

Defying worldly perfection and reclaiming our gloriously imperfect nature

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The First and Second Industrial Revolutions changed everything. Among a mass of advancements, this era galvanised the shift from wonderfully unique hand-made items, to the mass production and standardisation of goods. With this shift came the new expectation that goods would be predictable, identical and consistent—in other words, perfect.

Our familiarisation with predictable, identical and consistent goods can influence our expectations of ourselves and of others. It's ironic that through our own brokenness we often yearn for humans—just like a product from the assembly line—to in some way be streamlined or perfect.

Perfection is a dangerous concept to aspire to in ourselves, in others and especially in our children. When perfection becomes an expectation, the brain's sympathetic nervous system activates a fight-or-flight response. People become imprisoned by pressure and overwhelmed by dread, resulting in procrastination, rebellion and other unhelpful behaviours.

Studies over many years highlight the [debilitating](#) nature of perfection, which drives [turmoil and mental distortions](#). The quest for perfection is linked to [burnout](#), [anxiety](#), [stress](#) and [depression](#). This is not surprising, given perfection is outside of the human condition.

Perfection, in the worldly sense, is about control and manipulation. Perfection teaches people what to think, rather than how to think. Perfection is cerebral and rarely relational. It is unrelenting and unforgiving, and it reeks of judgement. It fails to acknowledge the [purpose and value of scars](#). Perfection has a ceiling; it suggests we reach a certain point and then we're done. But [we're never truly done](#), meaning that worldly perfection is unattainable. Outside of God's [awesome creation](#) and His [limitless love](#), does perfection even exist?

Schools, as we know them today, were established during the First Industrial Revolution. They were structured like the factories they were built to serve. Children were put on a cookie-cutting assembly line, with the goal to produce compliant, like-minded graduates who resembled whatever our notion of perfect was.

Schools have advanced only superficially since they were established. Their physical presentation has evolved, and technology has influenced superficial adaptation, but these renovations are insignificant when held against global industry disruption. The concept of children on an assembly line of perfection remains essentially unchanged. In fact, with the muscling-in of standardised testing, schools have morphed even more so into child-

manufacturing institutions. Quality control of the product—our children—is an ever-expanding political debate.

Enter: Covid-19. The pandemic has masterfully challenged schools in a way they have never been challenged before. It has exposed possibilities and created opportunities that have not previously existed.

To the outsider looking in, perhaps the most obvious adjustment for schools has been the shift from classroom-based learning, to at-home academic learning, back to classroom-based learning. Using this example alone, the constraints of the factory model of education are in the spotlight.

When students were learning at home, individualisation flourished. Students received instruction via YouTube or some other platform, enabling them to ‘pause and rewind’. In other words, students were able to work at their own pace, rather than being locked into an unnatural timetable or the tempo of their classmates. Additionally, while engaged in school activity at home, children could thrive through the value of flow. When they found themselves ‘in the zone’, they had the freedom to take advantage of the powerful momentum that comes with flow, without a bell interrupting and mandating that it was time to shift their thinking or take a break. Conversely, when a break was required to activate a child’s diffuse thinking, it was possible under the learning-at-home model.

The return to classroom-based learning puts children back on the perfection conveyer belt. It highlights the tremendous disconnect between how schools operate, and what we know about child psychology and educational neuroscience. A student cannot pause or rewind a teacher in the classroom setting where the needs of twenty-four other children must also be met. There is no flow in the classroom environment. The classroom is structured around bells and timetables, which make it convenient for adults to push children through the factory, but which are not conducive to learning.

It’s too early to draw conclusions about the true impact of the pandemic on our students and their families. It’s equally too early to draw conclusions about how the pandemic will impact school operations into the future. There are no quick answers through this situation and we shouldn’t feel obliged to find solutions [before their time](#). [We need to find comfort in the discomfort of the unknown](#); choosing to [rest in the peace of God](#), rather than [worldly anxiety](#).

What we can do, however, is recognise what we’re learning through this experience and rumble with questions that help turn our learning into [application](#).

In these very early days of the pandemic, seven thoughts have resonated with me. Each thought brings to light questions in relation to mission and ministry in our schools.

1. **Teaching is teaching, and learning is learning.** Teaching is the delivery of knowledge or instruction; it is imposed on someone. In contrast, learning is a process that leads to change and improvement; it happens internally through stimulation and engagement. We cannot be so arrogant as to assume that teaching always results in learning. We do, however, desire for ourselves and those in our communities to be [transformed by the renewing of our minds](#). Transformation rarely happens instantly. It

certainly doesn't happen by putting people on an assembly line. Transformation takes time. It takes patience. It cannot be constrained to a timetable or locked into a timeframe. It requires individual attention through coaching and mentoring. How are we already letting go of assembly line thinking and customising according to the unique learning and spiritual needs of each school family? And how can we further cultivate this?

2. **Worksheets are busy work. They serve no purpose in learning.** Phillip Cowell writes: 'Worksheets: If I know the grammar, what's the point in the worksheet? If I don't, how does this help me learn it?' Applying a one-size-fits-all principle is a bulk delivery method that may make the deliverer of the message feel productive, but it rarely pierces the hearts and souls of individuals. How much time and how many resources do we invest in mass-producing ideas and documents that are distributed from a central source, which serve little or no purpose in introducing our families to the God of love? Does our mindset nurture unity and crush uniformity, or vice versa?
3. **Learning happens through social connection.** Transformation takes place through relationships grounded in trust and vulnerability, where empathy abounds. We each have different histories and baggage, meaning we each have different barriers to social connection. Unlike a congregation's typical Sunday worship service, it cannot be assumed that the children and families who engage with a Lutheran school have a relationship with Jesus...yet. Schools are mission fields of the greatest kind, sowing seeds and often stirring the soil for the first time. To truly connect in a missional sense, [we must become all things to all people](#). Those who are engaged in front-line mission at the local level best know their communities and therefore must be the ones who prayerfully make decisions for their communities. This should not be seen as delegation from a hierarchy, but as brothers and sisters of God's church collaborating to [fulfil their role](#) in the [Great Commission](#). What does this mean for corporate or institutional decision-making? And what could it mean for church planting and repotting?
4. **We have been conditioned to believe that the structure of our education system is necessary and good and is the only way.** After all, no one alive today has lived in an era that would suggest otherwise. When we see things that are outside of our own knowledge, familiarity or comfort zone, we can judge them as weird, unbalanced or unhinged. I wonder, however, if it's actually you and me who have moved so far away from the [freedom we have in Christ](#), that we are the weird, unbalanced and unhinged, who have become [acclimatised to the structures of a fallen world](#). What did relationships and connection look like before we started pushing children through the assembly line? How are we [prioritising unconditional love, hospitality and grace, over convenient and familiar traditions](#)?
5. **Parents, staff and students are asking, 'What matters most?'** Should long division be prioritised over emotional intelligence and servant heartedness? Are academic demands more important than mental health and wellbeing? Is 'Lutheran' more important than Christianity or discipleship? [Should constitutions and legalities be obstructions for people crying out for spiritual healing](#)? These are the questions our Gen-Alpha students and their Gen-Y parents are asking. What opportunities exist to

engage in safe, vulnerable, healthy and robust dialogue, ensuring the difficult questions are not avoided or dismissed?

6. **Our children are growing up in a world of abundance and convenience, where the factory offers customised products.** We customise our phones according to our preferences, Netflix tells us what movies we prefer, we subscribe to our preferred sections of the newspaper, and our fridges can order our favourite brand of cheese from our preferred supermarket. Our younger generations are moving deeper into an echo chamber of abundance, convenience and customisation, and this is not easily penetrated by the traditional model of 'doing church'. Not dissimilar to the world our children are growing into, God offers abundance, convenience and customisation. He [blesses in abundance](#), His grace and mercy are inexhaustibly convenient [through faith](#), and He customises His [relationship with each of us](#). Still, the way we 'do' corporate mission in schools often resembles the factory model of the industrial era, which is a great departure from the factory model of the information age. Which elements of our traditional approach to mission do we need to let go of, in order to get the attention of the unchurched in our communities? If we are to expose today's students—tomorrow's leaders—to a faithful and loving God who [has good things for them](#) and [keeps his promises](#), how do we reinvent and reimagine our schools, in order to [connect with their world](#)?
7. **Every student matters.** The student with the diagnosis matters. The student with the dysfunctional family matters. The student who is difficult to love matters. The popular student matters. The student who flies under the radar matters. The gospel informs all teaching and learning and [transcends every educational model](#). God's Word affords us—[those gifted the colossal responsibility of mentoring future generations](#)—the courage to pursue a local school environment that supports each student to know their identity in Christ, to see themselves and each other as God sees them, and to be [filled with hope to face their future with confidence](#). Our world and our children aren't the same as twenty years ago, so how are we adjusting our sails according to today's wind, so we remain on course?

Schools are packaged into neat, perfect arrangements where bells flawlessly ring at the appropriate time and children are instructed to conform and comply. A short period of learning-at-home during the pandemic has exposed that we need to overturn this perfection-oriented model and reinstate the imperfect nature of child development. To do so, however, means letting go of our neat, perfect arrangements and recognising that learning and ministry are gloriously imperfect and messy. To quote my good friend, David Schuppan: 'Change requires faith and an end to the endless rounds of empty and motionless debate that keep us static, stagnant and uniform rather than empowering our diversity, creativity and hope in the Lord.' Praise God, that His love and church [endure](#), despite our well-intentioned selves getting in the way of its progress.

The industrial revolution has conditioned many to believe in worldly perfection. Numerous 20th and 21st-century researchers and writers have identified the challenges this poses, and the Western World is starting to take note. The thing is, we're starting to take note in relation to human perfection. But are we ready to take note in relation to institutional perfection?

There is no one-size-fits-all in people; in relationship; in faith. Your relationship with your father is different to your brother's relationship with your father, just as your relationship with our Father is different to my relationship with our Father. As such, every school's journey through the pandemic and how they rise on the other side will be different. To expect consistency or perfection across every school community would be narrow-minded.

Are we ready to let go of the security we feel through control, conformity and compliance, in order to enter a place of freedom and joyful trust? Are we prepared to let go of institutional perfection, in order to remove the barriers we have placed between the unchurched and their relationship with Jesus? How risk averse are we? Is it actually a risk at all, to release ourselves of man-made institutions and structures, and put it all in God's hands? Do we have the humility to get out of the way and stop thinking we know better than God himself? Are we prepared to support our schools, which are a significant arm of our Church, to defy perfection and reclaim their gloriously imperfect nature?

[Our theology](#) reminds us that we are gloriously imperfect. We are [wonderfully made](#), our lives are broken and messy, and our attempts at perfection are futile this side of heaven. In the same way that we seek to be [examined](#) and are [renewed by the Holy Spirit](#), the open-hearted examination and renewing of our institutional model of education is essential in order for us to be true to the teachings of our Lutheran schools.

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