



The Work of ACC&C and PaCT

by Margaret Roberts

Thank you Susan for your warm welcome and for the opportunity to talk about the work of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) and the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre (PaCT).

Professor Haire has asked me to pass on his apologies. He is a keynote speaker along with Dr Anwar Ibrahim, Opposition leader from Malaysia at an important interfaith conference in Perth this weekend. Interfaith dialogue is one of the ACC&C's core activities.


Susan has asked me to talk about the work of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (Centre) and to focus particularly on the academic and research functions of the centre.

So over the next 15 minutes or so I will talk briefly about:

- the history of this site and how the Centre has developed
- the vision and core activities of the ACC&C
- the role of the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre (PaCT), and
- the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT).

Brief history of the site

- I would first like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who have cared for this land for at least 15,000 years.
- From the 1820s the site was used as farmland, first by grazier Robert Campbell who leased the site, then by tenant farmer George Rottenberry.
- In 1913 the Foundation stone of Canberra was laid.
- In 1926 the Commonwealth Government allocated this land to the Anglican Church to build a national cathedral. But, of course, the Great Depression and then WW II followed and the Cathedral was never built because of lack of funds.
- In 1957 the St Mark's National Anglican Memorial Library was opened and this has now developed into St Mark's National Theological Centre, the headquarters of the School of Theology of Charles Sturt University.
- In the 1990s, Bishop George Browning, Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, had a vision for an ecumenical centre which would focus on reconciliation. He spoke with his friends Lowitja O'Donoghue, Mick Dodson and Sir William Deane about the concept and these discussions proved very fruitful leading to the development of the ACC&C.
- The site is a gift of the Anglican Church in Australia to the ecumenical movement. The Centre is a partnership of the National Council of Churches in Australia and Charles Sturt University.
- The Centre is run by a Board composed of church leaders and prominent lay people including Sir William Deane, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Bishop Stuart Robinson




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and others. There is also an advisory Council of eminent Australians including Professor Lowitja O’Donoghue, Reverend Tim Costello, with the Governor General as the Patron. The Centre has a staff of three; Professor James Haire is the Executive Director (Professor of Theology with CSU, former President of the UCA and Director of the National Council of Churches in Australia); a Centre Manager and Jessica Nelson, the Administrative Assistant.

The grounds of the ACC&C are open at all times to the public and are particularly beautiful in the spring. When you visit you will find:

- The Meeting Place forms the spiritual heart of the Centre, reflecting themes from Israelite and Indigenous spirituality. It was established in 1996 with an Aboriginal fire smoking ceremony. The 12 stones represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the fireplace is a place where indigenous people have told the stories of their people, culture and spirituality for centuries.
- 2000 HM Queen Elizabeth II planted the first Australian cypress tree near the Place of meeting. The cypress represent our European heritage and the eucalypts our indigenous heritage.
- 2001 Stage 1 of the building project began. In Sept 2001 PM John Howard became the first pilgrim on the Pilgrim Walk which covers the perimeter of the site.
- The Pilgrim poles were designed and carved for the meeting of the World Council of Churches held in Canberra in 1991. Each of the poles reflects themes in Christianity and Indigenous religion.
- The Labyrinth was opened March 2002. An Australian labyrinth with Australian grasses, it was a project of Indigenous people and Chernobyl survivors reflecting a theme of solidarity in suffering as a result of uranium mining and the nuclear accident of 1986. The central rock which comes from the Hamersley Ranges in WA is 2.7 billion years old and was a gift from the National Museum of Australia.
- The Chapel was also opened in 2002. The focus of the view from the Chapel is the Cross. The roof features the native grasses found at the top of the site. The Chapel is multipurpose – modern staging, seating, audiovisual equipment. It is used for national ecumenical services, conferences, graduations and exhibitions.
- The Outdoor Chapel was established in May 2002.
- The Cross and Narrow Gate was established in 2004 with funding from the Southern Cross Club. It stands 25m tall and is floodlit at night and visible from around Canberra. The Cross faces Parliament House.
- In 2007 the first of 7 shelters was installed on the site. “I am the bread of life”. They will reflect the “I am...” statements at the end of John’s Gospel.



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- In 2008 George Browning House, the administrative and academic headquarters, was opened.
- In August 2008 the Bible Garden was opened. It was established by a trust by the late Gerard Robinson, a South African born businessman who migrated to Australia in 1908. He created Australia’s first Bible Garden at Sydney’s Palm Beach in the 1960s. The Centre’s garden includes plants found in the Bible stories. Almost 70 have already been planted and in time there will be a total of some 148 plants of the Bible. The shape of the Garden reflects The Menorah which is said to represent the burning bush where Moses saw the angel who told him to lead the Israelites to the land of Canaan.
- In late 2009 the Mural Wall will be unveiled. It stands 24 metres long and 4 metres high and will feature a depiction of a painting, by an Aboriginal artist, of the Holy Spirit coming to our land.

Vision

The Centre endeavours to provide a meeting place for ecumenical dialogue and joint Christian celebration, reflection and action.

The Centre seeks to engage in interfaith dialogue from a Christian perspective, particularly with the followers of the other major world religions in Australia and regionally.

The Centre seeks to be a place of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Centre seeks to engage in applied Christian theology as a means of articulating a Christian response to the will of God in the issues of contemporary society and culture.

The Centre is regarded as a national institution and as such its records are archived by the NLA.

A major function of the Centre is to provide a facility for academic research in theology. This is provided through the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre (PaCT)

PaCT is one of five Strategic Research centres in Charles Sturt University (CSU), designed to foster excellence in applied research.


The other Strategic Research Centres are:

- National Wine and Grape Industry Centre
- Centre for Research in Complex Systems
- International Centre of Water for Food Security
- Centre for Inland Health

PaCT is the only university research centre of its kind in theology in Australia. It has a very high output of academic research.

Its member institutions are:

- The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, CSU, Canberra
- United Theological College (UTC), North Parramatta (Uniting Church in Australia NSW/ACT)
- St Mark’s National Theological Centre, Canberra (Anglican)



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Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn)

Rev Professor James Haire is the Director of PaCT.

What is public and contextual theology?

Public theology is concerned with analysis of the public expression of the Christian faith, and the public implications of the Christian faith for the whole of society and the environment.


Contextual theology refers to analysis of the way theology has been conceived in particular contexts. It is concerned with the interaction between universal themes in theology and issues relating to the particular context in which theology is developed.

What does PaCT do?

- PaCT provides a collaborative research environment through focus groups in both Sydney and Canberra.
- PaCT organises and hosts conferences and seminars.
- PaCT is the leading producer in CSU of high quality academic research. In addition to articles and chapters PaCT members have produced a book series, published by ATF Press, with one monograph by Graeme Garrett, *Dodging Angels on Saturday* and three edited collections *From Resurrection to Return*, *Into the World You Love* and *Validating Violence, Violating Faith*. In 2008 PaCT members produced a total of 85.5 DEEWR points which is the equivalent of 17 monographs. This is an increase of 60% over the previous year.
- PaCT has a number of Research Fellows: Associate Professor Scott Cowdell (St Mark's) – Scott has just published a monograph – *Abiding Faith*, The Revd Dr Stephen Burns (UTC) and Professor Wayne Hudson, Strategic Research Professor in the Humanities in Canberra (40% CSU and 60% Uni of Tasmania).
- PaCT currently has 5 PhD students who have received scholarships from PaCT via CSU. PaCT also provides “buy-in” funds to release academic staff from administrative work to concentrate on research and publishing.
- There are close to 50 members of PaCT.
- PaCT financially supports UTC and St Mark's libraries.
- PaCT engages in international solidarity and advocacy work. In May 2009 Rev Professor James Haire took part in the process of establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the Solomon Islands with Archbishop Desmond Tutu.
- PaCT is an International Partner in the Global Network for Public Theology. CSU is the global host of the GNPT from 2008 – 2011.

Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT)

Formed in 2007, the GNPT is an academic research partnership that promotes theological contributions on public issues, especially those issues affecting the poor, the marginalised and the



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environment in a globallocal context. Originally consisting of PaCT/CSU, Edinburgh University, Manchester University, Princeton Seminary and Stellenbosch University, the GNPT now includes 24 research centres and programs in universities, colleges and seminaries from all continents around the world.

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The headquarters of the GNPT moves around the centres and is located here at CSU from 2008 – 2011. The partner institutions in the GNPT meet every three years to share their work and consider future collaboration. The next meeting will be held in Canberra and Sydney in early September 2010.

CSU’s major contribution as host of the GNPT will be the establishment of a Network of Postgraduates Working in Public Theology through CSU Interact. The idea is to link postgraduates, most of whom would be doctoral candidates, in the area throughout the world and to enable them to discuss issues with each other online. It will include a short structured discussion programme, which postgraduates can join and take part in at no cost.

The future?

Further plans for the future development of the Centre are under negotiation. These will enhance the vision and roles of the Centre to provide a place for ecumenical activities, interfaith dialogue and reconciliation.