

An engineer down under!

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I have not quite faded out of CHRISM!

For the last six months I have been in Tasmania doing some fieldwork for what I hope will become a PhD on Built Environment and Biblical Theology - Tasmania because my daughter and her family live there.

I have been studying the building history of a group of small townships that grew up in the second half of the nineteenth century along four of the rivers that flow south from the Bass Strait, which separates north Tasmania from the Australian mainland. The rivers in question are the Rubicon, the Mersey, the Don and the Forth - a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland depiction of mythology and UK geography. The original townships have given way to the City of Devonport, which with a population of 25,000 is the fourth largest municipality in Tasmania.

The research is about relating these places, characterised by the crude buildings of the pioneers and a growing sense of architectural heritage, with Genesis 1-11, Nehemiah, some of the Psalms, some of John's gospel, a little of Paul and Revelation 20-22. It also has to relate to the fact that Aborigine Australian culture takes an entirely different approach to land and building from the European. The Aborigine belongs to the land in which he lives his nomadic life. He and the land are one. His concept of the building is that of the temporary shelter against bad weather. It is made, used for a while and abandoned. The European seeks mastery over the land. Once he is settled, building is more than shelter. It expresses mastery and evokes the European homeland. While the most interesting modern architecture seeks a distinctively Australian style and meaning, there is little of that in tiny, offshore, Tasmania.

This is secular theology. Doing secular theology, it seems to me, is part of secular ministry. Soon I shall retire completely from professional involvement with building. That will free me up to love it more and experience it in the way that everyone else does, not handicapped by the concerns of earning a living from it.

CHRISM, I believe, must not get bogged down in 'work' and ministry through 'work'. The 'S', the secular in our name, is much more than the narrow interests and vision of those who work professionally in any particular field at any particular time.

On the argument I advance, retirement from CHRISM is an absurdity - but not yet, for me, an economic necessity. The problem is with the 'E' in MSE - I've given up using it!