



Nicholas Henshall
Dean of Chelmsford

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Dear friends and colleagues across the Cathedral Community,

A SERIOUS HOUSE ON SERIOUS EARTH

Cathedral culture and Cathedral identity

So far the current “Big Conversation” has been fascinating. This morning on Zoom some 30 or so gathered and what I expected might last an hour at most became two hours of lively, engaged conversation. And although we talked about many things, I’d suggest that two key themes are emerging: culture and identity.

I had expected most people to talk about the pattern of worship going forward, but so far that has been a relatively minor theme. And even when people have been talking about worship it has very much been reflecting on precisely those themes of culture and identity. And if that all sounds a bit overblown, “culture” really just means “the way we do things round here”, and identity is simply a way of asking the question “what is a Cathedral?”

You will remember that when I was appointed here, the Bishop of Chelmsford gave me a very clear brief - that the “primary task of the new Dean of Chelmsford is to stretch a parish church cathedral to become the Cathedral for the Diocese, beyond and existing comfort zone.” And while the Bishop was clear that the comfort zone was in the Cathedral, it soon emerged that it was in the Diocese too.

One of the ironies here at Chelmsford Cathedral is that while it has served a local community for 800 years, it has never been a typical parish church. As St Mary's Chelmsford it was also always the county church for the whole region, and indeed the room above the porch was the county records office. It served exactly the same region in that capacity as the Diocese we serve today. And the north transept was built as a place for Archdeacons to transact diocesan business. A church very much at the centre of the civic and church life of the region - and therefore as the popular vote indicated resoundingly, exact the right church to become the Cathedral for the new Diocese in 1914.

But that line to me from the Bishop back in 2014 suggested that there was still something contested about the Cathedral’s identity, and I would say that there are ways in which this is still the case. Which is precisely why I am inviting people to read the other document attached with this week’s letter.

That document – “What is a Cathedral?” is, I admit far longer than any Dean’s Letter, but it is seeking to tackle these big questions of culture and identity in a much wider perspective.

The document speaks for itself and I warmly invite you to read it, ponder it, and reflect on the questions highlighted in red. Responses are very, very welcome as we continue our big conversations into the new year and beyond.

With my best wishes.

Nicholas

