

Think Tank 2018: Outside the City Gates

‘We believe God is teaching us through encounters with people different from us.’

That was the conclusion we came to as the JMP management team over 48 hours in Vancouver. But it was something of an unexpected outcome, as is so often the case when Christians attempt to get some handle on where and how God is at work. As we found, getting beyond our own agendas, re-igniting our limited imaginations, and opening ourselves in new ways to God’s surprising presence is an exciting but demanding task. A hallmark of our time together was a sustained time reflecting together each day on Acts 16:6-15; coming at the passage from every which way, trying to live *in* it, and learn *out* of it, being silent *before* it, and talking to each other *about* it.

The story outline seemed straightforward enough. The story takes Paul and his team further Westwards from Antioch with the good news, but it also tells of the dramatic divine exclusion of some plausible possibilities. Seemingly hemmed in, Paul has the vision of the ‘man from Macedonia’ saying ‘come and help us’. He and his companions sail across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. But soon they land in fresh uncertainties, with local complexities, delays, and further surprises. And paradoxically these are the soil out of which possibilities are opened up for surprising ways forward. The breakthrough comes in the form of a cross-cultural encounter with Lydia, a Gentile entrepreneur, herself an immigrant to Philippi, who has been meeting with other women ‘outside the gate’ of the city. This is not expected for Paul, it’s not about a man, and it’s not in the heart of the ‘happening’ place of Philippi. Paul and his companions needed to re-think, re-position, keep listening to the Spirit.

All of this nourished us deeply as we sought to work together to give focus and the vision for the future issues of the Journal. The parallels seemed to coalesce around the statement above: that God still works through people different from ourselves to bring about movement towards new and strategic growth. And we began to express again our desire that through the Journal’s recorded and curated stories from many different localities, the gathered conversations would catalyse new insights and new engagements with what God is doing outside *our* gates. We became excited that through listening, reflection, and re-engagement, we too might find parallel encounters to Paul with Lydia, unlikely at first, surprising yes, cross-culturally demanding, but nonetheless places where a ‘Lydia’ may be highlighting, in our places, new breakthroughs that we had never imagined.