
AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

Building Something New For Australia
John Parkes, Director

- **Acknowledgement of first inhabitants**
- **Archaeological evidence**
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- **Burgmann's vision**
- **Development of ecumenical vision**
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The History

The future is inevitably conditioned by history. Perhaps, then a good departure point for this reflection is an examination of the history of this place. The first inhabitants of the parcel of land whose story culminates in the building of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture were the Ngunawal people. It is very appropriate to begin with an acknowledgment of the presence of these First People as we talk about a site now dedicated to the advancement of reconciliation and understanding.

The place is deeply permeated by its indigenous roots. Archaeological evidence shows that Aboriginal people were in this locality more than 15,000 years ago. The land had food and water in abundance and the limestone plains provided a place where, at significant times, various tribes could meet. The river that flowed past the site, the Molonglo, is an Aboriginal place name. Today, of course, it has been subsumed in Lake Burley-Griffin. There is evidence that the name of our city is itself derived from the name given to it by its original inhabitants.

European settlers arrived in the district around 1820. On 28 October 1857 Robert Campbell bought 1060 acres of land for a property that he called Madura. Campbell used the land mainly for grazing stock. After he died, the property was subdivided and sub-let. The part of the property on which we now stand then became known as Rottenberry Hill, named for its tenant farmer, George Rottenberry. When Canberra was chosen to be the national capital and the Commonwealth began acquiring land, it was clear that many farmers like Rottenberry who had leases close to the centre of the city, would be asked to give up their land.

As plans advanced for the building of a National Capital, land was made available to the denominations for the establishment of 'cathedral' style churches. The Rottenberry Hill site was formally granted to the Anglicans in early 1926.

The first of three main characters in the developing saga of the site is the immigrant Anglican Bishop of Goulburn, Lewis Bostock Radford. In the 1920s it was



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clear to Radford that the Federal Government was committed to moving the National Capital from Melbourne to the Monaro Plains. It was also clear that a generous allocation was being made in the National Capital to nurture the spiritual life of the young country. Radford more than most saw the remarkable opportunity this presented, and his life became dominated by the demands of raising money and attempting to engage the imagination of his fellow Anglicans. Radford found the task of promoting St Mark's Anglican Cathedral difficult.

He began in the austerity of the Great Depression and waged a battle with his fellow Australians' parochialism and suspicion of Federal politics. His own denomination was unwilling to forgo local denominational loyalty to seize a wider vision. In the end, the vision was not enough to carry the day, and Radford himself was broken by it.

Radford's successor was the controversial Ernest Henry Burgmann, the so-called red bishop. Burgmann, the second of our main players, acknowledged the importance of the developing national capital by relocating himself in Canberra and by having the Diocese of Goulburn rename itself as the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn.

As he settled in Canberra, his vision of a national theological library and Institute of Public Theology began to take shape. The St Mark's Cathedral site was a logical place for this development, not the least because the Government was beginning to look for some activity on the site to justify the existence of the lease. Burgmann began the work and because it was a staged development including a future cathedral, it was in accord with the lease provisions.

Little happened to the site in Bishop Ken Clements' time. Under the next two Bishops, Cecil Warren and Owen Dowling, much work was done seeking to bring to fruition the dream of a National Anglican Cathedral. Despite all efforts, and in the face of Anglican parochialism and that deeply felt Australian suspicion for all

things to do with Canberra, these efforts failed. By this time, it seemed as though the vision for a national cathedral was permanently doomed.

The Vision

The arrival in 1993 of Bishop George Victor Browning, the third of our foundational players, marked a new stage in the development of the vision. It was important to think outside the square. The drive for a national Anglican cathedral or collegiate church seemed not to be practical. Bishop George was willing to ask if the land was being given now, what might it be given for? The answer seemed to him to extend beyond the limits of denominational affiliation. Rather than celebrate denominational individuality, George was able to discern the need for a place to celebrate the place of the Christian faith in the life of the nation. So what had begun as an exclusively Anglican project, suddenly became unashamedly ecumenical.

A number of factors came together to cement a vision. From the start the planning committee which Bishop Browning had called together had a number of significant meetings with the local Aboriginal community. They sowed the seed in the mind of the committee that whatever was done on the site must have to do with reconciliation between peoples whose stories had a history of alienation.

About this time Bishop George had come into contact with two significant Aboriginal leaders, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Mick Dodson. These two became good friends and supporters. They saw possibilities of the site as a place of reconciliation for Australians. It was from talks with the Aboriginal people and the concept of a meeting place that the Tent of Meeting (of which more in a moment had its genesis.

Next was the unequivocal support of Governor General, Sir William Deane. From his first conversation with Bishop George, Sir William became committed to the vision and was a driving force for the project. He believed in the vision and was able to open doors. He was a source of energy and support for the bishop and the team.

The vision for the future was enunciated in a quote from Morris's November 1994 address to the National Church Centre Conference.

The Centre was to be:

a place where men and women can range freely over the mysteries in which we all live, where they are not obliged to look over their shoulders for fear of eavesdroppers and censors, where they are free to be wrong in order to discover right ... a place where beauty resides and love resides and God resides, and the Grail-search is re-enacted as a search for truth; for new enlightenment in old truths.

The first structure to be built was the Tent of Meeting. The idea comes from the wilderness experience of the Jewish people. Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp. Anyone who had to consult Yahweh would go out to the tent (Exodus 33:7ff). The tent was also a place where people who were in dispute with one another could meet, outside the camp, on neutral ground. The focus was on reconciliation and meeting with God.

The tent symbolism can also be found in the Judeo-Christian faith understanding of the people of God as being on a journey. The tent invites shelter and rest for the continuing journey. It provides space for thanksgiving and for celebration of unity and reconciliation, at the same time suggesting that on earth there is no lasting residence and that the people of God are ready to pull up stakes and keep travelling into the future of God. (Hebrews 11:9f.) The poles of our tent were carved by local young people. In front of the tent is the symbolic fireplace, surrounded by twelve stones, which has become the spiritual heart of the centre.

The final factor in the mix which has led to the establishment of the ACC&C is the

cooperative arrangement which has developed between Charles Sturt University and the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn. Beginning with a cooperation with the School of Theology at St Marks, the partnership has spread over into the ACC&C development. The courageous support of Vice Chancellor Cliff Blake and his successor Prof Ian Goulter and then Dean of the Faculty of Arts now pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Ross Chambers has been a vital ingredient in the coming together of this momentous project.

A Council of eminent Australians was appointed including the likes of Sir Ninian Stephen and Sir Gus Nossel, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Hugh Mackay as well as leading representatives of major churches. A competition was called to select a design for a Centre. The Chair of the eminent panel appointed to judge the competition was Sir John Overall. The winning design submitted by Bligh Voller Nield was announced at the formal launch on 2 June 1998.

The design was described as being deferential to the landscape and assuming a spiritual quality by that deference. Viewed from the street the building would be essentially a rippling floating roof above the simplest of walls and grassed berms. Unlike the berms that are a feature of Parliament House, these are to be covered with the native grasses that are already a part of the site. Their natural condition will reflect the passing of the seasons. The architects sought to capture a vision of sacred space, being part landscape, part building. The grasslands conservation area, which was understood as representing indigenous Australians, was to be left untouched.

The Achievement

Stage One is now complete and fully funded. It comprises a 250-seat chapel, simple but flexible in design with catering, music and state of the art audio-visual facilities. There is in addition a meeting room and an intimate prayer room seating a maximum of half a dozen or so. The

chapel will be a focus for worship, arts, music, drama, literature and poetry.

Planning is underway for the second stage, the Collegiate Wing, Running along Blackall Street, and covered by an earth berm, there will be academic offices and lecture rooms, an exhibition area and a multimedia theatre. There will also be a study space for research. Although the buildings and the images are Christian, the project will encourage dialogue with other faiths in Australian life and in relation to Australia's neighbours, so that we may better understand each other.

The third stage comprises a Great Space, designed to take the shape of the activities to be held there. This will become the place where the nation meets to rejoice and to grieve. If a celebration is to be held there then the Great Space will be set up for that occasion. For a public memorial (like Thredbo or Port Arthur or the aftermath of September 11) then the space will take that shape and feel. In the amphitheatre outside, in the warmer weather, 2000 to 3000 people could gather for an event. The whole area is designed to take about 5000 people.

A Pilgrim Walk circles the native grasslands that sit at the centre of the site. Already we have established a prayer labyrinth, a forest gully and pond and an open-air chapel. The poles that supported the tent of meeting are now freestanding and have become the pilgrim poles.

We are about to commission a competition to design a great cross, 20 metres high, which will dominate the site. As the walk develops, alcoves and memorials will emerge celebrating aspects of the engagement of faith and culture. We are planning a bible garden that looks to the Abrahamic foundations of the three major faiths, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The pilgrim walk is already and will increasingly become a place of tranquillity and reflection; a retreat from the insistent demands of ever more busy lives. On 26th September last the Prime Minister

became the first pilgrim, and our dream is that many will become pilgrims over time.

Already we have programs of engagement. We offer prizes for religious poetry and short film. Our programs of engagement cover interfaith dialogue, a beginning of a conversation in the engagement between science and religion, public ethics. We are planning workshops on integrity in public discourse. Hugh Mackay is booked to give a public lecture later in the year. The Archbishop of Rwanda will speak at a colloquium on post conflict reconciliation and the International Court of Justice in September. Reconciliation is central to our mission. It was significant that the first public service of worship was the ecumenical service for 2002 Sorry Day 2002. Many church and community groups already use of facilities and we look forward to an expansion of use.

On the site originally given for a denominational cathedral, a facility is emerging by the grace of God that will provide a focal point for Christians and a resource for the spiritual life and journey of all Australians. The Centre will welcome all who come to use it as a place for reflection, prayer and pilgrimage. It aims to recognise and promote the indigenous contribution to an authentic Australian spirituality, and provide a focus for reconciliation.

The Centre will be a place for the study and celebration of the diverse Christian traditions and expressions of faith, which exist in multicultural Australia. It will also be a place for the exhibition, demonstration and performance of the arts, exploring their interaction with the Christian faith. Through talks and discussion, the study of Christianity and religion in Australian life will be explored. The project is unapologetically Christian. All hospitality has to be delivered from a base. Our base is Christianity. Our mission is engagement. Our model is hospitality and generosity. I hope that the vision speaks to you, and if it does, I ask you to become advocates for us.

John Parkes
Director