MINISTRY MISTAKES: THE TYRANNY OF TIME

Alan Stewart

I was recently asked to speak on the topic of what hinders gospel growth and particularly failures in ministry. I was pleased of course to be thought qualified to speak on such a topic! I'm writing from the perspective of someone who has been in full time Christian work.

After 14 years, there are many things that come to mind regarding failures in ministry. However, I'll limit myself to the theme of time. In Christian work (paid or unpaid, full time, part time, voluntary) the hardest question that any of us face is 'what should I be doing now?' What do I do now that will see the ministry grow in one week, one year, five years? Who should I be spending time with? What books should I be reading? If I'm married and have a family, should I be spending time with them? How many hours a week do I work? The 'what should I be doing now' question is harder to answer than the question regarding any individual task.

The four failures that I list below are at a personal level. The good news about ministry is that we are only ever responsible for our own personal actions. We are not and indeed cannot be responsible for the actions of others – that is the good news. However, it is also the bad news – we are responsible for what we do and God will hold us accountable for the use we have made of our gifts and opportunities, 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10; cf 1 Peter 4:17, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

Failure Number One: Time – Don't Waste It

In full-time Christian ministry we need to be self disciplined because we have a lot of time that we can waste. Apart from a few hours on a Sunday morning or Sunday night, no one really knows where we are or what we are doing with our time. We need to be disciplined in our allocation of priorities. There is a proverb that says 'plough your fields first, then build your rectory or manse'... well, something like that. The problem with 164 hours of unstructured ministry time is that it is very easy for work to expand according to time available. What should take one hour can take all day. In 15 years of Christian work, I confess I have not used time as well as I should have.

Classic time wasters are:

- **Over preparation** We need to work hard on preparing our talks but if we prepare beyond the point of diminishing returns, we are achieving very little. We may spend an extra 10 to 15 hours on a talk that will only improve it by a few percentage points. (I am not endorsing under preparation, I am simply against over preparation).
- **Sitting at the desk and shuffling paper** It is possible to sit at a desk, shuffle paper, make insignificant phone calls and be consumed with trivia and achieve nothing in a morning.
- **Long phone calls to your friends** Three or four 45 minute phone calls to friend and the morning is wasted. (I've heard it suggested that you should stand up while you are on the phone. This is very effective in limiting the time of phone calls. I've also heard that meetings should be held without chairs).
- **Television (especially late at night)** How much television do we watch during the week? Watching TV when we should be asleep may keep us from a good start in the morning. No one ever said on his or her deathbed, 'I wish I watched more TV'. Late night TV is also no good for the purity of our thought life.
- **Computers** A classic time waster. I am a complete technological incompetent and so I'm not tempted in this area. However, I suggest that if you own a PC or Mac and understand everything that this machine is capable of, you have probably wasted a lot of time fiddling with the computer.

We need to be self disciplined in how we use our time. I have not done as well as I should have in this area over the years.

Failure Number Two: Spending Time with the First Members of your Congregation

For failure number two, let me speak to those who are married or are parents: 'Your spouse and children are not an interruption to your ministry; they are your ministry'. This advice was less than gently delivered by a good friend of mine, now gone to be with the Lord. Those of us who are married and have families, need to spend time with our wives and children. I said to my wife the other day as we were out, celebrating our wedding anniversary, that it was harder and harder now to see our teenage children. They are so busy now; why didn't they have time for me? In her own, gentle way, she said, 'when the kids are little they are always available but you guys are out trying to change the world and all busy, busy. Then as they grow up, you haven't been around and they don't have as much time for you.' The husband then says, 'Well, why didn't anyone tell me?' She rolled her eyes and said, 'Make sure you tell the younger ones when you have the chance.' So if you're reading this, you have been told.

At the same time, I'm not saying we should be picking kids

up from school every day or having long and romantic lunches with our spouses each week. We need to work hard, and to some extent our families will carry the cost of ministry with a busy and tired spouse or parent. However, this is not an excuse for neglecting your spouse and your children: they are the first members of your congregation.

Failure Number Three: Wrong Priorities

In ministry, administration, paperwork and meetings are ubiquitous. They are the air we breathe. If we are not proactive in diarising the truly important, then the urgent and the ubiquitous will take over.

Take, for example, the priority of evangelism. A lot of pastors end up like the guy in my area who owns the fishing shop. He was very keen on fishing so he opened a fishing shop but now he sits in his fishing shop from early in the morning until late at night. Guess what he doesn't get to do anymore – fishing! He is too busy running the shop. A lot of pastors are like this with evangelism. It is often gifts in this area that got us into full time ministry in the first place. However, once in the ministry we are so busy running administration meetings, committee meetings and chasing up a hundred details, we never get time to evangelise. Evangelism should be the first thing to go into our diaries.

In every church I've been associated with, there is a series of men around the fringe of the congregation, sympathetic husbands of wives who belong to the church, men whose children are in the youth group and just blokes that I've got to know. As a male pastor of a church I should, as a matter of priority, be spending time with these men and sharing the gospel with them. (I am sure there is an equivalent for female pastors). But if time isn't allocated up front, it won't be available.

This early allocation of time should be done for evangelism, talk preparation, our own prayer times and discipling of the future leaders of our congregations. I must confess to regular failure in this area, where I've been too busy running infrastructure to actually go fishing (for people, not salmon) – the reason I went into ministry in the first place.

Failure Number Four: Beware of Busyness

As a young man in theological college I was told 'ministry is much more about who you are than what you do'. It was not until the last year or two that I have understood this. Godliness may or may not be next to cleanliness, but it certainly is not next to busyness. Our activism and obsession in planning and strategic action and workaholism show a lack of faith in the sovereignty of God. We need to trust in God's sovereignty, and rest safe in the knowledge that, as we sit and watch The Simpson's with our kids, God's gospel marches on.

A couple of years ago on holidays I went to two church meetings one Sunday. They couldn't have been more different. One was a very strict, reformed, free Presbyterian meeting: King James Bible, no instrumental music and a one hour sermon. The other was a meeting on the headland at the beach, run by the local Baptist church, with a dozen people and some 'open sharing time'. Music was a tape played in a car with the doors open. However, at both church meetings, there was a Bible verse that hit me straight between the eyes – Psalm 46:10 'Be still and know that I am God'. It was a very interesting verse for a workaholic, trying unsuccessfully to relax on holidays, to hear and consider.

So, the question is how do we avoid these failures and put good principle into practice? Hey, I said at the beginning that this was about my failures in ministry, not my successes. I'm still working on it day by day.

Adapted