

Editorial: Learning to Listen

When Lydia met Paul, strangely, surprisingly, she welcomed this newcomer and his friends, and their message, into her household (Acts 16:13-15). We're told she was a worshipper of God so perhaps Paul's vision of a Macedonian man was an answer to her prayer. It brought the gospel into a European city for the first time.

Paul's missionary band were ready to meet with these Gentile women too, well battered by their arduous and frustrating journey, enabled perhaps by the presence of Luke, himself a Gentile.^[1] An unlikely encounter nevertheless.

The *Journal of Missional Practice* has a Think Tank every year, a retreat where the Editorial Team gather to hear together God's call for the Journal. You can read more about this on our [Think Tank page](#). Always, we take time to 'dwell' in Scripture, and for the last couple of years our Scripture has been Acts 16 - the missionaries' winding journey towards Philippi and this strange encounter. At our 2017 Think Tank the story entered into our imaginations, and shaped our ways of thinking about the gospel in our own contexts. What is going on outside our familiar church-as-usual ministries. Who waits for us, 'beyond the city gates' of church life, but not far, and ready with a welcome. We called this idea 'beyond the billboard' and we were encouraged to think that God is active there beyond our usual ways of thinking and acting in church, and ready to surprise us (on the river bank).^[2]

The 'outside the gates' metaphor shaped our approach to our theme for issue 10, '[Questions of Place](#)'. In many conversations and interviews we attempted ourselves to go 'outside the city walls' to listen to and learn from people speaking from a variety of perspectives: First Nations in Canada, African immigrant in the UK, US Latino, poor urban estates in the US and UK, new age outreach in London. We found the diverse stories disruptive of any tidy account, but powerful in opening up new possibilities.

This year, at our Think Tank in Vancouver, we continued to dwell in Acts 16. It was the experience of encounter itself which held our attention. What happens when people listen to the story of another, especially when this 'otherness' is striking. When Lydia heard Paul's story; and as he listened to her, a Gentile woman trader, a worshipper of God, was he, the ex-Pharisee, surprised? How did it change him?

Paul and his group experienced God communicating and leading on their journey, in the puzzle of God's forbidding (Acts 16 v 6-7), through their dreams and through the people they encountered. They were responsive. But hearing God in this way is not inevitable and, in fact, uncommon in the West. We have become accustomed to think of learning and knowing differently. Sally Mann, a member of the Editorial Team, in her [reflection on the Think Tank](#) comments:

The method of knowing through action and reflection allows God to break down some of our tidy explanations and disturb pat answers. It invites us to take our obliviousness seriously, to recognize privilege and learn from the grassroots. It takes seriously that God is always the

prime mover.

In this issue of the Journal we want to turn our attention to hearing God particularly through encounter and sharing stories, drawing on the resource of Journal stories and the practices of action and reflection.

Sally Mann was a storyteller for the journal, and she describes, in her [Think Tank reflection](#), what happened when she told her story to the Journal, of the affirmation she experienced.^[3] She experienced listening to her own story as a 're-membering', a 'bringing the pieces of our story together...'. As we reflect and remember our stories, if we are lucky enough to find a good listener, they reveal more layers of reality, emotion and insight, more of God at work in our lives. Our stories also impact listeners, drawing out their own stories, reigniting imaginations, gently questioning assumptions. Surely this happened as Paul and Lydia listened to one another.

In this Issue we pay attention to this exchange by returning to some of our former story tellers and inviting them to tell again their stories, and by attending to how we listen. To help in our understanding of this dynamic we will ask some of our storytellers to listen, to engage with another's story, perhaps someone from an entirely different context and culture. They may compare experiences: how have they discerned God's call? Where did they grow, learn or change their minds? How have they each experienced God's love in their lives?

We plan, as in the *Questions of Place* issue of the journal, to model listening across cultural distance, taking our cue from Lydia and Paul's experience. This is challenging for those of us from the West, because it disrupts the western tendency to organise life swiftly into abstraction and theory. Harvey Kwiyani comments in his [Think Tank reflection](#):

This intentional embrace of uncertainty, of slowing down to listen and learn from the strangers among us, also signifies an epistemological shift — God's speed is not ours. My peoples in Malawi would always remind us, 'if you want to go fast, walk alone. But if you want to go far, go in community, but know that it will take longer'.

Genuine listening to the stranger, to someone very different to ourselves, is challenging and time consuming yet it has the potential to transform the way we experience our own context.

How does this 'genuine listening' occur? We have already begun to explore this topic in our webinar [Why Stories Matter](#) with Suzanne Willian who talks of 'deep and generous listening'. How can we help one another through the Journal, to become better listeners? Mark Lau Branson, in his [reflection on our Think Tank](#) conversations comments:

Almost without exception, real learning, the kind that gets embedded in our behaviours, imaginations, and habits, requires three elements: actions that allow the learning to be tested and expanded in real life, personal reflection that prayerfully considers the connections between ideas and actions, and conversations with others.

Our hope is to extend this listening experiment to our wider community, and to facilitate these three aspects of learning. Taking 'listening' as our topic, we will offer suggested actions and

tools for reflection. Through a programme of webinars we will provide opportunities for individuals and learning communities to share stories and to listen to one another.

An underpinning assumption of the JMP is that God calls to us through our lives and contexts, and the lives of others.^[4] As we come to more deeply appropriate this posture, and experience it, we will become listeners, expectant and hopeful in many conversations. In the video which follows, some Think Tank members (Martin Robinson, Alan Roxburgh, Mark Lau Branson, Sally Mann and Sara Jane Walker) reflect on listening in our multicultural contexts and invite you to join with us in this experiment in growing receptivity.

[1] The narrative is written in the first person in this part of Acts 16.

[2] See Journal issue number 9: [Beyond the Billboard](#), particularly Alan Roxburgh's reflection '[Outside the Walls and Beyond the Billboard](#)'.

[3] You can see Sally and her sister Angie Allgood in videos [here](#) with theological reflections on their stories.

[4] See our Purpose statement [here](#).