

Why is good, not good enough?

This world is no place for a perfectionist. No matter how much effort we invest, we never achieve lasting satisfaction. Every now and then I discover again that my desk is made of wood. Most of the time, I'm sure it's made of papers. I get to the bottom of the in-tray just to have it fill up again. And there's never enough time to do any job to the standard that I'd like. Jesus expressed the same idea with reference to human need. He said, "The poor you will always have with you". (Mark 14:7) No matter how much effort is expended or how much money is invested, poverty will never be fully overcome. So it is with churches. No matter how much we try, the perfect church will always elude us. In that, there's a very important lesson: church planting can't wait.

When we live in established suburbs or in developed country towns, there are churches all around us. Lots of churches. All different brands of churches. On one corner after another. And for those who go to those churches, the goal seems always to be the same: to make that church better. Better furniture. Better heating. Better parking. Better lighting. Better fellowship. Better teaching. Better hymnbooks. Better Bibles. Better buildings. Better signage. The list goes on without end, and that's not all bad. Churches ought to be as good in all ways as their members can possibly make them. But in this quest for improvement, is it possible that we overlook something – that we want what is better so we can spend it on our pleasures? (James 4:3) And could we, perhaps, overlook something else: that in focusing on our own concerns, we are blind to the needs of others.

Innately we seem to believe that we shouldn't plant a new church when there's more work to do on our own. But that's to think that we can really reach perfection. Since we know by both experience and reason that perfection is unattainable, how about we change our attitude, look with Jesus at the fields "white unto harvest" and truly act to take the gospel to unconverted people? Beyond our existing evangelistic efforts, this may mean starting a new congregation within existing buildings for the purpose of reaching a different group of people. It might mean starting a new congregation in nearby buildings not owned by a church to reach yet another group of people. Then, again, it might mean planting a whole new church in order to establish a believing community where one doesn't presently exist. Whatever is needed, it can't wait until our existing churches are perfect. By all means possible we should be striving to revitalise our present congregations or to keep them in a vital and active framework. But alongside that, we need to be working – prayerfully and energetically – to initiate and develop new churches.

In the developing suburbs of Sydney, hundreds of houses are being finished every day. Whole new suburbs are emerging within months. And hardly a church amongst them. Not a church of any persuasion. It's not that there are no Presbyterian churches. There are no churches at all. And that's a problem!

What happens when the word of God is not preached in a community? What happens when people's lives are not built around the Scriptures? In the first place, and most seriously, God is dishonoured: unknown and ignored. That hardly befits the duty of worship that all mankind owes to him. But in the second place, a community that does not hear God's word loses social cohesion, people become undisciplined, and the wisdom of the ages is lost. Look through history. Look at those civilisations that never had the grace of the gospel and consider their bondage to animistic spirits, the prevalence of sexual depravity and the devaluing of human life. Look, too, at those communities that failed to treasure the gospel when they heard it. Aren't they systematically overcome by lawlessness, mob violence, gang warfare, broken relationships and addictive behaviours involving sex, drugs and a range of factors that collectively shorten both life expectancy and life satisfaction. Is this what we want for our fellow Australians? Is this what we want for our children or grandchildren who will grow up in those church-less communities? Is this what we want for our God – that he should fail to receive the praise that he's due because people haven't been taught about him and don't know his goodness and love?

We are inundated with invitations to support gospel works overseas or to support underprivileged children. And well we should. But where is the urgent call to do good for those much closer to home? Where is the pressing cry to go and give to promote church-planting in our own unchurched communities. I'm fascinated that one of the largest mission societies now refers to most of its missionaries as "church planters" and describes their work as "church planting in Burkina Fasso" or "church planting in Senegal" – or wherever the place might be. They are clear about their intentions. Not just to be present as missionaries but, as a result of that presence, to see churches planted that will endure for generations. Why aren't we that clear? Why do we (apparently) imagine that because we have churches in some country towns we don't need to plant them in others; or because we have churches in some parts of our cities, we don't need to plant them in others. The challenge before us is huge. It's going to need huge resources. But if the vision is present, the resources will follow.

Very shortly, the Ministry and Mission Committee will publicise the fruit of extensive research into church planting principles and practices in Australia and overseas. We will also be launching a web-based self-assessment tool that will help people discover the role that they might play in church planting. We will be rolling out a mechanism to help potential church planters go beyond self-assessment and explore their suitability with the help of experienced church planters. At the same time, we intend to establish a means of evaluating potential church planting projects in order to invest in that work responsibly. We do not want to be encouraging people into projects that have a high probability of failure. The cost of that is too high. People are damaged and scarce resources are wasted. We don't want to do either of those things. But we do want to actively encourage church planting projects that are well-considered and well-prepared: where there is a proper synthesis of ability, affinity and opportunity.

As we finalise our organisational preparations and work to deploy our available resources, we are conscious of a great need for God's people to pray. Will you do that? Will you ask him to raise up gifted servants and equip them for the challenges of church planting? Will you ask him to draw attention to strategic opportunities to plant new churches? Perhaps there's an area near you that has no evangelical witness to the gospel. Perhaps you or your church would like to partner with some other churches in sponsoring a new church in its early, formative stages. Perhaps there are gifted people in your church – maybe even you – who could leave the church you're attending now to participate in a launch team to start and establish a new church. Sometimes people can do this without moving house. At other times they do better by uprooting themselves and settling in a new area – but that's far less inconvenient than heading to a different country! Whatever your situation, will you ask God to cultivate people for places where the good news of Jesus is not being declared and demonstrated effectively? Please pray, too, for the members of the Committee that we might be wise in all our conduct and attentive to God's will so that we neither run in front of him or drag along behind him. Pray that we might keep in step with the Spirit and effectively resource presbyteries, congregations and ministers for the formation, development and staffing of healthy, multiplying Presbyterian churches.

Perfect, we will never be. We may never be more than unprofitable servants. But even unprofitable servants can be productive. That is our prayer. Please make it yours.

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Superintendent