

## Outside the Walls and Beyond the Billboard

### Reflections on the 2017 JMP Think Tank

This September the Management and Editorial teams of the JMP met near Worcester, UK for three days. It was our annual Think Tank when we reflect on the work of the Journal and plan out the year ahead.

Over this past year we've been listening to stories from people on the ground who are discerning and joining with God in their places. These stories are suggesting to us that while existing structures of the Protestant churches continue to unravel and, preoccupy their leaders, God is fermenting something else amidst ordinary Christians in local contexts.

This conviction deepened as we spent time each day dwelling in Scripture, desiring to be a community of listening and discernment. The text for this Think Tank was Acts 16: 6-15, Luke's account of Paul's disrupted journey that led him to encounter Lydia outside the gates of the Roman retirement colony of Philippi. Those reflections are shared with you in *A Disruptive Spirit and Unlikely People*. Acts 16 directed our listening to the Spirit, it brought into clarity how the Journal can inform the questions about how we are to be God's missionary people in the UK and in North America.

Our listening to Acts 16 proposed to us that the Spirit is ahead of us, at work in ways which are for us messy and disorienting, upturning most of our plans and strategies. We have a preference to begin with definitions of church. We think if we determine what the church should look like, then we'll know what the mission of God looks like. But in this story the dance of the Spirit didn't start from definitions, or from plans, it started 'outside the walls'. As we read Acts 16 together we felt that this story of the disruptive Spirit was challenging us to venture 'outside the walls' and only then to discover what it means to be the church. This ferment of the Spirit is deeply disruptive for the euro-tribal churches.

These reflections affirmed our conviction that the JMP must be formed around stories that open us to this disruptive work of the Spirit. At the same time, we kept returning to the recognition that often Protestant churches in North America and the UK react to their own unravelling in their continued attempts to fix, renew, reform and make new their churches. In other words, as the Spirit is disrupting systems, leaders are working overtime to repair them. In so doing they are missing the incredible ferment of the Spirit going on outside of and beyond their walls.

One of our JMP Editorial Team members, Sally Mann<sup>[1]</sup> had this sense of what was happening:

*Of greatest encouragement is appreciating the extent to which, while often in less celebrated settings, outside of formal structures and among unlikely people, God is at work. The most compelling picture that came to my mind at the 2017 Think Tank was that of a dilapidated billboard with a beautiful view beyond. Broader Western imaginations, our constructions, the ways we expect to see God to work and the ecclesial structures that we have relied upon to 'do*

*mission', are falling apart. Some might feel called to try and repair them, to make them work again; to do more of the same, only better. Perhaps this is because we have been slow to notice the beautiful view behind the billboard? Could it be that what looked so 'set in stone' in our ways of thinking about church and mission were temporary constructions of our own making; perhaps useful for a time, but disassembling now. How should we feel about this? One option is to embrace the shift; to be hopeful. Beyond this deconstruction, if we attend well, do not panic or attempt to seize back agency, signs of something new and beautiful might be emerging.*

These words express so well what we see happening. The Spirit is inviting us to join something that is far past mending and reforming. Is this the form of our Macedonian call – a journey far beyond definitions and new forms, outside the gate, where we become, as Luke describes in Luke 10, guests rather than hosts? Is it from this location in our local communities that we might see what the Spirit is fermenting?

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!](#)**

[1] See Sally Mann and Angie Allgood. "A Deeply Rooted Missional Community in Bonny Downs", *Journal of Missional Practice*, Spring 2016, and the following conversation.