

## A Disruptive Spirit and a Strange Encounter

The world God is calling us into isn't one that will be shaped by efforts to fix, renew or reform the churches we have known. It is about learning to join with God in a ferment and bubbling within which we cannot be in control. This was part of our learning as we spent days together at Think Tank 2017, dwelling in Acts 16: 6-15.

The story is familiar. It is often used as a text to point out how the mission of God moved from Asia to Europe, from a Jewish to a Gentile movement through Paul's 'Macedonian' call. A man of Macedonia called Paul and his companions to come over to Europe and help them. Paul had set off on what should have been a fairly straightforward journey of revisiting small communities of Christians that had been established on a previous set of visits. The purpose was to encourage, teach, establish common structures and, where appropriate, to continue to form new communities across Asia. With no explanation Luke tells his readers that the Spirit (of Jesus) prevented them from carrying out these plans. Nothing worked according their expectations. It should have been a straightforward set of objectives that would have resulted in a return to Jerusalem or Antioch to report in on what had happened. But the Spirit disrupted these good plans. Each time they revised and tried a different approach to get the job done, the Spirit of Jesus prevented. Confusion and frustration must have been high.

In Troas Paul has a dream - a man of Macedonia – and everything changed. Clarity returned, the clouds lifted, they now knew exactly how to proceed. The new plan was to sail immediately to Samothrace then to Neapolis and, from there, to Philippi. One can feel the change in Luke's sentences as confusion is removed and a clear plan of action is in place. Something to do! Clarity at last! It all fits! Go to Philippi – that's the new plan.

They turn up in Philippi to operationalize in the way they'd worked in other places with great success – 'Paul's missionary method'. Find a synagogue in a town, join with them, teach about Jesus and form a new community of Jesus followers among the Jewish people and God-fearers attached to the synagogue. But the standard plan wasn't working in Philippi. The Spirit was *preventing*, or messing with their imaginations again. They spend several days in the city – one assumes trying to find a gathering of Jewish people or the rudiments of a synagogue but – no luck. What's to be done! On the Sabbath (important clue here) they go outside the gate of the city (they are pressed to look outside the formal structures and beyond their racial and tribal expectations) and look for the precursor of a synagogue. Would there be a group of Jewish men (after all it was a man in the vision) gathered for prayer? Paul and his colleagues were following established patterns. Even in Philippi, after all the 'Spirit-preventing' they still operated inside their established expectations. But it wasn't working.

Who knows how it happened – a group of Jewish men on the Sabbath – stumbling into conversation with a group of Gentile women. The text doesn't permit us to say these women were some kind of anticipatory synagogue-like women's prayer group. There's no suggestion of this and it would be hardly likely. Paul and his companions must have been spun out of their expected worlds enough that they were ready to be thrust by the Spirit into a conversation with these women. Here's the irony – a **man** of Macedonia becomes a **woman** (Lydia) from the

place in Asia (Thyatira) where the Spirit had prevented them from visiting. It is outside (the walls, the plans, the expectations, the social and gender roles) that the Spirit is already at work ahead of them. Lydia is at the center of this very different story. She is a 'worshiper of God'. Lydia hears Paul, becomes a follower of Jesus and invites Paul's group to come to her house to form a community of God's people. The outsider becomes the host; Paul (the male Jew) at first demurs at this strange invitation that is turning him, the leader, into a guest. What do we do with all this strange, disruptive ferment of the Spirit?

As we dwelt in this passage together our conversation was rich, deep and disorienting to our own ecclesially-shaped imaginations. It brought into focus insights that led to the writing of a [Purpose](#) statement for the Journal and for our learning community. We felt that the huge, disruptive unravelling happening inside all our church systems may be the Spirit preventing existing structures and leadership expectations from being fixed or reformed. The Spirit is ahead of us forming a very different future and forming very different leaders. All of this is very messy because established maps and patterns aren't workable even though most church systems and their leaders keep trying to make them work.

Acts 16 made it clear to us that God is the primary Agent in this story. If this is so, then we must acknowledge that it is possible that God is the primary Agent in the unravelling now happening to the Euro-tribal churches. At the same time, outside the 'gates' there are all kinds of Lydia's. We want to discover how we can enter this 'dance' of God's agency because we're pretty sure we don't know how to participate in this dance especially as this is a dance in which we are to become the guests not the hosts. We're good at building plans based on existing assumptions of our own agency but it troubled us that we could discuss God's agency but not really know what that meant.

If the Spirit is out 'in front of mission' in ways that are messy and disconcerting, it turns most of what we have been doing on its head. We're so used to predetermining what the church is and what the church needs to look like (get the 'essence' and 'identity' of the church right and then all the missional stuff will follow) that we can't grasp that this dance of God's agency doesn't start from our definitional beginning points. On the contrary, the disruptive, beguiling ferment in Acts 16 suggests that its only as we risk joining with the Spirit that we'll be able to look back (from outside the gate, as guests within the homes of 'Lydia's') and begin to name what it means to be the church. Wow! How disruptive is this ferment of the Spirit for us as Euro-tribal churches?

If any of this makes any sense then leadership is about the cultivation of a community of discernment, practicing life on the ground in the local. It will have little to do with control, management and outcome-based planning. The Gospel stumbles into Europe through thwarted attempts and risky journeys. It requires an inversion of kingdom roles where leaders, such as Paul, learn to become guest. 'Church' is a missional community discovering and discerning the shape of its life as it dwells in the local and seeks to discern the eruptions and interruptions of the Spirit in the context.

What of the shock of encounter in this story, Gentile women meeting with Jewish men? We wondered if a gift God is giving to the Euro-tribal churches in the unravelling is the increasing

presence of the 'other' through mass migration. What new ways of being 'church' must emerge as Euro-tribal Jesus followers learn to embrace, be with and become the guests of these 'Lydia's' among us. Is this a word from the Spirit for our time – that the dissolution of monocultural 'congregations' is an essential missional vocation for our time and place? Is this the only way in which the Euro-tribal churches can cease to be commodified and marketized?

We will continue to explore the implications of these questions and reflections through stories, articles and conversations as we discover the fresh ways God is remaking the world. Here is how you can join the conversation:

**1. Watch the video conversation with between Alan Roxburgh & Sally Mann**

- [Beyond the Billboard: How do we talk about this?](#)
- [Beyond the Billboard: What about leadership?](#)
- [Beyond the Billboard: Acts 16 & Finding Lydia](#)

**2. Join us November 16th @ 8am PT; 11am ET; 4pm BST for a [Webinar](#) where we will explore **how do we lead beyond the billboard?** [Register now to join us!](#)**