Building Associations among Cathedral Friends: From Topophilia to Fiat Social Capital?

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Abstract

Anglican cathedrals depend in part on their ‘Friends’ to support ministry and mission and to meet considerable building maintenance costs. Binding together subscribers in their topophilic sentiments, Friends’ charities may rely in turn on social capital to act as a catalyst for generosity. This study set out to explore whether topophilia is predictive of social capital among cathedral Friends. It draws on questionnaire data provided by 923 Friends of six English cathedrals. The results of multiple linear regression show that individual Friends’ social capital, measured by a modified version of the Williams Religious Social Capital Index, was predicted by the strength of their bond with the cathedral as place. Additional factors predicting social capital were: sex and education, involvement in other religious groups, social motivation for joining the Friends, and activity therein. The paper concludes by introducing the concept of ‘fiat social capital’ (a resource sponsored by such an organization adopting an instrumental approach). The findings will help Friends organizations to pursue charitable aims more effectively; and they increase knowledge about sources of social capital in cathedrals, a phenomenon investigated thus far in congregations.

Keywords

The present and future of Anglican cathedrals “lies particularly in their ability to enable and sustain a range of connections” (Theos & The Grubb Institute, 2012, p. 62). As “enormous magnets for all sorts of people” (Platten, 2012), cathedrals make three-way connections between people, place and God (Platten &

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While this capacity to make connections may be important for missional purposes and to build beneficial links between disparate local communities in an increasingly atomised world (Theos & The Grubb Institute, 2012), connections between people, place and God can be crucial for a more profane purpose, that of fundraising, not only to meet day-to-day running costs, but also to conserve and maintain cathedral buildings, the ongoing costs of which are immense. At the simplest level, as the number of connections increases, so too does the likelihood of leveraging more money. But there is also a more subtle value in the connections a cathedral makes: religious social networks influence generosity (Brown & Ferris, 2007; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). If literature that explores generosity with money and time in a religious context highlights social capital as a predictor thereof, the challenge must be to identify mechanisms that will create and sustain relationships conducive to building the resource.

Against that background, this study explores factors associated with measurable social capital in cathedrals. The focus is on ‘Friends’ organizations, whose charitable aims tend to require members to assist in maintaining, repairing, and restoring cathedral fabric, and to beautify the buildings (Muskett, forthcoming). All 42 Anglican cathedrals in England have a Friends association. Most were established in the late 1920s or early 1930s; and deep affection was the basis of cathedral Friendship (Muskett, 2012a). Objectives of modern cathedral Friends’ groups are similarly rooted in an affective relationship (Muskett, forthcoming); and their contributions to fundraising and volunteering, and capacity to build community, are well-documented (Archbishops’ Commission on Cathedrals, 1994; Beeson, 2004; English Tourist Board, 1979). Memberships total 55,000 (Beeson, 2004). Dissemination of information through official publications was, and remains, important for both sides of the dyad: information enables Friends, near and far, to keep in touch; and it engenders a well-informed appreciation of the cathedral, reinforcing the bonds of affection, and helping to sustain the supporter base.

Given the enduring premise of cathedral Friendship, the specific point of interest in this study is the potential influence of Friends’ topophilia (their love of place) over stocks of social capital in these charities. It will be claimed that by understanding factors to influence connections among Friends cathedrals are better-placed to adopt strategies to engineer the social structure, thereby maximizing scope for generosity.

The argument in this article, which depends on the social capital construct fully discussed elsewhere (e.g., Muskett, 2014), is developed in several steps. First, topophilia will be defined; and note will be taken of accounts of topophilic bonds with cathedral as places. Second, attention will turn to the influence of