Theology in a new space

Andrew Cameron

This article is a version of the lecture delivered on the occasion of my commencement as the Director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre, 14 July 2014, at the chapel of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C), Canberra. I have expanded it in parts and altered it to enhance its readability in written form. Film of the lecture itself can be viewed online. The theme of the lecture, ‘Theology in a new space,’ arose from a suggestion by the faculty at St Mark’s. It offered a helpful way to think through what attracted me to my new role, whilst also offering a way to begin a relationship with those I haven’t met. I hope it will also assist readers to ponder our inhabitation of theology in Australia’s third century.

What do we mean by ‘space’? The newcomer to Canberra finds space in the best and most literal sense, with the city’s designers having woven the city itself into the openeness of our country. Coming from a cluttered urban environment, it has been a joy to ride around the lake and walk the parks, even with a few moments of agoraphobia along the way.

But speaking metaphorically, the ‘new space’ refers to my doing theology in a different social context. This lecture is only a first iteration of that task, as I discover my new context and as we begin new relationships. Discovering

The Revd Dr Andrew Cameron is Director of St Mark’s National Theological Centre in Canberra and teaches theological ethics.
what matters to one another can only be an iterative process, where even misunderstanding and conflict plays a part.

So to edge into this new terrain, I shall first observe how a new space for me is not new for St Mark’s. Then, I shall touch on theology’s new context in Australia. We shall go on to revisit a prophet finding his theology upset by his new space, and he will return us to a consideration of theology in Australian public space. Finally, it turns out that we can’t only speak of ‘space’ metaphorically. The vastness of Australia does affect us, so toward the end I shall tell of how physical ‘spaces’ become ‘places’ that we can work together to sustain.

**A not-so new space for St Mark’s**

St Mark’s excites me as a new context due to something not at all new for St Mark’s. I shall draw a contrast with a university where we used to walk our dog.

This institution had expanded with a surge of new glass and steel monoliths, presumably to assert its pre-eminence in the various spheres of academia housed by them. These structures dwarfed us on our strolls, leaving us feeling as if we were wandering about the set of a dystopian science-fiction movie. (They make the chapel at the ACC&C, for those who know it, seem very cosy.) In jarring juxtaposition, on a derelict block next to the maintenance shed, was an ancient weatherboard demountable. This building was the interfaith chaplaincy hut—the only visible manifestation of theology in the whole terrain.

I had set out on the last of our walks to photograph it for the commencement lecture. To my great disappointment it was reduced to a pile of weatherboards fenced by an awning promising an improved campus. Perhaps the chaplaincy hut was also up for a glass and steel facelift. We consulted virtual space for the whereabouts of the chaplains, and were directed to a room in a building denoted as ‘transient’—ironically, it would seem—for this corrugated iron monolith, festooned with utility piping, had obviously been ‘transient’ for many decades. If I were a chaplain I would long wistfully for the weatherboard hut.

The Australian academic Paul Oslington, building on the work of Bruce Kaye and John Gascoigne, argues that universities in Australia were not explicitly founded in opposition to theology:
It is easy for contemporary observers to imagine the founders of our oldest universities being a bunch of nineteenth-century Christopher Hitchenses or Richard Dawkinses ... keeping the dangerous nonsense of religion well away from the impressionable youth of the colony. Such an image unfortunately does not fit the historical evidence ... In Australia the exclusion of the churches was not a rejection of the truth claims or the social utility of religion ... but [reflected] a desire to keep the ugly sectarian side of religion and clerical squabbles out of Australia's new universities. The founders wanted to run a university, not referee a rolling fight between the Anglican hierarchy, the Catholics, powerful Presbyterians and others in the colony.2

Oslington points out that the university colleges were founded denominationally, precisely to provide religious education for students in respect of their convictions. More recently, the university I strolled in has created a department that seeks to study religion ethically and respectfully. Even so, whatever the history, and whatever the merits of that department, one's subjective impression is of a kind of passive aggression about the merits of theology, embodied in that weatherboard hut and that transient building, surrounded by triumphal shining glass and steel.

Australia's almost uniform separation of theological education from public university education ‘is unusual internationally,’ says Oslington, ‘not just in Europe where the ancient universities grew from theological faculties but in other Anglophone settler societies like the US, Canada and South Africa.’ Against this backdrop of separation, Christian communities have formed independent seminaries, each of which can be regarded as an honourable initiative. (I remain thankful for the opportunities I have received at one of them, Moore College, whose formation predated that of the universities in NSW.)

But St Mark’s, partnering with United Theological College (Sydney) and alongside the Anglican colleges of St Francis (Brisbane) and St Barnabas (Adelaide), forms the School of Theology at Charles Sturt University (CSU). This arrangement has boldly recovered that ancient tradition where universities upheld the training of people for service in the Church. Nor has this training been allowed to drift into esoteric theory. CSU has a vibrant tradition
of preparing people for actual vocations in the community, particularly in rural and regional areas. The strength of this partnership is that it respects the way the four participants in the School are grounded in faith communities. The churches are the lifeblood of this School, as many enrollees come from churches to test and extend their convictions, and return as graduates to serve their communities. In the School of Theology, CSU does not have a department that only studies religion from an ‘outsider’ perspective, like most other enlightenment-shaped tertiary religious studies. It embodies what theologian David Ford regards as best practice for the field: an acceptance that no scholar ‘can neutrally stand nowhere’; the expectation that ‘intelligent faith lead[s] to constructive and practical theologies’; and the recognition that ‘if God is really related to the whole of reality, then theology must engage ‘with many other disciplines’.

The partnership with CSU represents to me a special kind of space—a safe space to argue and test ideas. We use university disciplines to lean into our human penchant for mental short-cuts and groupthink. It is ‘diverse’ in the best sense, where we each learn to embrace the existence of others and their beliefs, whether or not we embrace their ideas for ourselves. That practice expresses what has been called ‘critical tolerance’, the capacity to accept the proponent of a position whether or not we agree with him or her; and to discover the goods they are defending, even if we judge there may be other goods they have missed. It is a studious place that needs to be defended from the excesses of polemic, even if at times we might respectfully articulate and analyse the content and logic of various others’ polemics.

Other aspects of St Mark’s also express the faith in Christ of Anglican communities. Our Registered Training Organization (www.stmarks.edu.au/rto) teaches personal and relationship counselling from a Christian perspective, and assists Anglican ordinands around the country in their vocation. The Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies (www.centreforageing.org.au) assists those in front-line care of those in later life, and is a much needed development given the increasing number of Australians arriving at that stage of life. St Mark’s also has historic connections with our neighbours at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (www.acc-c.org.au). I shall return to these others dimensions of St Mark’s as I proceed.
A new space in Australia

Of course all theology now operates in a new Australian space. Many stories can be told in this regard, but I shall mention just three changing topographies in which we move.

First, consider the topography of the ontologies we move among, where a salient feature is a bold philosophical naturalism (popularly associated with the so-called ‘new atheism’). The narratives of naturalism extend to include accounts of the mind, morality and community. According to novelist Marilynne Robinson, these narratives trade on the cultural enterprise we call ‘science’. Its proper methods are illicitly inflated into various claims about meaning, so that philosophical naturalism finally becomes the key that unlocks every door. She denotes this discourse as ‘parascience’ — a genre, she says:

that makes its case by proceeding, using the science of its moment, from a genesis of human nature in primordial life to a set of general conclusions about what our nature is and must be, together with the ethical, political, economic and/or philosophic implications to be drawn from these conclusions ... One of the characterising traits of this large and burgeoning literature is its confidence that science has given us knowledge sufficient to allow us to answer certain essential questions about the nature of reality, if only to dismiss them.

This literature ‘arose and took its form in part as a polemic against religion’ and ‘claims the authority of science ... yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished’. Its narratives ground what some call ‘secularism’, the view that modern public deliberation can only deploy empiricist methodology.

This aspect of Australian life provokes much anxiety among opponents, which I think is an overreaction. Nevertheless, it does alter the space in which theology is expected to work. We may now, for example, be invited to participate in a new, non-supernaturalist kind of Sunday assembly, where community gathering, motivational speaking and community service intentionally seek to emulate whatever churches once brought to communities.

Correlative to the rise of this ontology, we move among new topographies of desire:
[C]ovetousness today wears very different clothing than it did on Mount Sinai. Covetousness now comes to us in the cloth of self-referential desire, an essential phenomenon of modern-day capitalism ... Covetousness is the dominant celebratory pattern of the capitalist religion ... When elemental needs are saturated, capitalism must stimulate desire anew; it will innovate, creating novel objects capable of simultaneously creating fresh forms of desire.

On this view, it is not simply that we like products. Our polity fetishises desire itself, as evidenced by award-winning advertisements that no longer commend a product, but simply arouse some powerful longing and then sign off with a brand. So ‘shopping’ is no longer the task of buying, but ‘the delightful exposure to commodities of all sorts in the hope that something may eventually stir up our desire.’ “The dynamics of a liberal market economy depend on the dual assumption of unstoppable, insatiable desire on the one hand and the scarcity of goods on the other.” As a species, we have long exhibited a very primal ‘loss aversion’—habits of thought that, without reflection and challenge, inevitably cause us to ratchet up, not down, the sum total of our acquisitions. Loss aversion and its concomitant vice, greed, have always been with us, but were not always publicly valorised. Now they are not only valorised, but combine with the fetishisation of desire to create catastrophic consequences in many communities, and certainly for the planet. The fetishisation of desire lies at the root of our confounded public deliberations on climate change and environmental degradation. For while ever as a public we adore insatiability itself, there exists no political means by which to slow our collective flight to consumptivist ecological destruction. We have no other ‘common object of love’ upon which to stand against it. This same dynamic confuses other public deliberations about the common good.

I yearn, perhaps naively, for a rapprochement between the Christian rights and lefts, that we might gather together to examine the distorting effects of late capitalist desire upon our shared community life, and the flow-on effects that distort and destroy the planetary ecology of relationships. Theology interrogates the distortions of desire that drive narratives of scarcity, then fear, competition and violence. Theology offers instead a life-giving vision of our desires finding their proper home. To gather well
around this task would settle us personally, and equip us to offer something precious to our nation.

But we must do so from within a chastened topography of trust. Theology’s commentary on desire would seem drastically weakened while the Christian community humbly bears the lash of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*.

It is notoriously hard for individuals to know where they stand in relation to sins committed by institutional ancestors. We prefer to say ‘that was them’, or ‘we were not there’. But these responses only seek to decrease our own anxiety by absenting ourselves, not only from the contemplation of the nature of collective culpability, but ultimately from the intense, unquenchable, daily suffering of victims.

In this, as in our responses to injustices against indigenous people, we may learn from the work of Katharina von Kellenbach on the moral journey of post-war Germany. She describes the false deployment of individualism and the self-justifying use of the language of redemption to sidestep the enormity of what occurred to Jewish victims. She suggests that a better biblical motif might be the mark of Cain—a mark that signified God’s protection and mercy, but not in a way that could be taken to erase the moral narrative of what Cain did. Cain’s past remained embedded in his moral reintegration as the eventual founder of a city.

Something went wrong in the desires inhabited by our communities and their representatives. They respected adult careers and reputations over the troubled presence of each quiet, withdrawn child, and his or her story as each came to maturity. What you love shapes what you notice, and our ongoing lament over what others failed to notice becomes an important step in the moral reintegration of the communities who bear this ‘mark of Cain’.

**The prophet in a new space**

In this glimpse of Australian theology’s new space, I can offer in reply no general principle or theory or approach. For Christians, the person of Jesus Christ comes to us—a little infuriatingly—not as some overarching social theory to wield, but as a particular person to whom we respond.

As I ponder our relationship to the Australian people, I find myself thinking of Jesus’ exasperated riddle of ‘the sign of Jonah.’ The incident was triggered by some religious carping over Jesus’ help for a person with disability. Jesus pushes back on their lack of generosity. His interlocutors ‘up
the ante’ by pressing for a ‘sign’ that proves his warrant to so challenge them. He retorts that ‘no sign will be given’ to them, except for ‘the sign of Jonah’.

The texts take this comment in two directions: that Jesus’ resurrection will be like Jonah’s own deliverance; and that rank outsiders seem to know how to turn to God in a way that religious people do not (Matt. 12:38–41; Luke 11:29–32). But the utterance is so cryptic, so pregnant with possibility, that people have wondered what else Jonah might have connoted to Jesus. For Yvonne Sherwood, ‘the very riddling, tangential quality of the logion [saying] ... ensures its generative capacity, its potential for spawning co-metaphors and enlisting readers in the obsessive hunt to run the elusive sign to the ground’.15

I propose to join that hunt. Initially, I could not help noticing that Jonah was doing theology in new spaces. He has some geographical displacements and new social contexts. More importantly, a lot he thinks he knows about theology doesn’t quite work for him, and he is disoriented and disturbed in unexpected ways. If you think it self-aggrandising that I might find some resonance with Jonah, he turns out to be pompous, self-righteous, vindictive and dissociated; and I discern a ‘sign’ of sorts at work here, at least for myself.

The book of Jonah reads like a short four-act play, which I shall recap if only to offset the odd dismemberings of it that were inflicted upon some of us as children. Yahweh, the defender of all good, calls Jonah to speak against the violent evil of Nineveh. So Jonah flees the other way. When a storm pounds his ship, the pagan sailors soon long for Jonah’s God: ‘Get up, call on your god!’ the captain implores Jonah. ‘Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish’ (1:6).16 Jonah piously responds: ‘I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ (1:9). Yet he is so dissociated from this utterance that only the sailors seem to understand its significance: ‘What is this that you have you done!’ they exclaim (1:10). They exhaust themselves protecting Jonah, calling upon Yahweh throughout. But finally they are forced to dump Jonah—and then they are delivered.

In the second act, Jonah’s new space for theology becomes the inside of a fish. He prays for deliverance as desperately as the sailors, albeit with a prayer that is more flowery. Theologically, Jonah’s prayer is difficult to fault, and reads like a Psalmist trusting the God who cast Jonah down also to lift him up. Jonah also finds a moment to assert that ‘those who worship vain
idols forsake their true loyalty [Hebrew *hesed*] (2:8), alluding to biblical Hebrew’s venerable ‘code-word’ for Yahweh’s ‘steadfast love’.

The comment is technically true: when we attach to small gods, we lose our capacity for steadfast love to one another, and miss God’s steadfast love to us. I am reminded of Pope Francis’s reflection that ‘when a face addresses a face which is not a face’ we commit ourselves to an ‘aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth.’ Jonah knows the theory, at least, that ‘by constantly turning towards the Lord, we discover a sure path which liberates us from the dissolution imposed upon us by idols.’

Yet Jonah’s utterance discordantly fails to notice how the very idolators he had travelled with, the sailors, then went on to experience God’s steadfast love. This Jonah is so theologically pristine, so proper—and so thoroughly dislikable. Yet so steadfast is God’s love that even he is delivered, and brought to dry land.

In the third act, Jonah tells Nineveh of God’s intention to uphold justice. The king responds: ‘All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish’ (3:8–9). God does, and they are saved.

‘But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry’ (4:1). Then follows the fourth act, and the book’s biggest reveal. We had likely assumed that his flight to Tarshish was because he was scared of public speaking, or frightened of the prospect of persecution by the Ninevites. But he makes explicit his inner thought processes at that time, ‘why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning’: ‘I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing’ (4:2). The statement directly quotes God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6 as ‘a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’. On Jonah’s lips, it is an accusation. He despises that the One who upholds justice seems biased toward mercy. In keeping with this bias, Yahweh responds mildly: ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ (4:4).

Petulant to the last, Jonah lives through an object lesson, when the vine that shades him dies, and he is cranky. God questions Jonah’s anger a second time. ‘You are concerned about the bush ... should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and
twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’ (4:10–11).

The mention of thousands whom God loves also recalls Exodus 34:7, where God’s mercy and opposition to evil both arise mysteriously from the depths of steadfast love, and this divine character is extended toward thousands. So also for everyone and everything in this story, even Jonah; but God’s appointed representative, despite his theological purity, hates what God is and does. Yet even he is saved.

Evidently Jesus thought deeply on this story. Why would Jesus think immediately of a ‘sign of Jonah’ at the height of his discord with the religious of his day? I cannot help thinking that he remembers Jonah’s toxic attitude, his theological blind spots, and his pious dissociation. Jonah knows theology, but is not present to the sailors, or to the Ninevites, or the animals. Likewise, the figures watching Jesus are religiously preoccupied, and not present to the needs of the person with disability. Jonah dissociates the truth of theology from seeing the good God upholding justice and delivering with mercy. Those around Jesus dissociate their religious precision about Jesus’ identity from seeing the good Jesus upholding justice and delivering with mercy. God’s question to Jonah fits equally well upon them: ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’

This sign, I know, matches myself at my worst: pondering matters of ‘truth’ while dissociated from the presence of others and from the excellence of God’s just mercy. Jonah inhabits a theological mind gone sour.

And if we can recognise ourselves here as individuals I wonder if we can recognise it in collectives too, for, after all, Jesus delivers this word to a ‘generation’. I hope I will not seem too harsh if I observe that our Anglican tribes sometimes leave me feeling as if, collectively, we are Jonah. We are inducted into ways of seeing the world—often at a very young age—that leave us preoccupied and absent from others. Clergy seem particularly apt to torture one other in these matters. I wonder if God also says to us, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’, calling us to remember all who teem around us, yearning in various ways for deliverance.

Of course such an analogy oversimplifies. Many Anglicans care deeply for their neighbor, and plenty of Australians do not seem to want ‘deliverance’ (although I shall return to that below). Some matters of intra-Anglican conflicts are weighty, on which Bishop Driver has recently written with gravitas. Harmony becomes too easily romanticised, often by recourse to a
social Trinitarian theology that fails to notice how the incarnate Son knew serious human conflict. Ultimately, believes Driver, we are called upon to be a polity that continues to speak persuasively with one another about such matters.19

Even so, Jonah’s dissociated doctrine turns him bitter and toxic, and in pressing whether it is right for him to be angry, God first addresses his spirit. Jonah misses the person of God, whose love gives justice and mercy. Jonah is absent from precious, searching neighbours. As well as repenting like a Ninevite and hoping in the resurrection, I hope to heed these signs of Jonah. I hope to participate in a place freed from Jonah’s kind of toxicity.

The reputation of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn goes before it, as a place where difference is met with calm respect. May that strength lead the national Church; and from within that space, may we become present to struggling Australians, in all their naturalism and secularism, in their fetishising of desire, in their grief and anger at the churches’ sins, and in the myriad stories we haven’t told.

Theology in public space

Particularly in its university setting, and in its alliance with the ACC&C, St Mark’s does its theology with a view to those around us. But consider what modern Australians contend with. At least the sailors and the Ninevites knew of gods. In A Secular Age, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor paints a sweeping panorama of what has shifted between the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Once it was hard not to believe in God; now, believers keep checking in on the believability of faith while unbelief is haunted by temptations to believe. To dwell within this space is to experience what Taylor calls a ‘cross-pressure’ that emerges and re-emerges in successive late-modern generations. ‘Both those who hope that unbelief will encounter its own limitations and aridity, and will peter out in a general return to orthodoxy; and those who think that all this represents an historic march towards reason and science seem doomed to disappointment.’20

Taylor argues that a momentous change has occurred in what he calls our ‘social imaginary’, which is to say, how we construe what surrounds us. In James KA Smith’s summary, it’s ‘the move from a “cosmos” to a “universe”—the move of spontaneously imagining our cosmic environment as an ordered, layered, hierarchical, shepherded place to spontaneously imagining our cosmic environment as an infinite, cavernous, anonymous
space’ (a little like my family’s first experience of Canberra, in fact). In a cavernous universe that may or may not have meaning, we are forced to inhabit what Taylor calls a ‘buffered’ self—a personal identity walled off, in various respects, from the rest of the now-impersonal universe. ‘For the modern, buffered self,’ says Taylor:

the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind. My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them.

The English philosopher Iris Murdoch has observed the moral outcomes of this kind of ontological detachment:

Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. ... Act, choice, decision, responsibility, independence are emphasised in this philosophy of puritanical origin and apparent austerity. It must be said in its favour that this image of human nature has been the inspiration of political liberalism. However, as Hume once wisely observed, good political philosophy is not necessarily good moral philosophy.

For Taylor, ‘disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one’s whole surroundings, natural and social.’ Buffered people become ‘bewildered’ people, lacking any sense of their ontological participation in their social and natural ecology. The only thing left to ‘buffered selves’ is some personal quest for meaning—the search for one’s ‘dream’ or ‘destiny,’ to borrow from movie-speak—in what Taylor calls the ‘age of authenticity.’ We have become a generation that wants to find what matters, but doesn’t know how to do so in any way we can trust.

In my own story, the person and work of Jesus stabilises me, testifying that we are somehow ‘known by God,’ safe in God’s mercy, called to rediscover how to be a creature in a creation and how to participate in God’s deliverance of the world. Others will come to St Mark’s at different points in their quest, and they are very welcome. I hope we remain a safe oasis for
all comers to explore the intricacies of what Taylor describes. I hope they can find something of what I’ve found; and of course they remain welcome whatever happens.

If Taylor’s and Murdoch’s analysis seems esoteric, a story from St Mark’s visionary founder, Bishop Ernest Burgmann, models the engagement with Australians that we would do well to recover. We could talk about his advocacy for various social justice causes. But the following anecdote neatly illustrates his concern for the travails of everyday Australians. Burgmann grew up as a bushman, and so was more competent than these bullock-team drivers he met along the road:

I remember ... when I had become a parson, falling in with two bullock teams hopelessly bogged. I saw at once that they were asking their teams to do an impossible thing. It was an up-hill pull and the wheels were sinking deeper every time they moved at all. I got off my horse and asked if I could help. I was not made to feel particularly welcome and I knew very well how the presence of a parson could cramp a bullock-driver’s style; but I quietly got a stick and kept the polers and pin bullocks up to their job. Then I ventured to suggest some different methods. I knew I had to work tactfully. The fellows tried to be civil, but I knew they wished me far away. However, I was on my own ground, even if they didn’t know it. As their efforts proved more and more hopeless they showed signs of being ready to listen. By this time I had worked out a solution [so that] the holes they were in could be avoided. My plan was at length accepted and I directed the doings. In a very short time all was well and I rode off quickly to make up for the lost time. A day or two later the drivers turned up at church. They remarked to a friend, ‘That b— parson knows more about bullock-driving than we know ourselves.

I liked bullock-drivers very much. They are among my most respected teachers. The idea that they are exceedingly profane is greatly exaggerated. Most of them make a clear distinction between ‘clean swearing’ and ‘foul language’. The former was an art, the latter was ruled out as ‘low’. Most of
the swearing in the bush in my day was 'clean.' Some of the drivers had an exceedingly picturesque vocabulary and a distinct feeling for the right word. In other circumstances they may have become literary artists.25

There’s nothing Jonah-like about Burgmann. His respectful connection with people reminds me of James Davidson Hunter’s vision of public theology, which he calls ‘faithful presence’. Writing in the North American context, Hunter rejects the methods and motivations of the political Christian left and Christian right, and of Anabaptist separatism. ‘[A] theology of faithful presence,’ says Hunter, 'begins with an acknowledgement of God’s faithful presence to us and that his call upon us is that we be faithfully present to him in return.’26

This ‘faithful presence’ is, I believe, our best hope for ministry to the lonely, bewildered, ‘buffered’ selves around us, as we become those who ‘pursue others, identify with others, and labor towards the fullness of others through sacrificial love.’27 Faithful presence takes seriously each person’s sphere of influence, particularly their workplaces. On this view, public theology consists in discovering each stranger, who, ‘however different … represents neither metaphysical danger nor darkness.’28 Within these spheres of influence, Christians become a kind of joyful resistance, seeking ‘new patterns of social organization that challenge, undermine, and otherwise diminish oppression, injustice, enmity, and corruption and, in turn, encourage harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, security, and well-being ... not so much a direct opposition through a contest of power but … a “bursting out” of an alternative within the proper space of the old’—and with the anger of prophetic opposition a mode of ‘last resort.’29 I look forward to exploring this kind of faithful presence with others in Canberra, and to equipping workers to lean back into their workplaces for the good of Australia. This kind of ‘resistance movement’ is needed to complement more traditional modes of high-level engagement (such as when a church’s leadership, or some Christian advocacy or lobby group, dialogues with political representatives).

In this respect St Mark’s Registered Training Organisation (RTO) already quietly enacts the arts and competencies of ‘faithful presence’. Our counselling trainers offer precisely the kinds of skills needed to properly hear and meet another. The gifts and skills of our counsellors show how to
value someone for what they are, not for what we wish they had become, whilst also holding out the hope of change. Our courses in theology and ministry assist people to come alongside others in a variety of modes of care, worship and instruction. The St Mark’s RTO is an extraordinary national asset, pioneering the capacity to connect with others in daily moments. In addition, several CSU courses under the Centre for Ageing and Pastoral Studies shape people into those who come alongside others in later life. I hope we can find ways to extend these works.

**When space becomes place**

Taylor noted how people can see themselves as tiny beings in an ‘infinite, cavernous, anonymous space’. In a country as vast as Australia, that becomes literally true. Anglican relationships become distorted by the attenuations of distance, while lonely regional and remote Australians hunger for connection. To address these realities, I shall end with some reflections on physical space by the British thinker Oliver O’Donovan.

‘Place is the social communication of space.’ ‘Space has no boundaries of its own,’ he says, although ‘geographical features such as seas, deserts, and mountain ranges [do] shape the social possibilities that arise among them.’ But O’Donovan thinks we do better to regard a space as a place when the people in a space take one another seriously enough to communicate good to one another—in ‘faithful presence’ to one another, to redeploy Hunter’s concept. When our relationships communicate what is good, a space becomes a place.

O’Donovan warns against trying to ‘abolish or escape from [place] into placelessness’. We pretend space is irrelevant when we retreat into the life of the mind. He also opposes the attempt to master space by carving it up as ownership. The assumption that land not in private ownership was *terra nullius* becomes ‘a terrible engine of colonial conquest’. (If you are a non-indigenous Australian, you may remember that shocking moment when you first realised how vibrant a place of social communication long predated us here.) I pause, then, also to acknowledge the Elders of the Ngunnawal nation, past and present, on whose ancestral land I stand at St Mark’s.

‘Places are the precondition for social communication of material and intellectual goods,’ says O’Donovan. ‘It is a high achievement to define society in terms of place, rather than blood-relationship, language, economic practice, or whatever.’ Over the years the sprawling bushland site on which we gather,
with its disparate buildings, its eclectic mix of subjects, its unique mix of faculty, and its range of enrollees, has become its own ‘place’—a society not defined by the usual tribal markers that divide us from each other.

Perhaps O’Donovan’s very English love of small places is what causes him to gripe about internet relationships attenuating people across distance, and so breaking down a proper sense of place. On this I beg to differ, as people far and wide around Australia become communicant members of this place, in Barton, thanks to the dedicated distance education offered through CSU by our faculty, and thanks to the travelling and regionally-based teaching teams in our RTO.

When I first came to St Mark’s I asked the staff what they valued about this place. They spoke of a worshipful, intellectual community gathered around Jesus Christ, who makes this space a place. As I’ve come to know past and present students of this place, I find a quiet love for it that runs very deep.

I recognise and respect that. In every way I have mentioned, St Mark’s already punches well above its weight on the national scene. That is what attracted me to participating with you. My family and I consider it a privilege to be invited to this Christian community, and to those who had a say in that, I thank you, and I value the opportunity for a new start here. As I navigate my new space, I undertake to do everything in my power to uphold and extend everything good about this precious, long-standing place.

Endnotes

1. See http://www.stmarks.edu.au/news/entry/theology-in-a-new-space-13-july-2014 for the lecture on which this paper is based. I began by expressing my thanks to Bishop Stuart Robinson and Bishop Trevor Edwards for overseeing my induction into the new role; to the staff of St Mark’s and their family members for their help in organising for a great night; and to Bishop Stephen Pickard and the Board of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) for the use of the ACC&C Chapel. I also noted my appreciation of the welcome and hospitality of all whom we have met in Canberra, and the courtesy and civility extended to us without exception. For reasons that I hope become clear, I reserved to the end of the lecture my acknowledgement of the Elders past and present of the Ngunnawal nation, on whose ancestral lands the speech was delivered.
Theology in a new space


5. Robinson, Absence of mind, p. 32.


18. Pope Francis, Lumen Fidei, pp. 15–16 ($13).

27. Hunter, *To change the world*, pp. 244–45.