



Several years ago, I heard this most beautiful musical rendition of Psalm 84, which was lifted up this morning. It was sung by the Westminster Abbey Choir, the same choir that has been part of some of the most famous worships broadcasted throughout the world in recent decades: from the late Queen Elizabeth's coronation and funeral to their annual Advent Lessons & Carols and plenty of other services in between. It is an all-boys choir, supposedly started all the way back in the 14th century, when the Abbey was a monastery.

Yes, for as often as Westminster Abbey has been on television screens in places well beyond Great Britain, it is a most beautiful cathedral, to say the least. And when the choir sings the arrangement of the 84th Psalm, "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts," they have a way of convincing the rest of us that God indeed dwells there. That with more majestic spires and incredible stonework and breath-taking stained-glass windows and soaring towers over the surrounding city landscape, that must be where the almighty and ever-lasting God lives on earth, because only the best and the most extravagant of places can be where the Lord of Heaven will emerge among us.

However, I want to tell you about a different kind of place a little over one hundred miles northwest of that most famous cathedral in London. It is on the campus of the University of Birmingham: St. Francis Hall. It just appears to be this random stand-alone square building of faded bricks with no spires or towers whatsoever. When you get inside, it is all the more un-appealing to the eye. There are three rooms: the worship room with a capacity for twenty-five people, and a most hideous red shag carpeting and the same color draping behind a small altar. The other room is called the Cabdury Room, which seems to be suitably named for its not-so-pleasant carpeting style as well; almost as if a big Cabdury egg exploded all over the floor. But that room is meant for a wide range of uses for 25 people. And then, there's the Oasis Lounge and Kitchen that can fit 12 people. If there is any church-like space in England that is the complete opposite of ambience and majesty from Westminster Abbey, it is St. Francis Hall on the university campus in Birmingham.

Nevertheless, the beauty of God most definitively emerges in that humble place just as much as anywhere else throughout the world, because it is never about the carpet or the walls or the chair setup to determine the Lord's presence among us. Instead, it is about what still can happen when you do not have the breath-taking architecture to work with at all. Actually, St. Francis Hall is home to the university chaplains of a variety of faith expressions, because as much as late teens and early twenty-somethings may come off as having the entire world figured out, more and more of them are willing to reveal a vulnerability about themselves that they may not want to broadcast to their families and close friends. Such honest and holy conversations can still happen on folding chairs on shag carpets.

St. Francis Hall is also the home of the local St. Mark's Lutheran Church, where neighbors of the community worship and serve with college students. They go on outings to nearby countryside areas, musical events, and even do homebound visits with one another. They, evidently, don't need impressive spires and stonework to bring God's love to life. It can still happen on folding chairs on shag carpets. Additionally, during the week, the building is used in a variety of ways, including prayer groups and Mass for the local Roman Catholics. The architecture doesn't have to be perfect to open the doors for others to come in and experience compassion for one another, to be a place of welcome and grace and mercy, as if that is supposed to be what the body of Christ is all about.

Next Sunday, will give thanks to God for 75 years of ministry here at Covenant. We will share plenty of memories of what has happened inside this building, where we know God has dwelled, too. However, we also proclaim that God dwells with us in the outings beyond the walls, in the homebound visits, and many other ways that we have been the body of Christ beyond this beautiful place. Yes, “how lovely is God’s dwelling place,” to say the least, but that ultimate dwelling place is not inside Westminster Abbey, or the Notre Dame Cathedral, or the Sistine Chapel, or even here inside the Lutheran Church of the Covenant.

No, God’s most cherished dwelling place is inside each of you, the very place God has insisted to dwell from the beginning with even more breath-taking love, the most inspiring grace, and the ultimate hope that will last beyond any brick and stone on this earth. It’s never about the carpet or the walls or the chair setup to determine God’s presence among us. It’s about our Lord who walked out of the tomb and into our imperfect but cherished hearts and will never, ever leave. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

[Multi-Faith Chaplaincy at St. Francis Hall, University of Birmingham \(birningham.ac.uk\)](http://birningham.ac.uk)