
IN THE CITY, FOR THE CITY

The Nall Lecture: In Memory of J Spencer Nall and Ken Nall
Wesley Uniting Church, Geelong, Sunday 19 June 2011
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(Available for download from the Resources page at www.rosslangmead.com.)

INTRODUCTION

Thankyou very much for the honour of being invited to give the J Spencer Nall and Ken Nall Memorial Lecture. I've chosen the title 'In the City, for the City' confident that both men would have embraced it, because they were remarkably active citizens of the City of Geelong as well as dedicated and active members of this church over many years.

I'd like to focus today on the local church rather than the wider church. And I'd like to address the context of the inner city rather than the suburbs. By the inner city I mean the Central Business District and the suburbs just next to it.

One reason for this focus is that many people lament the decline of the city church. They point to empty cathedrals and to city church buildings, some of which are now turned into art galleries or restaurants. I myself have worshipped in a church which could comfortably seat five hundred but where there were just six people at worship, two of whom insisted on sitting in the back row.

But I strongly believe that the church in the city has not only an important role to play but great possibilities for the future. I'd like to explore some of these today.

Another reason for focussing on the inner city is that many people lament the decline of the city. A lot of this comes from the United States or the United Kingdom. In many major cities, at least two or three decades ago, the inner city became associated with poverty and crime. Central Business Districts became dangerous after dark. White middle-class residents fled to the suburbs, and inner cities became multicultural, poor, vibrant in many ways, but also crime-ridden. Although Australian cities have not experienced anything like the crises of American or English cities, I know Melbourne has experienced its own version of inner-city decline, and my guess is that Geelong has too.

There has been a massive reclamation of the inner city across the world. Projects turning docklands into apartments with harbour views are common. Melbourne is one example. People are moving into apartment towers by the thousands and warehouses are being converted into units from the small and basic to the large and luxurious. It's not only housing that is flowing into city-centres, but also business, shopping, entertainment and recreation areas. The area near Eastern beach is a good example in Geelong.

While some of these new facilities are open to the general public, this rejuvenation is largely an inflow of the wealthy, which usually forces the poor out again. The city is always a complex web of power, money, influence, prestige and grand projects.

So, while I am optimistic about the future of cities, I am aware that the battle for their soul remains in front of us. Will the poor still have a place? Will privatisation continue so that public space grows smaller and smaller? Will architecture have a human face and a human scale, or will

the grand and the ugly dominate the city and diminish our environment? Will the city continue to suck up energy and resources at a far greater rate than the suburbs and rural areas, or will it lead the way in experiments in low-emission buildings, roof gardens and innovative use of natural lighting and heating? Will city politics succumb to the temptations of corruption and greed, captive to lobbies, or will it stick to its vision of serving the public by providing services, welfare, the arts and a space for the civic conversation?

I bring to these questions a love of the city and a passion for the Good News of Jesus, which expresses itself centrally in the countercultural witness of the local church.

I've been a city boy since I grew up as the son of Salvation Army missionaries in Hong Kong, then a city of three million and now seven million. My teen years were spent in Fitzroy, just a block from St Vincent's Hospital. I lived in Brunswick as a university student. And for the last thirty years I've lived in the inner-western suburbs—just outside the inner city, technically—in Spotswood, ten minutes from Flinders St over the Westgate Bridge. I love universities, libraries, cinemas, good hospitals, coffee shops and the concentration of services. I love the buzz of city life. I love inner-city public transport. If I lived in Croydon or Werribee I wouldn't be able to ride my bike to work. Of course, like everyone, I breathe in the smog, and get caught in traffic jams and look forward to getting out of the city for holidays. But because I'm not poor, I generally experience the positive sides of city life.

Theologically, I'm aware that the city has often been seen as a symbol of human pride, an expression of independence from God and a hotbed of evil. We only have to think of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah and Babylon to be reminded that this thread runs through the Bible.¹ It is certainly true that the concentration of humanity can bring with it the concentration of destructive forces. Take two simple examples. The violence of organised crime could never develop in a small town, but is given reign in the big city. And the financial crashes that cost people millions of dollars can only occur where cities are the hubs of massive flows of money.

But I'm also aware that Jerusalem is the symbol in the Bible of the city of God. The New Jerusalem is anticipated as the place where people of all nations will gather in God's presence (Rev 21).

Because cities are made up of people and people are capable of being transformed and redeemed, cities are also capable of being transformed and redeemed. I would summarise my theology of the city in these four simple statements:

- The city is a place where God's love is expressed.
- But the city also embodies injustice, violence, poverty and exclusion.
- The city can be, and needs to be, transformed under God.
- The church is God's agent, in and for the city.

This approach to cities, indeed to people and to cultures, is one that lives in tension between appreciation for what is and longing for what could be. It looks for God already at work around us, and longing, and praying and working for a transformation of people, cities and cultures that ultimately only God can bring, but which we, as followers of Jesus, want to 'live into'. This is my favourite phrase for the mission of the church. We are to live into the kingdom of God, or as I prefer to say, the commonwealth of God. The church is merely a sign and symbol of this commonwealth for which we long. We do not wait for it but roll up our sleeves and look for ways to express God's love.

¹ Stuart Murray, *The challenge of the city: A biblical view* (Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 1993).

So we neither condemn the city to hell and rail against it, as if we are righteous and others are evil. Nor do we naively believe that the city is pretty good and all the church does is to add some spiritual or humanising dimensions to it.

The change we seek is profound. We seek deep transformation, so that the city will gradually become more like the New Jerusalem. We are aware that the Good News of Jesus is deeply countercultural. Where cities tend to squeeze out the poor as economic forces play themselves out, the church stands for the inclusion of the poor. Where the city focuses on the grand, the new, the impressive, the ostentatious, the church stands for faithfulness away from the spotlight, for human values and for spending money on things that support the weak. Where the city wonders what to do with homeless people, drug addicts, delinquents and broken families, the church has for decades and centuries been caring for them, not always perfectly, but with a long-term commitment that is often overlooked by those around us. I notice that this city church, beginning as the Yarra Street Methodist Church, has had a continuous witness since 1842, just a few years after Geelong was founded.

This brings me to unpack my title, 'In the City, for the City'. In simple terms what I'm suggesting is that the church's mission is to be here and then to work for the life of the city and its people. It is to have presence and purpose. It is to be visible and to be visionary. It is a bunch of people and a bunch of programs. It will be found in the church gathered and the church dispersed. It will be in the Good News of Jesus, both announced and 'lived into'.

IN THE CITY

First, I'd like to explore the possibilities that lie ahead for any church that decides to be 'in the city'.

1. Moving into the neighbourhood

God calls Christians to embody the Good News. We are called to make the Good News visible, to 'enflesh' it. These words, 'embody', 'make visible' and 'enflesh' are just other ways of saying that we are invited to follow Jesus in incarnating the Good News. As John 1:14 says, in the New Revised Standard Version, 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us'. Or, as paraphrased in *The Message*: 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood'.

Now I understand that this is a challenge that is very difficult for an inner-city church. It's a little easier to issue this challenge to Christians inviting them to move into a poor neighbourhood, because house prices are low. Alison and I were responding to just such a call when we moved to the Western Suburbs to put down roots. But I know that friends who have felt called to serve the poor in St Kilda had to bid at auction against the rich in St Kilda. And friends who worked with the radical Christian community called House of the Gentle Bunyip in Clifton Hill, in order to work alongside the poor there, could hardly afford the rent, let alone hope to buy.

City churches have traditionally been made up of solid members who come in from the suburbs, and I understand why. But let me issue a twin challenge, the first easier than the second.

If you have little choice but to live in the suburbs but feel called to be part of a city church, I urge you to make the city your second home. If possible, eat and work and play in the city. Know its nooks and crannies, its structures and services. Get to love its strengths. Spend time engaged in the mission of the city church during the week. Do anything but come in once a week because you like the worship or the fellowship. At least in spirit, 'move into the neighbourhood', because the city needs you. And, I suggest, if you allow the city to nourish you, you will want to nourish it.

The second challenge is to actually move closer. We are entering a new era in the inner city, with residential accommodation growing rapidly. There will be some Christians who can respond to the call to literally move into the neighbourhood and live in the city or inner city.

My friend Simon Holt is minister at Collins St Baptist Church. He has gone to that church with a vision for it to minister to those who live within the Central Business District. Whereas in the early 1980s there were only 700 people living in the Melbourne CBD,² there are now 21,000, expected to double in the next twenty years.³ There are thousands of international students living between RMIT and the University of Melbourne. And there are many who call Melbourne's streets home because they have nowhere else to live. Collins St Baptist is changing in its membership. Once almost exclusively from the leafy suburbs, there is now an increasing representation from Southbank, from Docklands, from the student hostels and even from the street. It's on the way to becoming a local church in the parish of the CBD.

2. The significance of the centre

There is a strategic advantage in being located in the centre of the city. Many city churches have substantial buildings, a gift from previous generations.

They can be a noose around our neck, too, especially if they are unsuited for today's ministry, or if they cost millions to keep up. It can be even more difficult if they are heritage listed, which we want to respect but which locks us into an architectural past.

But we can celebrate being central for people to get to. We can be glad to host regional and citywide events. We can offer services knowing people can get to them easily. We can grab opportunities to engage with the city council or developers or welfare services. If we are to be a light on the hill then a prominent location is a good start. I was brought up to believe that the Catholics got all the good hilltops on which to put their churches, but I'm not sure that's true!

As soon as I say that there is significance in being at the centre, I also want to acknowledge that, while city churches are geographically at the centre, in cultural terms the church is no longer at the centre. This leads me to consider the value of being at the margins.

² Simon Carey Holt, 'Postcode 3000: From contested space to sacred place', Unpublished manuscript, 2011, Available at <www.csbc.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Postcode3000.pdf>, 5.

³ Nick Casey, 'Analysis of population and housing in Melbourne Local Government area 2001 to 2009', *Melbourne City Research, City of Melbourne*, <www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/AboutMelbourne/Statistics/Documents/Analysis_of_Population_and_Housing_2001_2009.pdf>, Accessed 13 June 2011, 7.

3. The significance of the margins

You will immediately pick me for being an Anabaptist and liberationist, because I'm less comfortable following Jesus with the accompaniments of power and influence than I am when on the edge seeking to be a prophetic voice. Whichever we prefer, the reality is that we have moved into a post-Christendom and post-Christian context, where the Australian church has become marginalised in terms of power, influence, resources and respect.

But the Christendom mindset has continued, with Australian mainline churches still often thinking they ought to be listened to in the public square. City churches sometimes long for the old days too, when they were big and influential. Those days are gone.

The great potential in being banished to the margins is that it is easier to see what following Jesus means when you are on the edge. This is where the poor and those who are sick and in prison are, and where Jesus is to be found responding to need. This is where the prophets are, naming what's happening in politics and economics and speaking up from a vantage of faith.

As urban theologian Rod Garner puts it, the church in the city can 'embrace an interpretation of the margin that endorses it as a place that can make a difference to the surrounding culture'.

4. Welcoming worship

A third aspect of being in the city is the potential for offering faithful worship week by week, particularly if it is real, if it is accessible to the newcomer and if it is accompanied by a warm and genuine community.

We all know the stereotype of a city church on its last legs. The pipe organ dominates. It's always cold on a winter's Sunday. It's huge and the seats are nearly empty. The rituals are impenetrable. It feels as if it's stuck in the last century. You can visit and leave and no-one would know.

In defence of city churches, this stereotype bears little resemblance to the worship I have experienced in city churches. It is often done to a high standard, with theological depth, with care for welcoming newcomers and a range of worship styles to suit different people. There are some who, for a variety of personal reasons, appreciate the ability to slip in and out of what we might call 'cathedral worship' or 'public liturgy'. If church members are 'all over them like a rash' they'll leave and never come back; some space and freedom to be who they are is important.⁴

While there are some newcomers who are attracted to the dominant evangelical suburban style of worship, others will tire of the repetitive and shallow songs, look for greater engagement with the world around and appreciate a willingness to face failure and depression, struggle and doubt—in other words worship that is real and open rather than an expression of a faith that always seems to be victorious and happy.

⁴ Patrick R Keifert, *Welcoming the stranger: A public theology of worship and evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

5. Community in the fragmented city

One factor that distinguishes the city from the country is its complexity of relationships and our freedom to sign in or out of a multitude of associations. We can join the tennis club, help at the school, sit on a board or join the Dungeons and Dragons club. For most people the challenge is fragmentation—our lives are divided between family, work, school, sport, hobbies, recreation and so on. For a few people the challenge is isolation—not being part of enough networks of support. In both cases, the central human need for community is not being satisfied.

The church is a response to God's offer of a new way of living. This new way is not pie-in-the-sky but has daily implications. It is a new community, and I'm pleased to say that it is one I experience all the time, not perfectly but substantially. In the body of Christ fences are broken down, differences are reconciled, joys are celebrated together and sorrows shared, the strong support the weak, people share their resources, the outsiders are welcomed as insiders and everyone's gifts are recognised as important.

One of the greatest gifts the city church can offer to the people of the city is a welcoming and real community that is committed at the core and porous at the edges. As one urban theologian, Tim Gorringer, puts it, 'the Christian understanding of community is [the paradigm] for human community as a whole'.⁵

I see signs in various city churches of creative expressions of community. Some worship in the city but have small groups where the members live. Some create community by gathering people around a common interest, whether walking or sewing or cooking meals for the homeless. Some host groups of lawyers or business-people, recognising that the city workplace is central for many people.

6. Inviting others to follow Jesus

My final comment on being in the city is on sharing our faith. If it is our desire for cities to be transformed by the Good News of Jesus—that there is a new way to live which brings abundant life—then we must find ways to invite others along on the journey. To be pragmatic as well, if others don't join us, our congregations will age and decline in numbers and our ability to engage with the city will diminish.

I grew up in an evangelical context where speaking about our faith was obligatory and awkward. I spent several years reacting to evangelism as I knew it. I became one who worked mainly for the social and political transformation that the gospel calls for.

But I have come to realise that this transformation is unlikely to occur unless people are transformed. I have two or three friends who are trapped in addiction and all that goes with it. My Christian friends and I have supported, challenged, assisted and walked with these friends for many years. I have concluded that change is unlikely unless they sense God's love and power for change.

⁵ T J Gorringer, *A theology of the built environment: Justice, empowerment, redemption* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 164.

What this means is that incarnational mission is an integration of word and deed.⁶ Mark Gornik, who founded a city church in Baltimore, Maryland, puts it well:

Spreading the news of the kingdom as invitation, welcome, challenge and summons will draw on the whole expressive life of the church in Christ—its life as a body of believers, its witness in proclamation and its healing of broken hearts and bodies. ... [It] invites and welcomes others to join in God's reign, a feast to which all are invited.⁷

I've touched on several aspects of being in the city. In terms of 'salt and light' this is being a light. In terms of the church gathered and dispersed, this is the church gathered. I've suggested that being in the city means physically moving into the neighbourhood, using the visibility that the centre offers, claiming the new perspective that the margins offer, welcoming others through worship that is real, creatively exploring ways of being community, and learning to share our faith in natural and respectful ways.

FOR THE CITY

When it comes to being for the city there are many ways for the city church to engage with the city around it. In terms of salt and light, this is closer to being salt, making a difference to society around us. It is often in the shape of the church dispersed, as well as the church gathered. It's mission, with a broader vision, with horizons lifted.

Just as we can't take it for granted that Christians will want to be in the city—as the flight to the suburbs shows—we can't take it for granted that Christians will want to be for the city. I have worshipped in churches where the prayers of intercession don't even mention specifically the issues of the world, the country, the city or the suburb. They express a general desire that all people will come to Jesus and worship him, but neither in the church bulletin, nor the activities of the church, nor the sermon, nor the prayers do we find any concrete engagement with the world.

1. Hospitality in the big city

The first way in which city churches can act for the city is to offer hospitality. The city, physically speaking, can be an inhospitable place. The wind blows between buildings. We sometimes sense that we are only welcome if we are spending money or a member. Parking is difficult. We are sometimes overwhelmed. Travellers and visitors look for a welcome sign. The poor look for help and support. Small groups struggle to know where to meet. Welfare services are often besieged. Powerful groups give and take according to the harsh rules of the market, with little room for welcome.

Both metaphorically and physically the church can be a centre of hospitality. Simon Holt writes,

If the church is to play a key role in the movement of the city from contested space to sacred place, it has the opportunity to model a form of life that is

⁶ Ray Bakke, 'Evangelism', in *Urban theology: A reader*, ed. Michael Northcott (London: Cassell, 1998), 294.

⁷ Mark R Gornik, *To live in peace: Biblical faith and the changing inner city* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 91.

genuinely hospitable, that seeks nothing in return and is willing to surrender its own comfort for the sake of others.⁸

Many churches take up this opportunity, particularly where their buildings are suited for other groups to use. At Westgate Baptist, where I'm a member, we host some groups on a modest paying basis, such as a local dance school, and others as guests and partners, such as a Karen Burmese fellowship, a Chin Burmese fellowship, and a couple of playgroups.

I'm aware that there is a critique of 'inviting people in' on the basis that the gospel impels us to 'go out and be with the people'. I accept the critique if all of our programs are centred at the church building, an 'attractional' rather than an incarnational approach.⁹ I accept the critique if new members are extracted from their context when they become Christians, only to become isolated from their previous networks, an 'extractational' approach rather than enhancing life where they are.¹⁰

But I recognise that, particularly for city churches, which often have substantial buildings and a key position in the city, it makes sense to offer those facilities to the city in hospitality, something I believe happens here at Wesley and, I'm sure at other city churches in Geelong.

Collins Street Baptist Church has recently opened a café on its small verandah. It is a friendly face to Collins Street, seeming to say, "Despite the imposing Corinthian columns we are a welcoming and hospitable church."

2. Commitment to the marginalised

The second way to act for the city is a commitment to the marginalised. Poverty and isolation is more openly visible in cities than in smaller towns, and city streets attract the outcast, the socially deviant, the newly evicted, the substance-addicted, the migrant and the refugee.

The challenge for most churches is not whether to respond but how to discern how best to respond and to which of the many needs that present themselves. I'm speaking in a Uniting Church, and the Uniting Church of Australia is said to be the nation's largest non-government provider of welfare. I know it happens at the level of organised welfare services and also at the local church level. So I don't have to labour this point.

All I will say is that our commitment to this 'deep, difficult, holy work' is costly and long-term, and yet, according to Matthew 25, our service to those in crisis or great need is at the same time our service to Christ himself. As British urban missionary Laurie Green puts it, 'There's no doubt that if you want to meet Jesus, you will find him in the urban poor'.¹¹

⁸ Holt, 'Postcode 3000', 7.

⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st-century church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 39

¹⁰ Frost and Hirsch, *The shaping of things to come*, 39.

¹¹ Laurie Green, 'God is a group?: The persistent presence of the Holy Spirit', in *Crossover city: Resources for urban mission and transformation*, ed. Andrew Davey (London: Mowbray, 2010), 97.

3. Salt: Supporting Christian citizenship

The third way of acting for the city is through the church in its dispersed form. We are still being the church when we contribute to society being more like the kingdom of God. When we have a say in furthering justice, when we as teachers assist young people in growing to maturity, when we as nurses or doctors contribute to healing, when we sit as councillors to contribute to wise policy-making and efficient delivery of services, when we write letters of protest against bad decisions—in these and hundreds of other ways we are salt bringing flavour to the city. We are leaven raising the bread.

Some churches give the impression that ‘real work is church work’,¹² whereas it seems obvious to me that God works through all Christians in their citizenship and vocation. City churches have the opportunity celebrate this, to encourage their members in their daily work and civic involvements. If we limit the influence of the church in the city to what happens when Christians are gathered, we miss the greater part of our witness and mission.

In some theological circles the church is valued almost to the exclusion of society, so it is disciples we want to make. In other churches social engagement is valued almost to the exclusion of the church, so it is citizens we want to make. If we are to cultivate a public theology, where faith speaks to society in a language both can understand, we need to nurture and develop citizen-disciples, those who speak both languages and can integrate the issues.¹³

4. Prophetic dialogue in the civic space

Fourthly, many commentators are saying that there are fewer opportunities today for conversations in a civic space, where different views are welcomed in an atmosphere of respect and with a desire for the common good. City churches have a particular opportunity to host these conversations. The Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Philip Freier, has gained respect for hosting these conversations regularly at Federation Square.

If we push this one notch further, the church can not only host conversation but also speak out prophetically on social issues. Churches have been strong on Indigenous reconciliation and asylum seeker policy, but weaker on environmental issues such as global warming. As with responding to the marginalised, I’m aware that we need to discern which of the many presenting issues we can tackle as a local church. It is an area where local churches can work with their state or national bodies and even connect internationally. My local church is active in advocacy for Burmese refugees because we have many we call our friends, because some of us have visited refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border as well as asylum seekers in hiding in Kuala Lumpur and because we have begun to understand the international issues associated with this deeply moving problem.

¹² Bakke, ‘Evangelism’, 295.

¹³ Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe, *What makes a good city? Public theology and the urban church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2009), 1–22.

5. The sustainable city

My last comment on ways to act for the city is that Christians are realising now that caring for creation is an important dimension of mission. Only very recently has this been seeping through into the theology of urban mission.

I have a particular interest in ecological mission, and believe that God's cosmic purposes include restored relationships at every level, between us and God, between humans, and between humans and God's creation. This includes the pursuit of the sustainable city.¹⁴

The city is one of the most unsustainable of humankind's inventions. It consumes resources far beyond its return to the environment and we city-dwellers are in danger of being a step removed from the earth. We forget when the different fruits are in season; we expect water to be on tap; we live in air-conditioning; and we are only slowly accepting that we will need to substantially reduce our carbon footprint.

I was pleased to see two water tanks beside St Michael's church on Russell St recently, a small sign that churches are beginning to integrate faith and care for creation. There are, of course, many ways to begin to walk this path, from bicycle racks to solar panels.

I've touched on several aspects of acting for the city. The church can model hospitality both through its buildings and in its open door to the people of the city. It can engage particularly with the urban marginalised. It can encourage Christian citizenship in the city. It can host and engage in prophetic dialogue. And it can be a voice and example in exploring what care for creation means in the city context.

These two aspects of being in the city and for the city overlap, of course. They amount to a long-term commitment to being with and for the people of the city. They involve being positive—contributing to the city—and negative—naming what is wrong with the city.

In the words of urban theologian Rod Garner,

Truth is two-eyed: in the crucible of the urban a particular kind of vision is required that registers and responds to the hurts and vulnerabilities of deprived communities yet is still able to find delight wonder in the sacraments of God's presence—hospitals, shops, sewers and dustbin collection all gifts in their fascinating complexity.¹⁵

I'd like to finish with a verse from Jeremiah which has sustained me for decades and which still fills me with hope. Jeremiah 29:7 is addressed to the Israelites in exile in Babylon—yes, the city that is equated with evil and rebellion against God. In this prophecy God says,

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

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¹⁴ Graham and Lowe, *What makes a good city?*, 55–60.

¹⁵ Rod Garner, *Facing the city: Urban mission in the 21st century* (London: SCM, 2004), 109, citing John Robinson on two-eyed truth.