories help us to construct individual and group identity, representing ourselves to ourselves and to others: narrative analysis considers 'how people construct and deploy stories to interpret the world' (Coleman, 2005, p. 46). The narrative approach to congregation studies was pioneered by Hopewell (1987) in *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, a landmark resource that influenced studies of congregations on both sides of the Atlantic (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1998; Cameron, Richter, Davies, & Ward, 2005; Collins, 2005: Guest, Tusting, & Woodhead, 2004; Percy, 2005).

On the basis of Pepper's (1942) four world hypotheses (contextualist, mechanist, organicist, and formist) and the root metaphors underpinning these understandings, Hopewell (1987) distinguished four types of congregation studies: contextual, mechanistic, organic, and symbolic. He particularly favoured the fourth perspective. As the bedrock of Hopewell's symbolic approach to congregation studies, Pepper's (1942) 'formist' hypothesis viewed the world as a collectivity of structures where different entities operate in different ways to derive their particular identities. Hopewell (1987) described the formist view thus:

> Such a world rests upon the evidence of similarity, correspondence of certain images and patterns with others, and the argument that such consonance implies a common form or structure in which similar objects participate. (p. 200)

In Hopewell's symbolic approach, which focuses upon identity, the congregation is considered as 'a discourse, an exchange of symbols that express the views, values, and motivations of the parish' (p. 28). Likening congregation studies to the process of searching for a new home, he shed light on the symbolic approach with the observation that house-hunters contemplating the symbolic language of a potential dwelling want to find one that 'expresses the self-understanding of its occupants and their transaction with the world'. Such house-hunters ask: 'What, in any circumstance, does this place say about us? What does it

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express about our values and the way we engage the world? (p. 29). Hopewell argued that narrative (then a neglected perspective among those who studied congregations) can be 'a means by which the congregation apprehends its vocation' (p. 193). He claimed that narrative alone is 'sufficiently sensitive to amplify the unique accents of a congregation's idiom … and sufficiently comprehensive to link congregational events and meanings' (pp. 50-51).

*Constructing narrative through a time-line exercise*

Within the narrative approach to congregation studies, the time-line exercise is a recognized mechanism to enable a church congregation to gain self-understanding, reflect on its corporate identity and apprehend its vocation. The method was mentioned by Hopewell (1987, pp. 164-5) and also included in the congregational study handbooks edited by Ammerman and colleagues (1998) and Cameron and colleagues (2005). The goal of the time-line method is not to produce scholarly history but 'to construct or uncover the collective memory of the congregation on the basis of individual and group reflection' (Thumma, 1998, p. 210). The principles can be explained as follows:

> A diverse cross-section of members [is drawn together] to pool their memories of a particular period in the life of the church. A piece of plain wallpaper, affixed to a wall, with time segments marked vertically, will cover the period under discussion. It is best to stay within living memory, although key dates in the more distant past, which had a decisive impact upon the congregation can also be included. The paper needs also to be divided horizontally to denote the local, the denominational, the national and the global. The exercise works best if participants are encouraged to work as a group and contribute their memories as they occur, stimulating each other

to remember.  If the time-line is left in place, others can be asked to contribute on future occasions.  (Cameron et al., 2005, p. 34)

*Metaphor as the focus of a narrative approach*

Fundamental to the narrative approach adopted for the present congregation study is metaphor: a symbolic literary device, which frames our understanding in a distinctive way. As 'storied people' we cannot survive without metaphor (Howell, 2015, p. 144).  Notably, such figurative language has been a potent device facilitating access to 'the story beyond the story' of cathedrals (Murray, 2014, p. 108).  Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classic study suggested that our ability to access stories in that way rests on the significance of metaphor in the mechanism of the mind, structuring the most basic understanding of experience; and on that basis, Watson (1995) argued that metaphor is 'absolutely vital for the understanding of theology' (p. 8).  For his part, McKinnon (2012) argued that close attention to metaphor has much to offer the sociology of religion; and he advocated an empirical methodological approach that identifies religious metaphors, asks what they mean to the people involved, discovers what difference they make to the context, and asks why they work when they do.

The aim here is to access the story behind the story of the chosen greater church through the metaphor which the congregation has lately adopted to symbolize its *telos*: 'sacred space, common ground'.  Early adopters of this relatively new figure of speech were the Deans of Gloucester and Christ Church Oxford (Gloucester Cathedral, 2015; Percy, 2015).  Percy's usage of the phrase emphasized a calling to be welcoming and hospitable, to offer an opportunity for prayer and contemplation in an oasis that contrasts with the busyness of the outside world.  Barley's (2015) case study of Truro Cathedral, which works under the 'sacred space, common ground' banner, revealed how the metaphor can be symbolic of an hospitable public utility oriented to the spiritual and to the wider community at one and the

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same time.  But when Barley wrote of Truro Cathedral embracing the implications of this dual perspective with 'generosity of heart' (p. 411), she also articulated the underlying tension between the two faces of a cathedral: the 'spectrum of potential audiences challenges all cathedrals across England' (p. 409).

**Method**

As companion to the whimsical evaluation of cathedral metaphors (Muskett, 2016) inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass*, the present study features a narrative involving what is conceptualized as a temporal wonderland. There is, however, no anthropomorphism in this particular adventure, no Humpty Dumpty and no mad tea-party.  The wonderland in question is the pioneering six-day Christmas Tree Festival that featured an artificial ice-skating rink and attracted over 10,000 townspeople and visitors – a highly unusual experience offered to the town by the greater church which is the field of study.

Initially, a description will be provided of the town and its church, and of the congregation's ordinary activity.  Some of this detail has been extracted from the church's latest annual report (Parish Church of St Wulfram, 2016).  Hopewell (1987) was not a particular advocate of contextual, mechanistic or organic congregation studies.  Nevertheless, he recognized that all four approaches (that is, including the symbolic) are likely to be in play in any single instance of enquiry, even though one generally dominates (p. 19).  In this instance, Hopewell's favoured symbolic approach dominates, but it is important first to set the context and provide some functional facts about the church under scrutiny.

A range of qualitative data will then be employed to relate the narrative of the festival itself and the congregation's own narrative.  The narrative of the event draws on a mixture of festival publicity material, participant observation and local and national press coverage.

Through the reporting of interviews, the press coverage gives voice to the aspirations of the Rector and his response to the event. Within the first narrative element, a series of vignettes captures how Festival-goers encountered the church through their adventure in the wonderland. Finally, the congregation's own narrative will be related on the basis of data gathered through participant observation at a parish conference two months after the festival and from a parish magazine article written by different participant.

**The narrative: An adventure in wonderland**

*Context*

The narrative is set in the town of Grantham (population: 40,000+) in the rural county of Lincolnshire and Diocese of Lincoln. St Wulfram's Church, known as 'the glory of Grantham' (Pointer, 1978) is a fairly recent member of the Greater Churches Network. The church was one of the sample of 50 chosen for brief case studies for Historic England's recent report on the Major Parish Churches (Burrows, 2016, pp. 138-9). This fourteenth-century Grade I Listed Building won a 5-star rating in Simon Jenkins' *Thousand Best Churches* (2000, p. 376) rendering it (in his personal judgment) one of the top 18 churches in England, and in the top 10 Greater Churches. Jenkins' book suggests that the tower 'ranks with any masterpiece of English art' and recounts that Ruskin allegedly swooned on first catching sight of the tower (p. 378). St Wulfram's can be seen easily from trains along the East Coast line linking London and Edinburgh: along with Peterborough, York, Durham and Newcastle Cathedrals, and the greater churches in Doncaster and Newark, it has 'a strong visual value along a major transport route' (Burrows, 2016, p. 20). In the last couple of years, £600K was raised through grants and from the community to repair the 282-foot spire, described by Jenkins as 'the finest steeple in England' (p. 376). The repairs allowed Historic England to remove St Wulfram's from its 'at risk' register (Davies, 2015).

When the great wooden West Door is ajar, the internal glass doors (installed to commemorate the Millennium) blur the distinction between the outside world and internal space. The interior of the church −'a single vast rectangle' (Jenkins, 2000, p. 378)– can currently seat 700 (but did seat up to 1,500 for major services in the past). In 2015, the rows of 1930s chairs were replaced with modern stackable chairs; and in 2016 pew platforms were removed and floors levelled to create accessible and flexible space. Ambitious plans are currently being discussed for a multi-million pound development within the curtilage of the churchyard to free up and equip the sacred space (including such facilities as a community centre, song school with rehearsal area, office space, education centre, and heritage workshops to train apprentices). The Historic England case study included the following statements:

> The church feels that community use is essential to the sustainability of the church, and recaptures the medieval use of the space in ways that celebrate the joy of day-to-day life.
>
> The church aims to change negative perceptions … by welcoming the community and encouraging people to engage with the space and feel a sense of common ownership and belonging. (Burrows, 2016, p. 139).

The church takes seriously its calling to be a living witness to the gospel at the heart of the town; and in many of its activities there is effective contact with substantial numbers of people of all ages beyond the congregation. The range of worship reflects not only the breadth of the Anglican tradition, but also includes liturgy from the Iona and Taizé communities. The central act of worship is the Parish Eucharist with Sunday Club and Creche (replaced once a month by All Age Worship or a Parade Service, followed by a Choral Eucharist). Choral Evensong is sung most Sundays. In contrast to these acts of

worship, evening and mid-week services are quieter and more reflective. The Occasional Offices are an important point of contact and ministry within the wider community.

St Wulfram's is home for a busy choral community of children, young people and adults from across the area who form a nationally renowned church choir. The choir regularly sings services in cathedrals and takes up residencies. Music is a substantial aspect of the church's outreach to young people.

A coffee shop in church opens on Saturday mornings in the Winter season, and during the daytime on Wednesday to Saturday in the Summer season, when high numbers of tourists and pilgrims visit the church (often drawn by Jenkins' *Thousand Best Churches*). A good deal of quiet pastoral work is conducted through this facility.


*Wonderland*

The six-day Christmas Tree Festival in St Wulfram's, the first of its kind in Grantham and the initiative of Father Stuart Cradduck (Rector of Grantham since May 2014), ran from Tuesday evening 24 November to Advent Sunday afternoon (29 November) 2015. It featured a large artificial skating rink in the centre of the nave, as well as 105 Christmas trees in the side aisles and chancel, decorated by local businesses, charities, church groups and individuals. From Wednesday to Saturday, the festival opened from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. (skating times: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 to 7 or 8 p.m). Children paid £3 and adults paid £5 to skate for 30 minutes. Entry to the church simply for the Christmas Tree Festival cost adults £2, but children 12-and-under entered free. Refreshments were served during festival opening hours.

Throughout the festival, a member of the clergy was among those at the turnstile to welcome festival-goers and receive entry fees; and other members of the clergy (clearly distinguished by their dress) walked around the festival and chatted with visitors.

In the Lady Chapel were chairs where festival-goers could sit and pray quietly. Close to the chapel entrance was a large table with aids to prayer, five Bibles, and a range of leaflets about spirituality. A notice on the table read: 'This table has a range of resources for prayer, study and reflection. Please do help yourself', followed by the verse: 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). Near the chapel altar was a display of nativity scenes within cardboard boxes (created by the Sunday Club and Crèche), stacked in the shape of a Christmas tree. In front of the boxes was literature for parents/carers to take away about the Sunday Club and Crèche. To the north-side of the chapel, beyond the Sunday Club display, the church's prayer board and votive candle stand were to be found in their usual places.

Two tall conifer 'prayer trees' lit with garlands of white lights stood at the entrance to the Lady Chapel. A notice nearby read: 'Thank you for visiting this ancient house of prayer. You are warmly invited to hang your own prayers upon these two trees using the tags provided. They will be prayed at the Eucharist on Sunday morning'.


*Adventures in wonderland*

On Tuesday at 5 p.m., there was a candlelit procession through the town to the church, followed by the festival opening and the grand switching on of the lights. 500 townspeople paid £10 each to attend the opening 'Slip and Sip' event. Over the course of the festival more than 10,000 people visited. Anecdote suggested that through their adventures in the wonderland many townspeople encountered St Wulfram's for the very first time.

Festival-goers would wander in and out of the Lady Chapel, at their own pace. There was no structured pathway to follow once inside the chapel, and it was up to the individual to decide how long to spend there. The craftwork of the Sunday Club and Crèche in the nativity scene boxes enticed children and families to venture further into the chapel and explore the

sacred space.  In contrast to the skating rink −full of loud music, excitement and laughter−

the chapel seemed a relatively peaceful oasis.  The chapel was not regarded as ambiguous

space, and it appeared to offer a chance to breath, to escape momentarily from the

entertainment and to engage in private contemplation.  Children and adults alike were

anxious to write and then hang their prayers on the prayer trees.  Not everyone wrote a

prayer, but the majority of those who entered the chapel took an interest in other people's

prayers and read some cards already hung on branches.

A total of 683 prayer cards were hung on the prayer trees.  One third of the prayers

(266) were clearly authored by children[5]; and eight of these were wholly graphic in nature.

Seven per cent of the inscriptions (46) were celebratory in nature, that is they bore an open

seasonal greeting (such as 'Merry Christmas to everyone', 'Merry Christmas ALL!', 'Happy

new year to all').  Seven of the cards bore open messages similar in nature to those that might

be written in a church visitors' book, including expressions of appreciation for the festival

and the work of the Rector (such as 'How great to see the church used in this way', 'Thank

you for all the wonderful trees', 'This church is amazing – THANK YOU xxx').

On Advent Sunday morning, the Family Eucharist was held on the 'ice'.  A selection

of prayers from the prayer trees were prayed aloud at the service.  The festival ended at 3

p.m. on Advent Sunday afternoon (but people still queued outside church and were

disappointed not to gain entry).  The skating rink was dismantled.  The subsequent evening

candlelit Advent Carol Service was well-attended.

By early December, Father Stuart's 'fall on the ice' during a TV interview had been

viewed online 28,000 times.  The incident provided a headline in the national church press

(Davies, 2015).


*Press coverage*

A local weekly newspaper heralded the success of the festival and published a series of photographs of families and youngsters enjoying the Christmas trees and having fun on the 'ice'. It quoted Father Stuart: 'As an event it was simply fabulous. So many people were saying they were delighted something of this kind was happening in Grantham' (Grantham Journal, 2016).

Interviewed about the festival by a *Church Times* reporter, Father Stuart explained that he wanted to challenge people's perception of St Wulfram's:

> It is a huge, very austere, vast building, which can be quite frightening to people; and it was about encouraging them to come in and experience the joy of our life inside these sacred walls…. The backbone of our thinking was about celebrating the church as sacred space, but also common ground. Through the joy of the laughter and fun that was happening here, God was at work. (Davies, 2015).

During that interview, he highlighted the prayer trees festooned with prayers.

*The congregation's own narrative*

One Saturday early in February 2016, members of the Parochial Church Council and congregation gathered in the church hall for a parish conference. A cross-section of the congregation responded to the open invitation (Bell, 2016) and a range of ages was represented.

In the morning, huge sheets of paper fixed onto the hall walls were used to construct a time-line, under the leadership of Assistant Curate, the Reverend Jacqueline Bell. Through this exercise, the story of St Wulfram's Church within the living past (that is, since 1920) was plotted decade-by-decade using photographs, newspaper cuttings, orders of service, and programmes of special events (such as flower festivals, Mystery Plays, a costume exhibition, and concerts by national and local orchestras and choirs). Plenty of documentation had been

collected beforehand in a set of boxes provided in church during the weeks leading up to the conference. Some information had also been gathered from elderly members of the congregation prevented from attending the event by ill-health, but whose memories the clergy were anxious to honour in the activity. People attached post-it-notes to the time-line to mark the point at which they had entered the church's life. Those with long memories entertained the gathering with oral reminiscences, stimulating others' recollections. It was surprising how much had happened over the years (Webb, 2016). A few days later, the time-line was moved into the church to stand along the south wall of the Lady Chapel for a couple of months, allowing others to add post-it-notes and information on events and people significant in the church's story. In May 2016, a team of volunteers began to digitize the time-line, the intention being not only to preserve the work in a permanent form for future display, but also to enable more people to contribute their anecdotes and photographs in due course.

After a shared lunch, those attending the parish conference reflected with Father Stuart on the notion of 'sacred space, common ground', working in groups and then pooling ideas to tease out the values captured by the phrase and embodied in the festival, and its significance for the way the congregation engaged with the wider community. There was broad agreement from each table that 'the church needed to remain a sacred building but also be available to the people of the town' (Webb, 2016, p. 6). The conference revealed widespread support for working under the 'sacred space, common ground' banner, but there was recognition of an inherent tension. Participants said it is important to capitalize on missiological opportunities to further the kingdom of God, yet the church should not be regarded as a perpetual funfair. Father Stuart said he recognized there was a tension in the two elements of the metaphor, but reminded the gathering that, just as the church had been used in medieval times by all the community for a variety of reasons, so it welcomed many people into the building to experience joy at the festival (Webb, 2016). He observed that the

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posting of over 600 prayers on the festival prayer trees had shown that people 'were open to the sacredness of the church' (Webb, 2016, p. 7),

The day ended with a service of unity and blessing. Walking to the church for this service, one participant mused: 'There is a challenge to all of us to live in such a way that we are individual "sacred space, common ground" projects, people of God yet open and welcoming to everyone, whatever their background' (Webb, 2016, p. 7). At the service those present renewed their commitment to the people of God in the town; thanked God for all who had gone before them; rededicated the church and themselves to be servants of God and at the service of the town; and moved forward in faithfulness and hope, looking to God to provide the blessings to enable them to be the Church of God's desire.

**Discussion**

The definition of a church is constantly being refined: 'somewhat like medieval cathedrals or abbeys, churches are now thought of as multiplexes' (Vosko, 2016, p. 43). Supporting this view, a December 2015 ComRes poll for the National Churches Trust revealed that more than four in five British adults (83%) recognizes that churches are important for society as they provide a space in which community activities can take place as well as worship (National Churches Trust, 2016). During the Christmas Tree Festival, St Wulfram's returned to the multiplex that it (and other churches and cathedrals) would have been in the Middle Ages − common ground for all townspeople. In this way, the festival can be compared with entrepreneurial activities of many cathedrals, about which the Dean of Lichfield (Chair of the Association of English Cathedrals) has recently spoken:

It's another way of attracting a new public into the whole place. We've been experimenting with things like festive food fayres, we've had a gala dinner and special black tie events… In the medieval period, the nave was very much the

people's place. You might well have had your market here. You might well have had

feasts on saints days here in the nave of the cathedral. So, in a way we're just

reviving a tradition (Dorber, 2016).

The time-line constructed at the St Wulfram's parish conference, which plotted major

festivals of the past in the congregation's narrative, served as a reminder that it was not novel

to invite the town to participate in an exciting event in the common ground of the church

building. Thus, in its own way, the church was reviving a tradition not only of medieval

times but of recent lived experience.

If the church functioned as a multiplex during the festival −common ground open to

all− was it concurrently operating as sacred space? This point was debated at the parish

conference. There was general agreement that the church should be available to the people of

the town while remaining a sacred building, and widespread support for the 'sacred space,

common ground' banner. Nevertheless, a potential tension was identified (one that chimed

with Barley's observation about Truro Cathedral's twin focus) and a concern was voiced that

St Wulfram's should not be viewed as a perpetual funfair. Does such an anxiety imply that

the vast rectangular interior of St Wulfram's was transformed temporarily into a profane

pleasure dome, with the sacred space of the church wholly surrendered to neutral common

ground? The words of Father Stuart in his church press interview suggest not. Furthermore,

it is notable that the sacred remained conspicuous throughout the festival: during the eating

and drinking, music and dancing, and unabashed fun, clergy were perpetually in evidence at

the front desk and mingling with the crowds, and plenty of use was made of the space set

aside for quiet reflection and prayer. A minority of joyous people chose to hang on the

prayer trees seasonal greetings and expressions of gratitude akin to those normally conveyed

through a church visitors' book. However, the congregation recognized that openness to the

sacred had been demonstrated by those who wrote prayers to hang on the prayer trees. It

could also be argued that openness to the sacred had been by demonstrated by those who were sufficiently interested simply to read a selection of prayer cards hanging on the trees. In such respects, the Lady Chapel functioned somewhat like the Prayer Space of the Millennium Dome, studied in November 2000 by Gilliat-Ray (2005), where 'the act of writing [prayers in an open book] and the content itself appear[ed] to have the effect of "embedding" religious experience within the fabric of an otherwise "neutral" location' (p. 360) and 'the space became sacralized not simply on account of the work of those who wrote the entries, but also by the efforts of those who read them' (p. 368).

There is no doubt that consonance between sacred space and common ground was achieved in the Lady Chapel during the festival. In ordinary time, such a natural intersection between the common ground and the sacred space of St Wulfram's occurs in the Coffee Shop, where the public can buy a cheap FairTrade coffee, and at the same time meet Christians and be receptive to the transcendent. Indeed, the church claimed in its annual report 2015 that a good deal of quiet pastoral work is conducted through the Coffee Shop.

So what did the festival seek to achieve by blurring still further the boundaries of the sacred and secular? In the words of Father Stuart, the festival aimed to challenge common perceptions of St Wulfram's: within a seemingly austere building, there was fun. When interviewed by the *Church Times* journalist, he admitted that the vast and austere building can scare people. For that reason, it was important to him to encourage people to enter St Wulfram's and discover the joy of life inside its sacred walls. There are two aspects to that injunction. The first is the act of enticing people inside, so they become familiar with the unfamiliar. As the companion article highlighted (Muskett, 2016), a basis of the notion of common ground in linguistics is personal acquaintance (Clark, 1996, p. 121); and as Wharton (2015) observed in her treatise concerning buildings as architectural agents, 'places, like

people, are usually more engaging and less dangerous the better we know them' (p. xiii).  The

other aspect of the injunction is enabling people to experience the joy of the Christian life.

This opportunity to experience joy chimes with Morisy's (2007) contribution to the

volume *Sacred Space* (North & North, 2007), where she suggested that fostering self-

forgetfulness and encouraging playfulness are important way-marks on the journey to enable

a response to the holy.  She argued first that 'art, creativity and fun, all of which have the

potential to promote a degree of self-forgetfulness, need to be part of our repertoire of

community involvement if we are to create sacred space for metropolitan man and woman'

(Morisy, 2007, p. 119).  Second, she argued that through play, involving self-forgetfulness in

the company of others, timelessness and joyfulness can be experienced, 'signifying the grace

that enfolds our world and our being' (p. 120).  These points reverberate with an aspect of

Morisy's (2004) 'foundational domain' of mission, which involves fostering the imagination,

through engagement with architecture, music, and the visual arts, and equipping people for

the explicit domain of faith and Church life (p. 154).  The foundational domain is an

important aspect of the function of cathedrals (Rowe, 2010), underpinning their theoretical

role as a mechanism to acquaint the passive majority with the activity of the religion minority

within vicarious religion (Muskett, 2015).

Just as vicarious religious presents genuine opportunities for mission at the

intersection between the practice of the religious minority and the 'approval' of the passive

majority (Davie, 2007), so there are genuine opportunities for mission and church growth at

the intersection between sacred space and common ground.  It is striking that, as portrayed by

Barley (2015) and Percy (2015), the 'sacred space, common ground' metaphor exhibits

hallmarks that chime with many of the greater church growth factors identified by Holmes

and Kautzer (2013).  Not least among those factors are the extension of generous hospitality

and the promotion of inclusivity and diversity in outreach, which are demanded by the

existential vocation, alongside the cultivating of mission intentionality and the embracing of opportunities to provide a context for spiritual expression.  The type of generous hospitality which encourages townspeople and visitors to make best use of common ground, often in novel and unorthodox ways, breeds familiarity with sacred space and thereby lays the foundation for a more thoughtful association with the sacred.  In such a way, the temporal is not divorced from the worship of God: the worship flows from and to all other ministries and actions in congregations and the larger community (Vosko, 2016, p. 43).

**Conclusion**

Within the framework of Hopewell's (1987) symbolic form of congregation studies, this enquiry has utilized metaphor as a key to access the story behind the story of a pioneering festival in a cathedral-like greater church.  A range of qualitative data was employed to chronicle the special event and relate the congregation's own narrative.  Like Hopewell's (1987) putative house-hunters, the congregation contemplated symbolic language hoping to inhabit an expression of its self-understanding and transaction with the world.  Through the stimulus of a time-line exercise after the festival, the congregation reflected on its corporate identity and apprehended its vocation.  The time-line enabled the congregation to nest its ongoing activity within the rich tapestry of the decades since 1920, and to recognize that inviting townspeople to an event on a significant scale in the vast church was not entirely new.  The congregation's endorsement of 'sacred space, common ground' (with its inherent tension) facilitated not only the conceptualization of its identity in a fresh symbolic way but also the sharpening of the focus of its calling.

According to Hopewell (1987), Christian mission is about 'crossing the boundary between the domestic and what lies beyond the parish household' (p. 199).  Here, in this study, is an example of an intentional congregation progressing beyond the prosaic and

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blurring the boundary of sacred space and common ground in order to interact with the wider community. It did so in a way that an iconic church of cathedral-like proportions in the heart of its local context can do especially well. The symbolic congregation study linked events and meaning, and revealed that the festival was not a single episode in the church's story but part of an unfolding institutional narrative. The challenge facing this greater church and others of similar proportions in comparable contexts is how to elongate the memory of such events and their association with the sacred space, in order to create a persistent consonance between that space and common ground where all are welcome and to engage in effective mission.

A potential drawback of this article is that it arises from the decision of a member of the congregation to treat a local church as a field of study. There is a risk in so doing because such a member is already an insider and may be accustomed to the church's values to be studied objectively (Williams, 1983, cited by Hopewell, 1987, p. 89). Although such an insider can never achieve total detachment, the trick is to observe as if an outsider, becoming a literary critic of the church narrative and seeking meanings afresh (Hopewell, 1987, p. 89). It is worth noting that at the time of writing the insider in this instance was merely a member of the church and neither held any office nor sat on any church committee, so had no preferential access to information. Another point of relevance in this connection is that the *telos* of the church began to evolve after the arrival of the new incumbent: in that sense, everyone's perspective changed and no prior insights could be taken for granted.

The study was carried out against the background not only of a developing interest in the distinctive roles of major parish churches and greater churches and their capacity to enable the Church of England to achieve growth, but also of the emergent field of Cathedral Studies which has brought rigour to the evaluation of the impact of cathedrals as key growth points in the Church (Francis, 2015). Building on Holmes and Kautzer's (2013) comparative

study of cathedral-like greater churches and cathedrals, the article responds to a call for further research to compare the ministry and mission offered by the network of greater churches with the ministry and mission of cathedrals (Muskett & Francis, 2015, p. 248). The study was both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature. Dialoguing with Cathedral Studies, it reflected on the application of a cathedral metaphor to a greater church and also, more broadly, on the context and characteristics of cathedral-like greater churches and the opportunities and tensions they face. There will be advantage in further analysis of the role of greater churches, especially in relation to mission and growth factors, so that their clergy can continue to learn from and support each other. The narrative approach which has borne fruit here may be helpful in that regard. A ready inclination to be attentive to other metaphors in the realm of symbolic congregation studies may also lead to an enhancement of our understanding of the role of our greater churches and cathedrals. It will also respond to McKinnon's (2012) plea for empirical consideration of the way metaphors are employed, their meaning, the difference they make and why they succeed.

**Notes**

1. Within the field of Cathedral Studies, a prime example of a study comparing parish churches with cathedrals is that on the Southwark Diocese by Lankshear, Francis, & Ipgrave (2015).

2. For a current list of members of the Greater Churches Network, see http://greaterchurches.org/

3. A 'Major Parish Church' has all or some of these characteristics: physically large (footprint over 1000m2); grade I or II* listed; significant heritage value; usually open daily to visitors; make a civic, cultural and economic contribution to their communities (Burrows, 2016).  The term was adopted by the Church of England in the early twenty-first century.  All churches in the Greater Churches Network fulfil the Major Parish Church criteria (p. 10).

4. By contrast, it is notable that the umbrella term 'greater churches' has not consistently discriminated between churches/abbeys and cathedrals: see, for example, *England's Greater Churches* (Nicholson, 1937), which covers cathedrals, abbeys and the great chapels of St George at Windsor and King's College at Cambridge.

5. Following Langford's (2015) procedure, authorship of prayer cards by children was inferred through content and sign-off information (for example, a statement of age); attention was also paid to lack of maturity in handwriting.

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