

# Church Re-Envisioned

At the end of last year, I was involved in interviewing candidates for my team at work. Before doing that, I made a list of skills and quantities that I was looking for. Some were technical requirements, specific to the role and some were more related to attitude and 'soft' skills. In today's passage, the requirement was that the people needed to be people "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" to be appointed the task of distributing food to the widows in their community. This task probably did not require any particular skills, but the community needed to ensure that the people entrusted with this task, were people of character and discernment, who were trustworthy and who were passionate in serving God.

**GETTING STARTED:** Phil talked about the voice of God coming to us through others, including people 'tapping us on the shoulder', asking us to do different tasks, that they see we are uniquely equipped to do. Also, he commented that we should not be dismissive, when people ask us to do / take on particular jobs or roles. How do you feel about this thought? Have you experienced this before? How did you respond?

## READ: ACTS 6:1-8

💬 What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

💬 What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

❗ Phil likened the early church, at this stage, to a 'start up' business, which had hit its first hurdle where hard decisions needed to be made. The church could have ended, as a result of the issues at hand. There is a statistic quoted that 80% of church plants fail.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that, in Australia, one in three new small businesses will fail.<sup>2</sup> If those statistics are true, then it is a safer bet to start a small business than to plant a new church. Good leadership is critical for churches working through issues. In the following quote, the 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, John Spurgeon, highlights the need to be discerning in appointing people to leadership.

"Certain good men appeal to me who are distinguished by enormous [passion] and zeal, and a conspicuous absence of brains; brethren who would talk for ever and ever upon nothing—who would stamp and thump the Bible, and get nothing out of it all; earnest, awfully earnest, mountains in labour of the most painful kind; but nothing comes of it all... therefore I have usually declined their applications."<sup>3</sup>

💬 In 1 Tim 5:22, we read "Do not ordain (or lay hands on) anyone hastily". Why is this verse good wisdom, particularly if we take the time to weigh / check the character, reputation and skills of a person, before appointing them to leadership positions?

💬 Leadership requires both skills and wisdom. Spiritual leadership also requires people to be prayerfully dependent upon God and open to his leading, both through Scripture and promptings of the Holy Spirit. In today's passage, the disciples had to use both wisdom and discernment to resolve the conflict at hand. Reflect on the following words from Col 1:9-10 and Phil 1:9-11. What do they tell us, about the benefits of asking God for wisdom and insight in our lives?

*<sup>9</sup> For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.*

*<sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.*

❗ As Australians, we pride ourselves on having 'equal rights', but then we may tend to discriminate against people, because of differences. Those in power have loud voices and are the ones who

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.movements.net/blog/tag/How+many+church+plants+fail%3F>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Start\\_me\\_up.pdf](https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Start_me_up.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://mlnchristian.wordpress.com/2018/12/19/ministerial-evaluation-faithfulness-success-or-fruitfulness/>

Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Selection from Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastors' College, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876), 34.

get heard. There are many people, including minority groups, new migrants, those with chronic illness and the aged, who may be vulnerable, yet do not have a voice, even about issues that impact their wellbeing. They only have a voice when others speak up and advocate for them. In today's passage, there was a group of people who were being overlooked. They were vulnerable, not merely because they were widows (ie their marital status), but also because of their gender (as women) and their ethnicity (Greek-speaking). In light of International Women's Day and the rape allegations reverberating around Federal Parliament, one journalist wrote about this issue:

"Every woman I know, regardless of how old they are, who they love, who they vote for, ... has had an experience in their life of a man not listening to them when they should have been heard. These experiences can be trivial and transient – the normal irritations of getting on in a society that congratulates itself for being equal, but really isn't. But some women have endured searing experiences of being silenced – experiences that rupture their lives."<sup>4</sup>

☞ Something that is dear to the heart of God is acts of righteousness and justice. The Old Testament law enshrined practices which sought to look after and protect those who were vulnerable or unable to provide for themselves in the Jewish community. In what way was the provision of food to widows in the early church, an act of righteousness and justice? In what way was advocacy (ie speaking up for those who were being oppressed, by not being treated equally) also an act of justice?

ⓘ The disciples recognised that their calling was to devote themselves to prayer and to ministering the word. (Acts 6:4) This did not mean that they were averse to serving food, but meant that they did not spread themselves too thinly.

☞ Phil challenged us with the question: "what has God called you to do? Are single-minded, not letting anything get in the way of that?" How do you answer that question?

ⓘ The people that were given the task of distributing food to the Greek-speaking Jewish widows, were men with Greek names. It is assumed that these men were also from this community. We might think that the best people to minister, might be the ones from the Hebraic Jewish community, but the disciples and the early church used cultural sensitivity when resolving this issue. In a similar way, churches that have been planted by Westerners in other countries, may be better served by training up local leaders and adopting practices that are more in line with cultural norms.

☞ Consider the work of Tendai and Caitlyn in Africa and the leadership development work that Roger has been doing, particularly in Africa. What are the benefits of training and resourcing local leaders? Why might these leaders be more effective in their ministry, than Westerners who may take many years to learn language and culture?

ⓘ Phil talked dealing with conflict well, as an essential part gospel witness. Local people in Jerusalem would have known that conflict was occurring in the church. By dealing with conflict directly, rather than brushing it under the carpet, "the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and a great deal of priests became obedient to the faith". (Acts 6:7)

☞ It is easier to avoid hard conversations about difficult issues, than to have the courage to deal with things directly. How do you feel about having tough conversations, particularly with your peers, work colleagues and other people at church? How do you broach these conversations?

ⓘ Phil talked about Stephen. In Acts 6:5, he is noted to be a person "full of faith and the Holy Spirit", who was appointed to distributed food. Yet, in Acts 6:8, he was doing "great wonders and signs among the people". In Acts 7, he made a speech to the Council – and, by the end of that chapter, he was being stoned to death. Phil commented that we should never tell God that we will "never" do something – because that may be exactly the thing that God is calling us to do.

☞ What ministry task have you decided that you never (ever) want to do? Why?

**REFLECTION:** Phil said that whenever people come together, we will rub each other up the wrong way. We might say the wrong thing or be harsh. At the same time, it is important that we make a choice to not be offended or to harbour bitterness. One writer comments: 1/ Recognize that offense stems from pride. 2/ Remember *who* your Defender is. (1 Pet 3:9) 3/ Choosing not to be offended protects not only your heart... but your relationship with God. (Heb 12:15)<sup>5</sup> How often do you get offended by what others do or say? How will you deal with these issues going forward? How will you show "great grace"?

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/06/canberras-pale-stale-and-male-tribe-is-missing-the-moment-as-it-did-with-julia-gillards-misogyny-speech?utm\\_term=Autofeed&CMP=soc\\_568&utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_source=Twitter#Echobox=1614972037](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/06/canberras-pale-stale-and-male-tribe-is-missing-the-moment-as-it-did-with-julia-gillards-misogyny-speech?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=soc_568&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1614972037)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alyssajhoward.com/2017/06/08/protect-your-heart-offense/>