



ABSTRACT

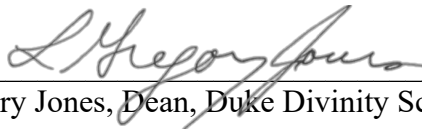
*Transformational Detours:  
A Journey with Lydia Through God's Power Within*

by

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## **Abstract**

“Transformational Detours: A Journey with Lydia Through God’s Power Within” is a call for Christian leaders to return to the roots of their heritage and follow the example of Lydia, Paul’s first European convert and church leader, who was a worshipper of God, student of prayer, eager listener, responder to truth, and sharer of talents and resources. By engaging the scriptural imagination, this thesis uses an interdisciplinary method through the genre of epistles to weave together stories of scriptural figures, Wesleyan founders, and the author’s own experiences to provide a foundation upon which leaders may rediscover God’s power within as described in Ephesians 3:20 which “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

## **Dedication**

To my amazing husband who encourages all my endeavors.

To my precious children who inspire me to never stop asking, seeking, learning.

To all sojourners of faith who long for transformation on their journeys.

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It is with sincere gratitude that I must express my thanks to my congregation at the Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City who have been so supportive during this process, along with the church families in Raleigh, North Carolina who embraced my husband and I so early in our ministry endeavors. So many friends and colleagues from Point Loma Nazarene University, and a wealth of others who I have failed to mention, also provided inspiration throughout my D.Min. journey. I appreciate all of you!

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## Introduction

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

This thesis is my story through the lens of Acts Chapter 16 and the conversion of Lydia, a businesswoman, worshipper of God, student of prayer, intent listener, responder to truth, and sharer of talents and resources.<sup>1</sup> It is the story of my long journey, filled with many detours, of learning how to live in what I've come to call God's Far Beyond as described in Ephesians 3 – "God's power at work within us that is able to accomplish abundantly far beyond all we can ask or imagine."<sup>2</sup> As I enter the story of Lydia through my scriptural imagination, I see my own story unfolding in a new way, touched by the fingerprints of God and framed by divine footsteps before, behind and beside me. My own journey, with all its twists and turns and ups and downs, becomes transformed through the lens of Paul and Lydia's narratives which brings light to my dark paths and speaks truth to the lies that might plague me. As Richard Hays encourages, "we read scripture to learn the unfolding story in which we too are characters, and to understand the role we are called to play in it."<sup>3</sup> I've come to realize that as Christian leaders, our training for engaging scripture has focused our attention primarily on appropriate biblical methods of study and questions of biblical authority.<sup>4</sup> While these skills are helpful in providing context and historical knowledge, when we rely on them alone, they impede

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16: 9-16

<sup>2</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016). 21.

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Forming Scriptural Imagination*, Divinity, Spring 2013. p 3

<sup>4</sup> Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, First Edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2003). 145.



our ability to engage our scriptural imagination as they hinder our capacity to understand “the ways in which Scripture’s words (and the Word) shape both our minds and our lives.”<sup>5</sup> Gregory Jones shares with us his concern in *The Art of Reading Scripture*:

American Christians have largely lost a rich familiarity with ruled patterns for reading and embodying Scripture, the kind of familiarity that shapes people’s lives and, at its best, enlivens a scriptural imagination. Indeed, this loss of familiarity is at least in part a consequence of an increasing preoccupation with questions of biblical method and biblical authority. As Christians in modernity have increasingly argued about the appropriate method or methods of biblical study as well as the perceived status of Scripture’s authority, we have failed to attend adequately to the task of actually reading and embodying the text themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Jones continues by encouraging us to “rediscover Scripture as the ‘word that journeys with us’” and “learn to live with, and embody, the texts of Scripture throughout our lives.”<sup>7</sup> Through this style of engaging the story of Lydia with you in my letters, I hope to enliven our scriptural imagination and challenge us to develop “habits of effective and faithful reading and embodiment of Scripture.”<sup>8</sup> We are all characters in God’s story that began with the words “Let there be.” God is still shaping and forming within and through creation, still walking with us the beloved, still claiming that all God has made is good.

I’ve chosen to write this thesis as letters to my fellow Christian leaders, both young and old, and especially to the generation that is only just beginning their call into Christian ministry. We have failed you I’m afraid, my young brothers and sisters. The church, in its grasp for power and affluence, has become irrelevant to the complex and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

hurting world around us. We have become just one of many institutions, stale and saltless, forgetting our first love and call to be the living body of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. These letters are an attempt to beckon us back to our roots and foundation and to waken us to new possibilities as we embody Ephesians 3 and pray for God to strengthen us “in our inner beings with the power of God’s spirit so that Christ will dwell in [our] hearts through faith as we are rooted and grounded in love.” They are also written as a reminder to live lives grounded in God’s love so we may “comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.”<sup>9</sup>

As Christian leaders, we have a different call and mandate upon our lives than the secular leaders of the world. We are a part of a bigger kingdom than our own and the dream we follow is not of our own conjuring but was established by our creator God. Each of us is one among the millions of followers who have come before us. We have also caught God’s vision to reunite God with God’s beloved children and have dedicated our lives to this call, joining our brothers and sisters who have witnessed God’s triumphant love throughout history and sharing this love with those we encounter along our journey.<sup>10</sup>

Brothers and sisters, from this foundational conviction, that we each play a role in a God given mission beyond our individual notions, I want to explore with you Biblical, mid-century, and current day models of Christian leadership. Through my letters, I will first share from my own experiences of how I believe God works through unexpected

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<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 3: 14 – 21 (Paraphrase of New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*. 20-21.

detours, as evidenced in Paul's life, and turns them into transformational journeys to shape us to both learn from and impact the world we are called to serve. We will also take a deeper look into Paul's first European convert, Lydia, a disciple who was only briefly mentioned in the scriptures<sup>11</sup> yet embodied the essential elements of faith for developing our Christian walk. Looking to Lydia's example, we will examine key practices that prepare us to live in God's Far Beyond: a life of prayer, the art of eagerly listening, the beauty of abandoned response, and the strength of collective resources. Each letter, grounded in foundational Biblical examples, will also explore key leaders of the Wesleyan tradition in light of these models and will challenge us to embrace and return to the strength of this heritage. Lastly, I will share examples of how we can implement these models in our current community and cultural contexts that God has placed us in, following God far beyond our own knowledge and imagination.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 16: 9-16

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 3:19 & 20

## Chapter One: Living in God's Far Beyond

Dear friends and sojourners,

I fear the church has become so conditioned to live within its own four walls that we have lost touch with the radical faith God has called us to. Do we truly believe God can do more than we could think or imagine? Or do we confine ourselves to our own imagination, thoughts, and ideas no matter how creative and innovative we may think they are? Thankfully, even if we confine ourselves to our own limitations, God does not. The question we must ask ourselves is whose realm do we chose to live in, ours or God's?

We serve a God who Paul claims, in Ephesians 3, loves us and all creation with a love that surpasses all knowledge. If this is true, then we must not be content to live within the boundaries of our own knowledge and understanding but believe and step moment by moment into the unknown and uncharted world of faith with our God who "by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."<sup>1</sup> I have found myself expressing this as living in "God's Far Beyond," beyond our own limitations and imaginings with complete abandonment and trust to what God wants to accomplish in and through us. Believing that God is bigger than all the impossibilities and the mundane ruts we may find ourselves in and having faith that God has the power to lead us to places we have never imagined, to navigate us through difficult paths, and to produce options where there are none to be seen. God is still creating out of nothing. God chooses to love us despite the fact we continue to be

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:20 (New Revised Standard Version)

unworthy. God chooses to work through us even when we may lack a vision for this work ourselves. I want to explore with you key principles for us to practice in our lives, through the life of Lydia, our fathers and mothers who have gone before us, and my own experiences, that will prepare us to walk in God's Far Beyond.

What does God's Far Beyond look like? What stories are testimony to it and to the promise of our lives encountering it as well? Biblically, it is the fire that burned but did not consume. It is the dry ground in the middle of the raging walls of waters. It is the oil that never runs out. It is the virgin conception by the Holy Spirit. It is the thrown stones that do not kill. It is an encounter with the Gospel that changes one's life forever. For the many Christian leaders who came before us, it was the perilous journey to freedom. It was the founding of churches against all odds. It is a heart strangely warmed. For us today, it is the breaking of norms in society. It is partnerships across race, class, sectors and faith traditions. It is a warehouse donated for Christian ministry by an atheist. It is a bridge built, a cup of water extended, a smile of hope during dark times.<sup>2</sup> It is us joining all those who have come before us saying "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," rather than questioning God with "How will I know that this is so?"

Mary's response to Gabriel's news that she was to conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear God's son was simple acceptance with the words, "Let it be" rather than asking for proof or challenging God's ability as Zechariah did earlier in Luke's narrative.<sup>3</sup> Mary

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations* (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1985). XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:18

sought no qualifications or guarantees.<sup>4</sup> To live in God's Far Beyond is to say, "Here I am, a servant to our Lord, let it be,"<sup>5</sup> and submit ourselves to God's "power at work within us" which "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."<sup>6</sup>

The question for us is whether we are willing to submit, like Mary, to things beyond our understanding, beyond our reasoning, beyond what we can prove, analyze, script, test, or organize on a nice graph. Are we willing to "let it be" without qualifications or must we know and understand and question like Zechariah, putting our faith in the answers to "How will we know?" rather than in God's ability to do more than we can think is possible?<sup>7</sup> Living in God's Far Beyond is a faith that sees more deeply God's ability to do immeasurably more than we can think or imagine rather than limiting God's work within the inadequate framework of our own knowledge, abilities, and understanding. It is returning to our childlike wonder and innocence, waiting expectantly for our mother/father God to astound us once again.

God's Far Beyond is the Great Mystery of our faith. When our faith in God becomes something that we can fit in our pocket to take out when needed, then we have lost our belief in the Great Mystery of God and have reduced God to one of our many useful commodities. Our faith in God becomes a product of choice rather than an unfettered response to a call that brings us beyond ourselves and into a journey of the unknown. Richard Rohr shares in *Everything Belongs*, "That's why so much of the West

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<sup>4</sup> Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God: Deluxe Gift Edition*, Lea edition (Nashville, Tenn: Upper Room, 2003). 41.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:38 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 3:20 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>7</sup> Job and Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*. 41.

is understandably abandoning religion. People know the great mystery cannot be that simple and facile. If indeed the great mystery is indeed the Great Mystery, it will lead us into paradox, into darkness, into journey's that never cease."<sup>8</sup> Rohr goes on to caution us away from a religion that does not spur us to seek and search and lean into God's creative power to make something out of all the nothings we tend to see with our limited vision.<sup>9</sup>

As I explore God's Far Beyond with you through my letters, I hope to be true to our Wesleyan heritage and bear Christian witness to it through the testimonies of our Biblical and ancestral fathers and mothers so that their life stories may inspire us today as we journey with our God. Their stories can also offer us hope along our paths which often seem to lead to destinations we have not expected and experiences we have not sought. I have witnessed my own fair share of these unexpected detours and in hindsight have realized that God has used them as opportunities to shape and prepare me to live in God's Far Beyond and experience moments that exceed anything I could have orchestrated or designed. I will also share ideas on the foundational practices modeled for us by these leaders of our faith that help us to be the rich soil ready to receive all that God has in store for us as we minister and grow in faith and love.

Let us journey together to discover God's Far Beyond.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, Revised and updated edition (Crossroad, 2015). 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: Transformational Detours

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I have come to believe that life with God is a journey of discovery through detours. We form plans and have ideas on how our lives should turn out, many times to find ourselves confronted by unforeseen barriers and unexpected events that alter our original well laid course. This is the story throughout time. Through scripture, we see the steadfast companionship of God – sustainer, nurturer, and guide – as God walks with creation through each detour faced whether caused by our own actions or forces beyond our control: Adam and Eve’s detour from the garden of Eden, Abram’s journey up Mount Sanai to sacrifice his son, Jacob’s flight from his brother’s wrath, Joseph’s journey from slave to royalty, Moses’ path from certain death at birth to leader of a nation, Mary’s virgin conception of the Messiah, Saul’s encounter on the road to Emmaus, Lydia’s passage from slave to pastor. The list goes on throughout time. In these reflections, I also think of key founding figures from our Methodist heritage like Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who rose from being cast out by her wealthy family to being a key leader in the Methodist movement;<sup>1</sup> Bishop Richard Allen’s journey from slavery to founder of the AME church;<sup>2</sup> John Wesley’s failed attempt as a missionary in Georgia to the life-changing moment years later in England when his heart was strangely warmed;<sup>3</sup> and Harriet Tubman’s remarkable quest for freedom and her heroic contributions to the

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<sup>1</sup> Moore and Henry, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher: Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Salop* (HardPress Publishing, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*, 1st edition (New York; Chesham: NYU Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley: 2nd Edition*, 2nd edition (Nashville: ABNDP - Abingdon Press, 2003).



Underground Railroad.<sup>4</sup> The testimonies of God's sustaining presence and transformative power through life's detours continues throughout our present age as we look at our own personal stories and discover God who journeys with us each step of the way, walking alongside us through the unexpected detours we find ourselves on.

After, walking through many unexpected detours myself, I've come to believe that God has used each one as a time of transformation and growth in my life. I'd like to share a few of these stories with you and reflect on God's transformational power in the midst of challenging and unforeseen circumstances. To clarify though, I'm not one to believe that God is the one who causes the detours and difficulties in our lives in order to mold and shape us. After all, it was not God who plucked the apple and put it in the hand of Adam and Eve to bite into. They were responsible for reaching out and wrapping their fingers around the plump and juicy piece of fruit until it snapped away from its tree and lifting it to their lips to take that fateful bite. It was not God who thrust Joseph into a cistern and sold him into slavery. It was not God who created the enslavement of people for monetary gain. It was not God who separated a daughter from her family or caused a missionary journey to end in complete failure. It was not God who told me that no one would understand my call to be ordained and to pursue other endeavors.

But it was God who called out in search of Adam and Eve and walked with them and their offspring once their decisions drove them from the garden. It was God who journeyed with Joseph as a slave through the events that led him to a place to save the people of Israel. God walked with our Methodist founders through a variety of obstacles

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero*, 52830th edition (New York: One World, 2004).

as they continued to faithfully follow the call placed on their lives. And I know God walked with me through years of detours before I received my ordination 20 years after the initial divine call.

While God does not cause bad things to happen to us, God does allow the circumstances of our lives to occur.<sup>5</sup> As Christians, we may believe that our journeys are meant to be safe and without conflict or challenges, and when unexpected detours are encountered, we may wonder what we are doing wrong or blame others and God for our circumstances. The simple truth is we live in a fallen and damaged creation unable to sustain perfect and unblemished experiences for its occupants. Even though God allowed the perfection of creation to be destroyed by human will, God also chooses to be with us as we experience all that life has to offer us: joys, sorrows, failures and successes. God can use our life circumstances to prepare us and shape us into a people who reflect the divine image we have been created to imitate, as the power of the Holy Spirit accomplished in and through us more than we could ever render of our own will.

Like me, I'm sure at times you've found your journey has led to what seems like dead ends. We may be trying to do what we believe God has called us to do but then hit an unexpected wall or sudden change of direction. This can lead to frustration, exhaustion and burnout especially when we view the journey from the outcomes we hoped to achieve rather than a product in and of itself. We are not alone in these seemingly fruitless experiences. Over the centuries, followers of Christ have experienced these apparent dead-end journeys, wrestled with the frustration and disillusionment they produce, questioned their initial call, wondered if they had indeed heard God correctly,

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<sup>5</sup> Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes: A Spiritual Companion Through Life's Losses and Sorrows*, Revised edition (Ave Maria Press, 2009). 21.

and cautiously searched for the next steps wondering if yet again they may find themselves with little to show for all their efforts.

A friend recently shared their frustration at wasting so many years pursuing three wrong careers before they found the one that best fit their personality. I thought about that for a bit and how I related to this in many ways, yet as I reflect back over what I may consider wasted detours, I realize there is another way to look at these apparent wrong paths that I had either ignorantly chosen for myself, stumbled upon accidentally, or found them thrust upon me. What if instead of a waste of time, these journeys were moments when God shaped me and prepared me for where I find myself today? Again, I'm not suggesting that these experiences were authored and orchestrated by God but rather as we journey through life and are faced with watershed moments, unexpected events that alter our life's trajectory, or bewildering dead ends, they are opportunities for God to teach us, guide us, and shape us.

Although it may often feel like it, we are not alone on these discouraging segments of our journeys for we walk and serve a Savior who knows this pain personally. Jesus Christ is our companion on this journey and experienced all and more than we may endure, including rejection, humiliation, loss, and isolation. Christ was beaten and nailed to a rugged piece of wood that he was too tired to carry, he was deserted by his followers and companions who stood hopeless from a distance wondering what went wrong, grieving over the loss of what was supposed to be, and he even felt forsaken by his own father as death drew near.

We know this is not the end of our Lord. In fact, it was the rebirth of all humanity as Christ stepped through the gates of hell and victoriously flung open the door of

salvation and eternal life for all. The good news of this victorious side of the cross is the amazing grace-filled miracle of our gospel. We are right to focus our attention on our victorious Savior. Yet, let us not forget to also embrace the significance that God became flesh and dwelt among us, experiencing all the hardships and trials life has to offer. When we remember that our Lord and Savior's journey was also fraught with difficulty, we may learn to recognize Christ's presence and compassion for us as we travel the path set before us, despite the struggles, closed doors, apparent dead ends, and victories that evade us.

Also, as we walk through the labyrinth of life, as I've alluded to earlier, it is essential to seek the models provided from those who have gone before us. While I will not be focusing directly in my letters on the primary model Christ provided for us in God made flesh, I want to look at some of Christ's disciples from the Bible and into our present day.

First, I want to examine Paul's first European convert, Lydia. She is introduced to us in the book of Acts and provides us both companionship and inspiration along the path of leadership in the church. Examining the few verses that share her story with us, I'd like to reflect on how God uses unexpected detours to transform us and open doors to discovering God's divine will that we may otherwise not be ready for. We will first take a look at Paul and his thwarted attempts toward destinations he had planned to go. Especially his detour to Macedonia which led to the prophetic encounter with Lydia who became instrumental to Paul's future ministry. As a successful businesswoman and foreigner, her surprising actions and response to the Gospel provide us an essential road map for our journey with Christ. Over the course of my letters, we will glean from the

providential nexus of these two narratives fundamental practices we can adopt for our lives today as we live out the Gospel through our own unpredictable paths of obedience to God.



Good morning my fellow sojourners,

I must admit, I find myself strangely satisfied that the Bible is full of so many imperfect people whom God decides to work through. I would like to further examine how God uses detours in people's lives to become unlikely messengers of the Gospel. My mind cannot help but turn to Saul, who God renamed Paul, a man who tried to snuff out God's story and violently persecuted the first Christians. I will refrain from detailing Paul's goal of persecuting the Church before encountering Christ. We all know the stories of how he approved of the stoning of Stephen,<sup>6</sup> and then ravaged "the church by entering house after house; dragging both men and women, committing them to prison,"<sup>7</sup> and hunted both men and women alike, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Jesus stops Paul's murderous journey. On the road to Damascus, Jesus asked Paul why he was persecuting him and sent him to Ananias to receive his sight. This watershed experience transformed Paul and the desires of his heart, turning his passion to pursue men and women for persecution into a pursuit of saving their souls for Christ.

Another unforeseen diversion that comes later in Paul's ministry is of particular interest to me. After many of Paul's adventures of preaching the Gospel, escaping the hands of the Jews, healing people, and challenging leaders of the synagogue, in Acts

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 8:1

<sup>7</sup> Acts 8:3 (New Revised Standard Version)

chapter 16 we are told about an experience that leads to a powerful encounter that would be foundational for Paul's ministry. Paul and Silas had just recruited Timothy, a believer in Lystra whose mother was a Jew and father a Greek. In verses six through ten we are told:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night, Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.<sup>8</sup>

Paul and his companions change course from the original route of their missionary journey. I find it interesting on this new path, that Paul does not meet the man he must have expected who had appeared to him in the dream, but instead meets Lydia, a successful, independent businesswoman who may have been a former slave according to many manuscripts.<sup>9</sup> The unplanned intersection of their journeys became a crossroad to new possibilities founded in God's provision and abundant grace. Lydia becomes a critical agent of change in spreading the Gospel in the Macedonia region.

Can we relate to this in our ministry ventures? A vision or gut feeling draws us to make certain decisions that unfold in ways we were not expecting. In truth, I'm not certain I can recall when something has ever turned out exactly the way I had originally planned or expected. I strive to say this with a light heart, rather than regret, as over the years I've realized that if I turn from my naturally stubborn lens, I can see how

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 16:6-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>9</sup> Richard S Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess*, Paul's Social Network 5 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Pr, 2009). 1.

encounters along unexpected paths and unplanned results often point beyond my human efforts and design.

In this case with Paul and his companions, if their hearts and minds had not been opened to taking a different route than they had planned, they may never have experienced the amazing support from the church in Philippi. According to Richard Ascough, “without Lydia there may well have been no Philippian Jesus community. She was a key player in Paul’s social network – one of the pivotal sisters in the faith” that embraced and provided for them through the challenges and hardships that awaited them.<sup>10</sup>

How many times are we so set on the outcomes we have our minds so determined to accomplish that we miss opportunities God is providing us to take part in? We limit ourselves to our own strength and wisdom rather than live by faith in God’s power at work around us, beside us, behind us, before us, and within us which is able to do far beyond what we can even think or imagine.<sup>11</sup> It is as if our goals and desires each become a blinder, a stiff leather patch attached to the bridle of our ego. We are like horses pulling our heavy wagons of expectations and outcomes with no vision for anything but the course that we have set before ourselves. These blinders are meant to keep horses from seeing behind them or beside them so that they do not become distracted or diverted. We craft our human made blinders that we subconsciously bind to the eyes of our minds and hearts and wills, making it very difficult for God to deter us from ourselves or stir within us a God-designed, far-beyond plan. God may be on the side of the road we are journeying beckoning us or behind us in our rear-view mirror because we’ve hurriedly

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Eph. 3:20

moved past all distractions in order to keep on task with our strategic plan, too focused on the goals we've set out to accomplish to notice. If Paul and his companions, in this brief scripture in Acts, were so set on an encounter with a Macedonian man as his vivid dream had foreseen, they may have walked right past Lydia and never experienced the rich relationship and networks this encounter had in store for them.

Paul's group made it a practice each time they reached a new city to search for the local Jewish synagogue on the first Sabbath of their arrival, in order to share the Gospel of Christ.<sup>12</sup> In Macedonia, it appears there were not enough Jewish men to establish a synagogue in Philippi so their search for a house of prayer on the Sabbath led them instead to a gathering of women praying out by the river. During this time, a group of women, no matter the number, could not compensate for the necessary quorum of the ten men it takes to constitute a synagogue.<sup>13</sup> This group of women were worshipers of the God of Israel, scripture tells us, who met each sabbath on the bank near the Gangites river to pray.<sup>14</sup> When I think about this encounter and mentally insert my goal-oriented self within the narrative, I wonder how I may have responded to this situation of not finding the Macedonia man I had been looking for, the one I had changed my whole course of action for.

I can picture myself in Macedonia, a few days after arrival, still searching for the man from my vision who pleaded with me to come and help them. I am hopeful that on the Sabbath I will find a gathering of Jewish men administering the Jewish service of prayer for the sabbath day. I could not find a regular synagogue established within the

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<sup>12</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Revised ed. edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1988). 310.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 311.



city walls, so my companions and I decide to walk to the river outside the city where Jews in foreign lands often met instead. As we walk along the bank of the river, we begin to hear voices and are hopeful we have found the group we are searching for to fulfill the prophetic vision of our mission and share the Gospel with the men in Macedonia. As we round the bend and get closer to the bank of the river, we find a group of women instead, worshipping God and praying. Would I stop or continue past them? Would I feel my heart downcast and my spirit frustrated that once again my search was in vain? Would my blinders of clear expectations and set outcomes keep me from seeing the activity of God as I unseeingly move past this opportunity because it did not fit the bill I prescribed?

Thankfully, Paul that day did not pass these women by, but instead cast aside the time's social norms and his vision's vivid influence. Without hesitation, Paul joined the women in worship and prayer to share the true identity of the God to whom they were praying and the Word that became flesh. Paul embraced yet another detour on his journey which opened the door to God's unforeseen possibilities. Lydia was amongst these women, a seller purple cloth. Scriptures tell us she was a worshiper of God. As the Lord opened her heart that day to accept Paul's message, she immediately responded and wanted Paul to baptize her and her entire household.<sup>15</sup> What if Paul had seen the group of women as another failed endeavor in his strategic plan? What if his blinders of intended goals and outcomes had led him straight past them, seeing them only as a disappointing distraction in his search for the man in his dream? What do our own blinders keep us from seeing? How might they not allow God to distract us and detour us from our own efforts and into the far beyond of God's own design?

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 16:14-15

I often wonder what I've missed along my journey. Encounters with Christ that I couldn't be bothered with as they didn't assist me in reaching my goals. God's Far Beyond comes in all different shapes and sizes. It is not only unexplained, amazing, miracles that seem beyond our reach. It often may be in an unassuming stranger, an inconvenient request, a seemingly dead end that becomes doorways of transformation for ourselves and those we encounter. May God give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to understand.



Dear friends,

We have looked at the detour that led Paul to Lydia so now let us observe the detours we can learn from Lydia's own life that led to her hearing the good news of Christ and becoming the host of the first church in the region that is now known as Europe. The unplanned intersection of paths between Paul and Lydia opens many unexpected doors. Lydia is recognized as the founder of the network of Christ followers in the Macedonia region and the benefactor of Paul's ministry.<sup>16</sup> Several diverse narratives are attributed to Lydia, a seller of purple cloth, captured in just four brief sentences in Acts 16:14-15 and 40. Verse 15 makes it known she is the head of her household as she took the authority to have her entire household baptized and then extended the invitation to Paul and his companions to stay at her home, "prevailing" upon them to accept. It is often assumed by those interpreting the New Testament that women acquired independence through being divorced or widowed and thus becoming heads of

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<sup>16</sup> Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess*. 1.

their own households. Some scholars suggest this is how Lydia acquired her independence.<sup>17</sup> It was also a practice of Rome during that period for free-born women or freed women with multiple children to be allowed certain independent privileges such as making legal transaction without consent of their husbands or guardians.<sup>18</sup> In my scriptural imagination, I lean toward many scholarly indications that support the narrative that Lydia was a freed slave. It was the custom of the time to refer to women who were former servants by their geographical origin.<sup>19</sup> Florence Morgan Gilman explains that

Lydia, originally from Thyatira, is said to have been a resident of Philippi, a worshipper of God and seller of purple goods when she was converted to Christianity. Because the city of Thyatira in the Roman province of Asia was in the district known as Lydia, it can be assumed that her name had been applied descriptively to her in Phillippe, i.e. “the Lydian woman.” This suggests that she once had servile status, since slaves were often given a name reflecting their geographical origin. However, she must have achieved her freedom because she had her own household in Philippi. Furthermore, her occupation as a seller of purple goods is one known from various inscriptions to have been held in many instances by ex-slaves. It has also been noted that Lydia’s name is a Latinized form of the Greek *Lydē*. This could be a clue that her former owner was one of the Roman residents of Phillip, a not implausible suggestion since that city was a Roman *colonia*, a place where Romans, especially veterans, were encouraged to settle.<sup>20</sup>

I am fascinated by this narrative of a woman who journeys from being a slave to a successful businesswoman and the head of a large household in a male-dominated society. During a time when men held the authority to make decisions for their households, Acts tells us that Lydia was the one who had her whole household baptized, welcomed Paul and all his companions into her home, and shared of her resources to support Paul mission. During this time, and in many places still today, it would have

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<sup>17</sup> Florence Morgan Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992). 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ascough, *Lydia: Paul’s Cosmopolitan Hostess*. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul*. 31.

been very unusual for a woman to invite a group of men and all those traveling with them into her home, especially if she was a woman without male supervision. Acts is not shy in describing Lydia in a few short verses as a woman who handles her own affairs, both business and personal, making her own decisions, independent of a male figure of authority. She also demonstrates strong leadership within her group by speaking openly and directly to Paul and all his companions.

Lydia's example inspires me. Despite all the detours she must have faced while journeying from slave to a free woman of commerce, she is introduced to us as a seeker of the true God and is a living testimony to us of key tenets for us to embrace on our life of faith – living a life of prayer, practicing the art of eagerly listening, responding with abandon, and sharing of collective resources – which I'm sure were strengthened and shaped throughout her journey as she sought God through each twist and turn. As a seeker of the true God, I'm confident the detours of Lydia's life were not wasted years but rather were times of molding and preparing for the important leadership role she would have in Paul's ministry: hosting the first house church in the Macedonia region, spreading the Gospel, and supporting the continued missionary efforts of Paul.

I want to examine these precepts and principals of Lydia more closely with you but first I'd like to write to you about my own formational detour stories that became times of preparation and molding for working with God in ministry and also about our founding Wesleyan fathers and mothers who embodied the same tenets and practices as Lydia, opening doors and possibilities that most could not have dreamed of or hoped for. I believe these practices prepare our hearts to journey with God in God's Far Beyond, allowing the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and work within us and through us so that

we may have eyes to see and ears to hear beyond what our humanness can even think of or imagine.

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*I said, "Let me walk in the fields."  
He said, "No; walk in the town."  
I said, "There are no flower there."  
He said, "No flowers, but a  
crown."*

*I said, "But the skies are black,  
There is nothing but noise and  
din";  
And he wept as he sent me back;  
"There is more," he said, "there is  
sin."*

*I said, "But the air is thick,  
And fogs are veiling the sun."  
He answered, "Yet souls are sick,  
And souls in the dark undone."*

*I said, "I shall miss the light,  
And friends will miss me, they  
say."  
He answered, "Choose tonight  
If I am to miss you, or they."*

*I pleased for time to be given.  
He said, "Is it hard to decide?  
It will not seem hard in Heaven  
To have followed the steps of your Guide."*

*I case one look at the field,  
Then set my face to the town;  
He said, "My child, do you yield?  
Will you leave the flowers for the crown?"*

*Then into his hand went mine;  
And into my heart came he;  
And I walked in a light divine,  
The path I had feared to see.*

- George MacDonald<sup>1</sup>

My dear friends of faith,

This morning I was thinking back on my long path to becoming a pastor. What a squiggly and crooked line it becomes as I map it out in my mind. Definitely not what I expected when I first felt God's firm yet gentle hand upon me at the age of 21. I can still clearly recall God's voice interrupting my time of prayer. I was on my knees in a little chapel at Point Loma Nazarene College in San Diego, CA during my junior year. My

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<sup>1</sup> George MacDonald, *Obedience* <https://www.all-creatures.org/poetry/obedience.html>.

heart had been longing, ever since I was a child, to go overseas and be a missionary and I was praying that morning for God to open these doors after graduation. I was in the midst of a daydream really, picturing the harvest of souls and incredible adventures waiting for me in the jungles of Peru. I had already enjoyed a summer there with missionary friends just before beginning my university studies and had fallen in love with the people there.

As I knelt in a posture of prayer, I was, in reality, reliving my surreal trek through the Amazon jungle and floating down its river in a wooden craft rather than focusing my thoughts on God. Suddenly, an uncomfortable feeling settled over me and unwanted images of urban streets, crowded sidewalks, and people of all nationalities walking speedily in different directions swept through my mind. A clear voice interrupted my reverie. "You will preach my Word in the city." My eyes quickly opened to the sound of these words and I shook my head as if to shake them from my brain where they seemed to echo again and again. "No!" I said out loud, "That is not what I am called to do," I replied in my head, feeling my spirit dig in its heels as I continued the defense in my mind. "I could never speak in front of people! And the city? No, no, no, no, I've been called to a mission field abroad!" I turned quickly around and went from kneeling at the altar to sitting with my back against it wrapping my arms tightly around my legs. With the multicolored light from the stained-glass windows tinting my arms and knees, I hugged them stubbornly and tried to master the unsettled feeling within me. I slowly ventured another dialogue with God. "Lord, was that really you?" I sat there a few more minutes in silence as a heavy weight settled upon me. I wanted to leave this weight at the

altar, but as I stood up and walked away it clung to me and within me in an unescapable way. I felt afraid.

This was the start of my long passage to become a pastor and my detour from being the missionary that I had originally dreamed of. It was the beginning of my walk with people in urban settings rather than along the river of the Amazon. Working alongside people one-on-one and assisting with their needs, was something I was comfortable with, that excited me and gave me energy. But to preach? That was another ball game. I was so uncomfortable being in front of a group of people. I had no idea how this watershed moment in my life that day in the prayer chapel would lead me on many detours as I explored this new call.

From my experience, God has a funny way at times of preparing us for the call placed on our lives. Have you ever claimed Psalm 37:4 as a promise that God would give you the desires of your heart?<sup>1</sup> I can't remember exactly when I began to interpret this verse differently from the way we were taught as young people in the church thinking that if we do good and trust in the Lord, our hearts desires will be given to us. At some point, I began to realize that this verse is not referring to "giving" in the way we add to our Christmas lists as children, with the gifts being our desires that we ourselves have chosen waiting in expectation for God to fulfill them. Rather the desires are created and given by God, planted within our hearts, taking root and becoming our desires as well, shaped and nurtured by God. "Take delight in the Lord, and God will give you the desires of your heart," scriptures tell us. As we focus our eyes on the Lord and delight in our God, we will discover desires within our hearts that we may never have thought we

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 37:4 Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

would have, placed by God within us as divine gifts from our creator. If we are only focused on our own created desires, we may miss out on what God has planned for us. Let us delight ourselves in the Lord and make room for the God-designed desires to be grafted within us through prayer, listening, and responding.

God was trying to place a desire in my heart that day in the little prayer chapel and I said no. I carried the weight of that initial rejection heavily, wrestling with it through many dialogues in my mind of why I must have heard this call in error. Yet, the seed had been planted and it would begin to take root through a variety of experiences and detours, the question was would I nurture the soil for this precious seed, or would its growth get choked out by the weeds of the world or snatched up by birds with nowhere to spread its roots in my soul?<sup>2</sup>

It wasn't long until the seed of God had a chance to sprout in my heart. Have you ever heard of Tony Campolo? What an inspiring man. Now he can preach! And preach he did to our student body at PLNU just days after my chapel experience, calling us all in his charismatic and persuasive way to come and minister in the streets of Philadelphia and Camden. I remember his words had a way of calling many of us to live in God's Far Beyond and participate in ministry beyond what we had ever thought to imagine. That day in chapel, the seed within me stirred and I decided to apply and see what happened. Within a few weeks, against all logic, I turned down a paid summer resident assistant job on campus and accepted a summer internship to become a Jr. High youth pastor in one of Philly's largest government housing developments. My daily walks on the hot and densely populated well-worn streets were a far cry from the jungles of Peru; the sun was

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4 and Matthew 13



no longer filtered by lush jungle trails and a green canopy towering above my head but was blocked from the cement sidewalk under my feet by the large cement developments. What a transformational summer! I learned so much. Mostly by making one mistake after another as God's grace taught me about loving people across racial and economic boundaries. I went back to San Diego no longer resistant to God's call. My heart's desire had shifted as my unexpected detour to Philly nurtured the soil within allowing the seed God had planted to begin to grow and take root.

I was in love with God's work in the city and upon my return I craved for more. So after graduation, rather than heading to prepare for missionary work overseas, I moved to Los Angeles to work at the First Church of the Nazarene, located at the heart of the LA riots, and began my master's in theology and ordination to become a Nazarene elder. It was a detour I had not planned for but one that continued to develop God's call on my life. In that short year, I met my husband who also sought his ordination with a call for urban ministry. Through a series of doors opening and lots of prayer, we headed shortly after our wedding to Raleigh, NC to plant an inner-city church and non-profit. This move, while convinced that God had called us to this work, would send me on a ten-year long detour from my ordination that I never would have expected, but that's a story of preparation I will share in a future letter. First, I'd like to share about someone else's journey that I found encouraging during my unconventional path. During times when the road seemed unclear, I was often reminded of John Wesley's transformational detours God seemed to use to shape and prepare him for his pivotal work in forming what became the foundation of our heritage as Wesleyan denominations. For now, I must close but I look forward to unpacking this further my next letter.



*All too often we bemoan our imperfections rather than embrace them as part of the process in which we are brought to God. Cherished emptiness gives God space in which to work. We are pure capacity for God. Let us not, then, take our littleness lightly. It is a wonderful grace. It is a gift to receive. At the same time, let us not get trapped in the confines of our littleness, but keep pushing on to claim our greatness. Remind yourself often, “I am pure capacity for God; I can be more.”<sup>1</sup>*

Dear friends on the journey,

As “pure capacity” for God, our life experiences, planned and unplanned, become opportunities to walk with God in discovering how to become. Rather than spending time complaining about our lot, beating ourselves up for our failures, hiding from our fear of the judgement from others, defending ourselves against possible criticism, we can grow through all the experiences of our lives as we authentically own our imperfections and shortfalls and “embrace them as part of the process in which we are brought to God.”

When thinking about the paths that our lives take and the many unexpected twists and turns we experience, I am confident our God journeys with us and sees them as “pure capacity” to shape and guide us into further discovering the powerful love of God that is able to accomplish more than we can think or imagine. The road we travel may not be what we had originally expected as we encounter both joys and sorrows, frustrations and

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<sup>1</sup> Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*, Reprint edition (HarperOne, 2012). 26.

surprises, setbacks and successes along the way, yet as we seek God and open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit's transforming power, I'm confident we will look back over the journey and see how God has used these moments to nurture our growth as disciples of Christ.

As I've explored before, Paul is an amazing example of God's intervening grace; beginning with his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and then the many detours he experienced throughout his ministry, including the one to Macedonia without which he would not have met Lydia. Lydia herself is a testimony to God's companionship along her journey as she encounters the truth of Jesus Christ through her unexpected encounter with Paul during her routine practice of worshipping God in prayer each Sabbath at the river. I can recall many other journeys throughout the centuries of sisters and brothers who testify to God's work in their lives in unforeseen ways that shaped and transformed them, guiding them to further glorify God and plant the seeds of salvation throughout their planned and unplanned paths.

I turn to the journey of our founding father, John Wesley, as he set off for the Americas to be a missionary to the people he called Indians, which I will from here on refer to as Native<sup>2</sup> Americans. It was a journey that started with good intentions to share the Gospel, but ended in disaster, sending a frustrated and disillusioned Wesley back to England after only a year and eight months. It is hard to say how the difficulties, misunderstandings, accusations, and judgements Wesley faced on his pastoral assignment in Georgia shaped him and his future ministry.<sup>3</sup> My wonderings about God's hand

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<sup>2</sup> Today there is no consensus on how indigenous people would like to be referred to collectively. Common terms used are Native Americans, Indigenous Americans, American Indian; however, most indigenous people prefer to be associated with their particular nation.

<sup>3</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 74-89.

molding us on our unexpected detours bring my thoughts not necessarily to the particular hardships, dead ends, and rejections Wesley faced in Georgia, although I'm certain they had a significant impact, but rather to the unplanned encounter with the Moravians on his pilgrimage, and the influence this band of German missionaries had upon his life.

The Moravian missionaries had worldwide influence through their missionary endeavors, not least among them being the influence upon John Wesley himself which eventually led to his conversion experience after which he wrote the familiar words, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."<sup>4</sup> His first encounter with the Moravians was on board a ship headed for America. During the voyage, at one point they experienced a treacherous storm that threatened to take all their lives. Wesley shared in his journal how he had already been impressed at their humility and meekness as they served all those on the ship by performing the most lowly of tasks that other passengers refused to undertake.<sup>5</sup> He also never witnessed them turning ill toward others when they were "pushed, struck, or thrown down" but saw them time and time again walk away without complaint. When Wesley inquired about this behavior, they shared with him that "it was good for their proud hearts" as "their loving Saviour had done more for them".<sup>6</sup>

During the severe, life-threatening storm that Wesley thought would swallow them up, he made note of how he witnessed amongst the Moravians "an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the Spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge." While the waves broke over the sides of the ship, shattering the mast

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<sup>4</sup> "The Moravians and John Wesley," Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-1/moravians-and-john-wesley.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley Journals, Sunday, January 25, 1736.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley Journals, Sunday, January 25, 1736.

to pieces and pouring water throughout all the decks, the missionaries continued their morning service through calmly singing the Psalms while their English neighbors wailed and screamed in fear. Wesley asked them afterwards if they had been afraid to which he was told no, they were thankful to God and were not afraid to die.

I pause as I recount this story and reflect upon this foundation of seeking God in prayer witnessed through the Moravians and Paul and Lydia. Whether during diverted journeys, daily servile tasks, or life-threatening situations, I am encouraged and challenged by the witness of my sisters and brothers who came before me, their consistent abiding in the presence of God, through prayer, and obedience, and eagerly listening to hear the voice of God rather than yielding to fears, pride, anger, and human desires that often come so naturally to us.

This encounter with the Moravians along with living life amongst them for a while in Georgia made a life-long impression upon Wesley as he continually witnessed their cheerfulness, good humor, lack of anger, strife, wrath, bitterness or evil-speaking, devoting themselves continually to prayer and a life of simplicity. After his miserable attempts in Georgia, in which he experienced spurned love, church ridicule, and closed doors to his original purpose of ministering to the Native Americans, Wesley returned to England disillusioned and lacking faith, considering to be done with preaching all together.<sup>7</sup> Yet, his path was divinely influenced again by Moravians as one brother, Peter Bohler, encouraged him during his struggle with unbelief to “Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 74-89.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Journals, Saturday, March 4, 1738

Wesley was “pure capacity” for God to shape and mold and fill with the power of God’s will for his life even when he did not feel it to be possible, providing counsel and guidance throughout the process of faith. Gustavo Gutierrez speaks of this in *We Drink from Our Own Wells* as he reminds us that our conversion is only the beginning of our spiritual journey as we start off on a new path. We often think this path should be clear and free of trouble as we follow God, yet conversion is a process of transformation not “something that is done once and for all.”<sup>9</sup>

Much like the Jewish people on the journey through the desert after their rescue from slavery, Gutierrez reminds us that one’s spiritual journey “entails a development, even a painful one, that is not without uncertainties, doubts, and temptations to turn back on the road that has been traveled” yet thankfully it is not a path “marked only by stumbling blocks” as “there is growth and maturity.” Gutierrez shares with us that:

Throughout the gospels we are repeatedly told that after some word or deed of Jesus ‘his disciples believed in him.’ The point of this statement is not that up to that point they had no faith, but rather that their faith deepened with the passage of time. To believe in God is more than simply to profess God’s existence; it is to enter into communion with God and – the two being inseparable- with our fellow human beings as well. And all this adds up to a process.<sup>10</sup>

Like Wesley, Paul and Lydia, our lives as Christians are a process of learning and being shaped as we commune with God through times of bounty and times of scarcity.

This reminds me of Richard Allen’s long journey from slavery to freedom and founding the first major African American church. Born into slavery, Richard became a follower of Christ as a teenager in 1777 when a traveling Methodist evangelist shared the

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<sup>9</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey Of A People*, trans. Matthew J. O’connell, Anv edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2003). 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Gospel to a group of enslaved people in a clearing amongst woods in Delaware.<sup>11</sup> This newly found freedom in Christ led Richard to bring a preacher to the home of his owner, who felt convicted by the Gospel message, leading to the signing of a manumission agreement for Richard's freedom. Richard's salvation in those Delaware woods began a never-ending process of faith that led him into deeper and deeper communion with God and the people he encountered, unfolding a series of events from the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) to his tireless efforts as reformer, minister and abolitionist.<sup>12</sup> Like Richard, Lydia, Paul, and John, we are pure capacity for God to deepen our faith through the experiences our paths provide. As the Moravians encouraged Wesley, will we join our brothers and sisters before us and keep journeying on the path of faith even when the path feels long and full of hard work, as Richard experienced after gaining his freedom? May we embrace the process and trust that God is working through it as we travel in communion with God and others.



Brother and Sisters in Christ,

I was 24 years old in 1994 when my husband and I moved to Raleigh, North Carolina to plant an urban church and non-profit. It was a crisp fall morning when I went to meet with the senior pastor of the suburban church who had hired my husband to lead this endeavor. I wanted to see what steps I needed to take to continue on my ordination track. I can still picture him leaning back in his office chair looking at me over his hands touching fingertip to fingertip. “You know, everyone will assume you’ve lost your

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<sup>11</sup> Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*. 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

identity in your husband,” he told me nonchalantly, like it was the only obvious answer to my inquiry. I felt my heart sink to the pit of my stomach as the oppressive reality became clear to me. The South would not be as open to a woman becoming ordained as they had in Southern California. I didn’t possess the correct anatomy in the South for such an endeavor and wouldn’t fit into the ‘good ole boys club’ that I had already heard reference to when talking about all the pastors getting together in the district.

I attempted to share the truth of receiving my call to preach and pastor before I even met my husband. “The only reason I met my husband was through obediently pursuing this call that God had already placed on my life,” I declared. The senior pastor leaned further back in his chair. “I’m sorry but I really just don’t think it would work out,” he told me. “Like I said, everyone will just think you’ve lost your identity in your husband.” Then he quickly rocked forward placing his hands on the desk, a signal the discussion was over and asked with a smile about how we were getting settled into our new apartment.

I walked out of the church feeling like a foreigner in a strange land, disoriented and not sure where to take my next step. My identity had not been lost but stolen. I was no longer seen as the capable young woman I had been viewed as in California, a woman called by God to serve in a God-ordained capacity, but rather a supportive sidekick to my husband who himself was seeking ordination. The North Carolina skies were blue and beautiful with bright fall colors of red, yellow and orange blanketing the horizon all around me. The songs of birds were filling the crisp breeze with a lovely melody and yet my heart felt cold, grey, and dead like the gravelly asphalt crunching beneath my feet as I walked back to my car. This was a detour I was not expecting at all. “Why God? Had I



not heard you correctly that day during college when you so unexpectedly called me to preach your Word?" I questioned God all the way back to our apartment, not in anger, but as one who feels disoriented, wondering how I found myself in this situation and what power did I had to do anything about it.

My husband, who has always been my number one fan and supporter was not so easily deterred when I shared of the encounter. He quickly dismissed the opinion as an old relic and retired vestige of a view that many twice our age still held onto. Instead, he encouraged me by sharing that one local church in our denomination was indeed pastored by a woman and encouraged me to have lunch with her and see if she'd mentor me through the ordination process. "She could be a mentor and help you navigate the culture here," he said with an encouraging smile. With renewed energy, I found the number of her church in the phone book and gave her a call.

I wish I could say that I walked away from lunch with her inspired and ready to continue the trek to ordination in the South. I can still picture the wood table at the restaurant and hear the clatter of utensils and dishes around me as she spoke the fateful words that sent me on a ten-year detour with God. "If you can do anything else and still be at peace with God, do not pursue this call," she gently shared with me over soup and salad. The words still wring in my head when I reflect back on that moment with my young heart only wanting to do the right thing in God's eyes. What did her statement even mean? If I could do anything else and still be at peace with God? I was basically being advised to do my best to find another path that would still give me peace of mind at not obeying what God had called me to do. I must have looked very confused, as she began to explain why she was advising me to give up this path, sharing how difficult it

was to be the only woman in the white man's world of our denomination. She encouraged me to pray and see if God would spare me from the pain she had experienced. And this began my ten-year detour of soul searching and questioning, being shaped in ways I had not planned on and learning how to speak into a system that was not supportive of the calling God had placed on my life. God was faithful to continue to open other doors during our years in Raleigh to preach both in word and deed even while the door to ordination remained closed to me.

During these challenging detours, I've been encouraged by many of our founding leaders in our Wesleyan heritage who also faced obstacles when pursuing God's call and have been strengthened by their strong voices in creating change and opening doors for those who followed them. I think especially of Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who in the 1770's found opposition to her speaking and teaching in the preaching-houses of the time. Several preachers opposed her speaking in the church, using the words of Paul to support their disapproval. Mary wrote to John Wesley laying out her response to each of the objections she was facing. In an artful arrangement of scriptural exegesis and spiritual commission, she asked Wesley for women to be given the same opportunities as men to follow their call to preach God's word.<sup>1</sup> In defense of what she considered and extraordinary call upon her life she wrote: "I do not believe every woman is called to speak publicly, no more than every man to be a Methodist preacher, yet some have an extraordinary call to it, and woe be to them if they obey it not."<sup>2</sup> This letter influenced Wesley to make exceptions for certain women to preach. And preach, Mary did, even

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<sup>1</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists: Second Edition*, 2 edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013). 247-248.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 248-249.

after the resolution at the 1803 Methodist Conference banned women from preaching, she continued to deliver five sermons each week until her death in 1815.<sup>3</sup>

Mary's life was confronted with obstacles and detours, yet she met each in prayer, waiting upon the Lord to guide and sustain her. Like Lydia, she was a woman of prayer, seeking God and listening intently for God's living word to make her path clear in the unexpected and unwelcome detours she found herself upon. One particular struggle of Mary's life I find to be an encouraging companion during times I feel misunderstood and obstacles seem to block my path or dark times weigh upon my spirit. It is the story of when her call to be a devout Christian drove a wedge between her and her family as they feared her Christian ways would "bring a reproach on them" in society and forbade her to have any Christian influence upon her younger brothers.<sup>4</sup> In one such discussion at the age of 21, Mary shares in her Letters:

One day my father said to me: 'There is a particular promise which I require of you; that is, that you will never, on any occasion, either now, or hereafter, attempt to make your brothers what you call a Christian.' I answered, (looking to the Lord), 'I think sir, I dare not consent to that.' He replied, 'then you force me to put you out of the house.'<sup>5</sup>

Her parents however desired her to depart of her own accord rather than directly throw her out and would not clearly give their consent for her to leave. Mary shared in her journals, "My dear mother had sometimes expressed the belief, that it would be better for the family if I were removed from it, lest my brothers, who were younger than I should be infected by my sentiments and example. Yet she did not see it clear to bid me

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<sup>3</sup> "I Received My Commission from Him, Brother | Christian History Magazine," Christian History Institute, accessed February 23, 2021, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/i-received-my-commission-from-him-brother>.

<sup>4</sup> Moore and Henry, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher : Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Salop* (HardPress Publishing, 2014). 22, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

go; but rather wished me to depart of my own accord.”<sup>6</sup> Mary desired an “amenable agreement” with her parents to live elsewhere rather than runaway which she felt was against God’s Word. Mary described this difficult journey with her parents as a furnace becoming hot, yet she wrote in her journals that “I did not dare come out without the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

Mary desired for her parents to speak to her directly, praying they would not only give her clear leave but also not cast her out without hope of ever seeing them again. In her journals, she reflected back on this difficult time sharing that the “*continual language of my heart was I am oppressed, Lord, undertake thou for me.*”<sup>8</sup> Finally, one evening her mother gave what would be the clarity she had been praying for although still veiled in obscurity. Mary writes, “My mind was pressed down with sorrow by this suspense [of no clear word from them]. Just as they were going out, my mother said, ‘If you will, the coach, when it has set us down, may carry you home to your lodging.’ My father added, ‘And we shall be glad to see you to dinner next Tuesday.’”<sup>9</sup>

This brought Mary some relief to finally have a clear request from her parents to both make her leave of them but also invite her to see them again. Late that night, after Mary had brought her trunk to her new lodgings that lacked a stitch of furniture, she bolted the door to her room and using the windowsill as a chair, with borrowed table and candlestick she recounted her feelings that evening in her journals:

I am, said I, but young – only entered my twenty-second year. I am cast out of my father’s house. I know the heart of a stranger; but alas! How much more of it may I yet have to prove? I cried unto the Lord, and found a sweet calm over spread my spirit. I could in a measure act faith on these

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 27.

words: ‘When thy father and mother forsake thee, the Lord shall take thee up.’<sup>10</sup>

Mary “saw the wise and gracious hand of God in all”<sup>11</sup> that she experienced, even through the pain that each visit with her parents inflicted upon her heart. Over the course of her years, she experienced many other unexpected detours as she faithfully served God. She continually bore witness through her many journal entries to the presence of God always with her through each and every trial: from the opening and running of an orphanage and facing many financial difficulties, through her perseverance in the face of continual objections to her preaching God’s word, and after the loss of her husband who she enjoyed only four short years of marriage with later in her life, among many others. Mary trusted in the Lord and “saw the wise and gracious hand of God in all.”<sup>12</sup>

Through my years of detouring and seeking what it meant for me “to find anything else and still be at peace with God” rather than pursue God’s call on my life to preach, I resonated with Mary’s cry, “*I am oppressed, Lord, undertake thou for me.*” And through each twist and turn, open and closed doors, I witnessed God’s hand in it all shaping, molding, and using me to further the witness of God on this earth. I hope the witness of Mary’s life and others who have gone before us can be an encouragement to you as well as your journey through the many detours that life may bring your way.

In the letters ahead, I want to explore with you some of the key practices that I believe provided rich soil in the lives of Lydia, Paul, Richard, John, Mary and many other brothers and sisters in Christ which prepared them to meet each detour they encountered with grace and perseverance, ready to be molded and shaped by God throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 29

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

journey. We will examine a life of prayer, the art of eagerly listening, the beauty of abandoned response, and the strength of sharing our collective resources and how these practices lead us into walking with Christ in God's Far Beyond, bearing witness to God's abundant grace and power beyond what we can even ask or imagine.

### Chapter Three: Foundational Practices – Living a life of prayer

*“[One] reason we have difficulty praying is that we are unable to quiet down enough to become sensitive to the movements of the Spirit. This usually happens because we have been living our lives at too fast a pace. Rushing from one activity to the next, we lose touch with the Spirit. We are not moving against the Spirit in a sinful way, but we are not allowing the Spirit to infuse our activities, enabling us to perform them in peace and joy. Finding ourselves anxious and worried both about the result of our work and about getting it all finished within the allotted time, we come to prayer restless and find it almost impossible to quiet our minds in a way that allows us to be sensitive to the movements of the Spirit. Since we cannot allow the Spirit to bring us to the Lord, we begin composing our own monologue to the Lord, expressing our own needs and concerns, often in a rushed and rather compulsive way. It often seems that we could be using our time more effectively by skipping prayer and finishing the work we left undone. Prayer will remain difficult until we develop a rhythm of life that enables us to work in tune with the Spirit, thus experiencing the peace and joy that flows from the Spirit’s presence. If we are living in tune with the Spirit during the day, it is easy to allow the Spirit to unite us to the Lord during prayer.”<sup>1</sup>*

My dear friends,

When I read the words of Hauser above, I’m reminded of the model Lydia provided us in scripture. Lydia was an eager listener, practicing prayer and setting aside time away from her work and the hustle and bustle of the city to worship God and seek God in prayer. This time nurtured the soil of her soul to be ready to receive God’s word from Paul, a complete stranger. Paul and Silas share about this experience in Acts 16 versus 13 & 14. “On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Hauser, *In His Spirit: A Guide to Today’s Spirituality*, Ex-Monastery Library edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1982). 77.

to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” Lydia had made prayer a practice which prepared her heart to receive God’s word for her and her family. What I find noteworthy is the “rhythm of life” Lydia had nurtured that enabled her to “work in tune with the Spirit [and] thus experiencing the peace and joy that flows from the Spirit’s presence.” Lydia set time aside to seek and listen to God. To be with God by the river each Sabbath. This took intentionality and deliberation, setting consistent time aside to walk out to the river and gather with other women to pray to God, to worship God, to commune with God with an open and listening heart.

Our work and our ministry often calls us to stay continually busy and hop from one task to the next believing that “we could be using our time more effectively by skipping prayer and finishing the work left undone.” This is a lie that wants to own our time, our thoughts, our actions keeping us from hearing God’s life-giving word that transformed Lydia and her entire household and ushered her into God’s Far Beyond: leading a house church as a gentile businesswoman and supporting God’s missionary team. Mary Fletcher also exemplified weaving the rhythm of prayer into her everyday life of struggles and joys which nurtured and developed a trust in God through all circumstances.

What are ways we can go “outside the gate” of our demanding lives and create a place of prayer by the river to worship and listen to God? We may jump to the quick conclusion that this is not realistic in our time or in the specific setting we find ourselves living in. There are no rivers in my densely populated section of San Diego. How do we develop this rhythm in our lives as Hauser suggests and Lydia and Mary model for us?



The examples are as numerous as the people breathing life today and can look differently for each one.

For me, walking has been my river no matter what setting I'm in, even when there's not a drop of water in sight. Our little urban neighborhood of San Diego, only about fifteen miles inland from the coast, is the most diverse and densely populated area in the County with more than 100 languages spoken when including all the dialects represented by the various refugees and immigrants settled here from around the world. I've been amazed at how many of the low-income families who live here in City Heights have never even seen the ocean even though it's only a 20-minute drive away. As I've said, our neighborhood is very densely populated and it's difficult to find a quiet place like the shore of a river on the streets surrounding my house. Yet, there is an urban canyon loop trail which is a hidden gem that weaves its way through the heart of our neighborhood and provides a sanctuary from all the hustle and bustle of urban life. It's on this trail that I'm able to daily get away to pray, think and dialogue with God. It is during these times that I'm not as distracted by all that I should be doing to be productive with the endless tasks on my list and can hear God's prompting the clearest.

When we set time aside to talk with God and listen with an open heart, God's will can be revealed to us in ways we may not expect. When I reflect back on our years of ministry in Raleigh, North Carolina, I'm still amazed at God's guiding hand as we journeyed in prayer, seeking God's will and waiting for the path to be made clear before making decisions. Through prayer, God opened doors in ways far beyond what my husband and I would have thought to ask for. Some doors were exciting to step through while others, in truth, we wished we could have closed but as we obeyed God's calling

and followed the direction our dialogue with God provided, we experienced life in God's Far Beyond, as God's power worked within us to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could have asked for or imagined (Eph. 3:20). I'd love to share a bit of that journey with you.

The man I met and fell in love with, in Los Angeles, California, one year after the riots in 1992, was very reluctant at first to accept God's call to move across the nation to Raleigh, North Carolina and plant an inner-city church and non-profit for a large suburban church. Before I arrived on the scene, Kevin first tried to avoid this call by casting a fleece before God saying he'd go if he was the second choice of the suburban church who had called and interviewed him for this position. As he continued to lift this decision up to God in prayer the weeks following the interview, he received a phone call one day while he was in his office at the Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene. It was the senior pastor in North Carolina offering him the job but then shared that he felt he owed it to Kevin to be honest and let him know that he wasn't his first choice. He said he was worried about Kevin being so young, still single and upwardly mobile, fearing he wouldn't stay with the job for very long.

Kevin was stunned how clear it was that he was the second choice and felt all the more reluctant to leave his job in LA that he loved. He found himself throwing out a second fleece, praying that God would remove this call. He was in the midst of leading riot relief efforts in LA after the city went up in flames when the LAPD officers were acquitted of the brutal beating of Rodney King. He didn't feel like he could leave this work unfinished, so he asked the Raleigh pastor if they'd be willing to wait one year for

him to start the position feeling certain that they'd be too impatient to wait that long. Shockingly, they said yes.

A couple months later in the fall of 1992, I arrived in LA after graduating from college and seeking to follow God's pastoral call on my life for urban ministry. I planned to work with the homeless population and begin my Masters in Intercultural Studies at the Bresee Institute with the Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene where Kevin led their community engagement programming. I was assigned to be Kevin's intern. Long story short, our common interests and personalities sparked each other's attentions. We soon realized that we wanted to journey this crazy life together, and by the spring of 1993, we were engaged. Kevin then threw out his third fleece to God by giving me full veto power on the move to Raleigh, NC, believing that there was no way I'd want to leave my Southern California roots and live in the deep South.

We flew to Raleigh together to meet the church congregation that was sponsoring the non-profit and inner-city church plant to make a joint decision. Almost immediately, I felt a clash of ideals with the senior pastor who proclaimed homeless people should pick themselves up by their bootstraps and get a job. I asked him how many homeless people he actually knew by name to which he admitted that he knew none. I felt a stubborn resolve that there was no way I was moving to Raleigh, North Carolina! How could we build something in the midst of such beliefs? After sharing my thoughts with Kevin, he and his colleagues celebrated upon our arrival to LA that we would indeed be staying put in Southern California. Yet, after returning to my apartment, I found that I could hardly sleep or eat, and I felt God's hand heavy upon me over the next few days.

Leaving Los Angeles didn't make any sense professionally. Kevin had just been offered the Director position of the Breese Institute and I had secured a wonderful teaching position working with underserved children speaking a vast array of languages. All our friends, colleagues and even pastors were telling us why we needed to stay in LA and why Raleigh was the wrong move for us; but my spirit was restless and miserable, and against human reasoning, I knew what we had to do. I can still picture Kevin's jaw drop when I told him one evening that we had to go to Raleigh. Deep down he knew it too. I felt the heavy weight lift that evening as we accepted God's call to move to Raleigh and, only a month later, we were married and heading across the nation in Kevin's beat-up old pick-up truck on a detour to our story we had hoped to avoid. We drove off, however, filled with a strange sense of peace and excitement for the adventure that lay ahead, confident that God was with us no matter what we might face.

The first three years in Raleigh, took a lot of energy, patience, and consistent presence in the community where we felt God had called us to serve. We didn't realize the culture shock we would face going from the streets of LA to the segregated black and white world of the South. Influenced by Robert Linthicum's book *City of God, City of Satan*,<sup>2</sup> God laid it on Kevin's heart to walk the city in prayer seeking where God would have us join in his ministry. The suburban church who had hired Kevin was a bit impatient with us, wanting us to jump in right away and create programs in the inner city where their members could work with the poor. Kevin told the senior pastor it would take time to build trust with the community and stressed the importance of seeking the doors God wanted to open for us rather than us rushing in with our own ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991).

Within the first few weeks, Kevin and I chose a day to walk and pray through all the neighborhoods surrounding downtown Raleigh where government housing units stood isolated like brick barracks. We prayed silently, not sharing our thoughts with each other but seeking for a sign from the Holy Spirit inviting us to join God's efforts. After walking through Walnut Terrace, one of the largest run government housing complexes that has now been destroyed and replaced with upscale market rate condos, we turned up a street through the neighboring community of Caraleigh, a more affluent all-white neighborhood. A middle-aged black man was walking toward us with his head down. When he neared us, he momentarily looked up and our eyes met. Both Kevin and I smiled and said hello as we had done multiple times throughout the day to everyone we passed. This encounter was different than the quick nod or echoed salutation. The anxiety in his eyes melted as he returned the smile and greeting. I noticed his shoulders visibly lift and he stood taller as we passed by. I ached inside wondering about all the unjust experiences our brothers and sisters of color endure daily that must cause them to walk so carefully and often fearfully in our dominant white culture.<sup>3</sup> We continued to pray in silence but later that night, back at our apartment, we shared our thoughts about the signs God provided, pointing us in a certain direction and inviting us to begin building relationships within a certain community. We had met a lot of people on the journey and saw many neglected quarters of the city<sup>4</sup> where I'm sure God was actively engaged, so I felt a sense of awe as Kevin shared with me the distinct impact that the man in Caraleigh

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<sup>3</sup> Jesmyn Ward, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, Reprint edition (Scribner, 2016). 129-144. Garnett Cadogan shares through a powerful essay about his experience of the perils of walking as a black man in America.

<sup>4</sup> Words inscribed in the minutes of an early meeting of the founding of the Church of the Nazarene.

had on him. I eagerly share with him that this was also the exact moment I felt God saying, “This is where I want you to be.”

We began to look for a house to buy in Caraleigh so we could be in walking distance of Walnut Terrace and easily have people over. This real estate venture was one of my first tastes of blatant racism. At one house after we were leaving with our relator, a neighbor came out to talk with us. He seemed friendly but when we turned back to our car after talking for a few minutes, he shouted to our relator, “I’m fine if you bring these types of people into our neighborhood, just don’t even think about bringing those other kind around here!” I felt like a knife hit me in the back. I refrained from comment, but I can’t promise he didn’t catch the anger in my glare as I slipped shaking into the car. One house after another turned down our bids. It didn’t make any sense. No matter the price we offered, no one would sell their house to us.

We couldn’t help but wonder if the Baptist preacher had anything to do with our unanimous rejections. Our first week beginning to build relationships with families at Walnut Terrace, we had walked up to the Baptist Church in Caraleigh which was only two blocks away and spoke to the minister who was watering the lawn. We discovered he only used the building on Sundays and Wednesday nights, so we had inquired if he’d allow us to host Bible studies and youth activities during the week at his church for families at Walnut Terrace. “Those kind aren’t welcome, here,” he firmly told us and walked away. Later, the families in Walnut Terrace shared with us how scared they were to walk through Caraleigh due to all the hateful insults thrown at them and the frequent calls to the police that were made just for them passing through. We experienced a bit of this reality after walking up to the basketball courts in the middle of Caraleigh with

several youth who lived in the Terrace. We played together for a couple of hours and then decided to return the next day only to find that the nets, rims and even the backboards had all been removed. We became thankful no doors opened for us to buy a house early on as we realized God was protecting us and our new friends from moving into that neighborhood as it would have created more barriers than bridges in ministering together.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually we bought a small house in a neighborhood a mile away. Looking back after several years, we realized God was with us during this purchase as so many people living in the Terrace had a family member who lived near our house. It wasn't uncommon to hear our names yelled out of a car window as someone drove by with a friendly hand waving to us. Our house became a place for all the youth to hang out. Several learned to make their first cakes in our kitchen, helped me hang wallpaper on our old walls, ate weekly meals with us every Thursday night. Mothers sat with me for hours talking in our living room or on the front porch and were the first to rock and sing to my babies in my living room the weeks following each birth.

The journey to creating this community did not happen overnight. It took over a year of continued presence at Walnut Terrace, building relationships slowly, playing basketball with the youth, and meeting with families to explore ways to partner with them to gain trust, acceptance, and the invitation to minister with them. The suburban pastor who hired us was always impatient for us to start up programs and after each weekly

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<sup>5</sup> Ward. 138. Cadogan shares of the anxiety of walking alone as a black person as he recounts many experiences of abuse by white pedestrians and the police who he'd meet on the street. He was forcefully searched and at times physically struck for no other reason than the color of his skin. "The mutual distrust between and the police was impossible to ignore.... They'd glare. I'd get nervous and glance. They'd observe me steadily. I'd get uneasy. I'd observe them back, worrying that I looked suspicious. Their suspicions would increase. We'd continue the silent, uneasy dialogue until the subway arrived and separated us at last."

meeting, Kevin felt exhausted and beat down. The leadership skills he had gained in Los Angeles seemed to be stripped away. It was a long but foundational first three years as we clung to God's original call and the peace of knowing that despite the obstacles, setbacks or unexpected detours we encountered, God was with us. The power of God working through us and the community of Walnut Terrace, built trust on both sides leading eventually to the establishment of a non-profit and many opportunities to minister together with the people who had become family.

During the sixth year of our ministry, the families at Walnut Terrace began to ask us if we could start a church. This had been the original goal of the suburban church who had hired my husband. As I alluded to earlier, my husband's philosophy was to move slow: first establishing trust in the community, allowing them to identify their own needs, deciding what programs they wanted to invite us to help design, and then working together to make it happen. Out of this approach several different things emerged – some of which we would probably never had thought of – adult tutoring assistance for a GED program, an aerobics class, a youth tutoring program, a Christmas store, a mentorship program, an adult choir, a children's Bible Study, and finally the request for a church of their own where they weren't pressured to “dress up in fancy clothes and have extra dollars to carry up front for the offering.”<sup>6</sup>

When we shared about this desire to start a church, the suburban church was very excited and gave us a full “license to hunt”, as they called it, their congregation for people to join us. Instead, Kevin sent out the invitation to everyone to join us in prayer

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<sup>6</sup> Many families shared that they didn't go to church because they could afford the fancy clothes required for many churches in the South along with the expectation each Sunday to walk up front during the offertory to put in cash they often didn't have enough of to even pay the bills or put food on the table.



every Friday night asking God for guidance on who should join this effort and to open doors for a place to worship on Sunday mornings. We prayed together for a few months. Several families came and went, some thinking we were taking too long to take action, some realizing they didn't want to leave their suburban church home. In the end, we had seven families join us.

During these months of prayer, God performed an amazing miracle providing us a large warehouse on the edge of Raleigh to house both our non-profit activities and our church for free. The old warehouse had been something Kevin and I had seen and fallen in love with on our first prayer walk when we had arrived in Raleigh years ago. We struggled to find out who owned it over the years, but during our months of prayer, one day I happened to notice that a new large lease sign had been hung up on its exterior. I called the number to learn more. The owner gruffly told me that they wanted a 50-year lease and \$10,000 each month and then inquired what we wanted to use it for. I told him about our ministry and the people of Walnut Terrace and how they wanted to have a place for a church. He scoffed and clearly stated that he didn't believe in God and shared that there's no way what we were doing would ever work. I continued to share about all the ways God had opened doors so far and about seeing his warehouse all those years ago. Eventually he stopped me and said, "What would you say if I let you use it for free for one year and we'll just see what you and your God can do?" I felt joy well up inside me and told him, "Mr. Stone, even though you don't believe in God, I'd have to say that you are an answer to our prayers!" That very next week, he met us at the huge warehouse and showed us inside. It was full of tons of spare parts and items as he was a re-possessor of cars and stored every unclaimed item in this warehouse. "If you can clear this place

out, it's yours," he told us and handed us the keys. He provided a large dumpster and his son joined us to clear the place out. We couldn't help but thinking that Mr. Stone used the building to repossess cars, but that God was now going to use it to repossess souls. The building immediately became a draw to many who passed by in the evenings while we were having Bible studies and prayer meetings, or during worship on Sunday mornings. Our pews consisted of donated couches and chairs along with truck benches that had been pulled from repossessed cars. That first year, we also celebrated together as Mr. Stone himself became a Christian along with many of his bar buddies that he and his wife two-stepped with each Friday night. Over the next few of years, he never charged us any rent.

I have never experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit like I did those first couple of years in the warehouse. Everyone felt welcome. We quickly ran over a hundred people, a diverse mixture including our handful of suburban families, many homeless individuals, low-income youth and families, and random people who somehow found their way to us. It was not uncommon for people to walk into the building during a program or service and say in some fashion, "I'm not sure why, but something drew me to come in. I couldn't say no." God was moving in miraculous ways and it was such a blessing to be a part of it. The church grew. It was an amazing diverse group across race, class, gender and orientation: a former Baptist worship minister who became a hairdresser after embracing his same-sex orientation, a Muslim bodybuilder recently released from prison, a homeless man with amazing keyboard skills, conservative suburban affluent families, and many Walnut Terrace families who had helped us from the very first day after stepping foot in the community God had clearly called us to. We

had a lot of fun together and filled the large warehouse with praise every Sunday morning while people from all walks of life joined in.

Without that original day of prayer set aside to discover where God was at work and asking us to join, who knows where we would have ended up trying to “do” ministry. We almost certainly would have missed out on so many incredible experiences of God’s power at work within the hearts of the people at Walnut Terrace, our sponsoring suburban church family, and within ourselves. I encourage to us to practice prayer in our daily lives throughout each joy, sorrow and mundane moment, through every plan that works out perfectly and each that doesn’t, just as Lydia, John, Richard and Mary did along with so many others who have come before us. It was this practice of setting aside time to worship God in prayer at the river each week that prepared Lydia’s heart to receive the miraculous word of the Gospel and prepared her to respond so readily. It was through prayer that Mary could say with confidence even in her darkest moments that she “saw the wise and gracious hand of God in all”<sup>7</sup> And as I will share in future letters, it was through prayer that others such as Richard Allen and Harriette Tubman paved paths of liberation both physically and spiritually as they sought God’s guidance and provision through their lives. May we too, be people of prayer, seeking and waiting upon the Lord so that we know with confidence as Mary did that God’s gracious and wise hand is with us throughout it all.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 29.

Dear friends,

During my journey through ministry, I've come to realize that my ability to learn and grow during the unexpected detours in my life often depends on how I've been nourishing the soil of my spirit. Jesus speaks of this in his parable of the seed that falls on various types of ground. I do not believe that the condition of the soil of our lives is determined by accident, but rather by choices we make throughout the circumstances we encounter. It is not that all the effort of growth is placed on our shoulders, as God who created us, is still creating in us and through us, but this relationship goes two ways. God will not force us to respond, force us to relate, or force us to return the love God so freely offers us. It is a mutual relationship. The question is do we seek and welcome this relationship and all that it entails? Are we prepared to step into this dynamic love that transforms, shapes and nurtures us? Are we ready for the living words of God spoken in this relationship to take seed, root, and grow to full maturity in the soil of our beings?

As we look again at Lydia, we are told in Acts 16 that she was a worshiper of God and as she eagerly listened to what Paul had to say, the Lord opened her heart to receive what she heard. Again, this short description of Lydia points us to key practices in preparing ourselves to receive the word God has for us, to cultivate fertile soil that allows the seeds of God to take root in our lives and not be snatched away or withered on stony ground. Lydia intentionally set time aside to pray and worship God, a regular practice she nurtured which established her eager listening ear to hear God's word and her ability to quickly respond to it. Lydia embodies these key tenets that I believe are fundamental for our faith in God, our continued growth as Christians, and our ability to live in God's Far Beyond. These practices build off each other as the discipline of prayer develops a skill to

eagerly listen with our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, which in turn cultivates our ability to respond to God without hesitation and embrace the truth unfettered by human logic and reasoning.

Let's continue to look at the practice of prayer. Prayer is communication with God which, as in any relationship, can occur through many forms. It is the daily discipline of communing with our God and Savior, responding to the invitational knock to come in and dine with us. Jesus Christ calls to us, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." (Revelation 3:20) This image of prayer is simply answering the knock upon the door of our lives and allowing God to join us at the table for discussion, listening and receiving, sharing and asking, and gaining clarity through dialogue around the table with our Lord.

Prayer, during the various seasons of our lives, may take on different styles for each of us. Certain methods of prayer may come more naturally to us than others. For some, centered prayer, when we are focused withing and internally pray and lift up our gratitude and supplications to God, may work best. Others may find the Ignatian Examen a helpful practice to create this rhythm in their lives, while also simply praying the scriptures may be helpful in nurturing our listening ear to hear God's message and find guidance by our loving creator. This only touches on a few practices and, for many of us, it may be a combination of various forms that eb and flow depending on the seasons and circumstances of life. I will not go into depth about the many methods of prayer that can be explored as we grow in our relationship with God, but I would like to share just a few

practices that I have found helpful over the years in nurturing a fertile soil for God's word to take root in my life.

I've found the Ignatian Method of prayer a particularly engaging way to pray through scripture as I read the stories in the Bible and place myself within them, allowing myself to wonder what it would have been like to walk in that moment, the sounds I would hear, the sounds I would hear, the smells in the air, the sights my eyes would take in, engaging all my senses to feel a part of the story as it unfolds in the text. I encourage my own curiosity about the characters I am learning from, what may all be going on in their lives, then envision what character I might play in the scene the text has shared with me. I then focus on Jesus, and putting myself in our Savior's position, I imagine what I may have thought and felt in this situation and what words I may have spoken or left unsaid. Ignatius offers us a way to discover God in new ways and grow in our knowledge and love of God and neighbor. I've found it's not always easy to participate fully in this method of prayer if I am unable to give freedom to my imagination, unfettered by my theological training that wants to harness my creative thought with the "correct" way of interpretation. It takes practice to rest in my more childlike self, to give my imagination free reign, to allow myself to move beyond an observer to a participant in the story itself: to feel, taste, smell, and touch all that this imaginative prayer may choose to reveal.<sup>8</sup>

Another Ignatian technique I have found aids the realization of God's presence in my life and the discernment of God's direction for me is the exercise of the Daily

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<sup>8</sup> <http://prayer-center.upperroom.org/resources/resources-methods> There are many books and resources to learn more about the Ignatian Method of Prayer. This is only my own paraphrase. The Upper Room Prayer Ministry (<http://prayer-center.upperroom.org>) is a good resource to get brief descriptions of several methods of prayer that can be explored to nurture communication with God throughout various stages of life.

Examen. I've found this method helps to nurture my spirituality as I discover God in all things and allow God to align all aspects of my life to God's will. It only takes a few minutes at the end of each day to sit with God and reflect upon our experience since waking up each morning. It helps to find a comfortable and relaxing place to picture yourself in the presence of God. Some people may light a candle, symbolic of God's presence, or may play soft instrumental music to keep other noises at bay. To start, take deep breaths and focus on the air expanding your lungs as you inhale. Allow yourself to feel the presence of God. As you look back on the day's events, ask God to bring clarity to your mind as you walk back through your day expressing gratitude for both the little joys you may have experienced and the more significant moments and encounters that may have occurred. Allow yourself to notice the various emotions you may have felt during each of these points throughout your day. What is God saying to you through these feelings? How is the Holy Spirit speaking to you through your feelings of fear, joy, anger, excitement, boredom, concern, resentment or compassion? Is God nudging a change of course, an area to seek or provide forgiveness, or to reach out to someone who is on your mind? Then ask the Holy Spirit to point you to something specific in your day that God sees important for you to pray for through intercession, gratitude, praise, repentance or other fitting responses. End your time by praying for tomorrow and notice what feelings rise within you as you think of the events that lie ahead. Lift these feelings in prayer, turning them over to God and asking for provision and guidance and hope for all that you will encounter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Father Mark E. Thibodeaux SJ, *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2015). As with the Ignatian Method of Prayer, there are many resources to explore to make the practice of the Examen a rich time of nurturing the soil within us to be ready to receive and be transformed by God's word. One resource I've found helpful in recent years is Father Mark E.

To participate fully in the Examen, bringing to mind the events, feelings, encounters, and thoughts throughout the day, I've realized that it depends a lot on how present I actually am within each moment. Is my mind engaged in what is happening while I walk from point A to point B, aware of the sounds, the smells, the movements around me, the feelings within me? Or is my mind preoccupied with worrying thoughts about a past, present, or future occurrence? Am I caught up in anticipation of an upcoming event? How often have I arrived at a destination without the ability to recall the route I took to get there, flying by on autopilot? How many meals have I inhaled without noticing the taste and feel of each bite or the people who are around me during a meal?

In the world we live in today, we are especially distracted with our ability to have information always ready at our fingertips. Our attention is always being drawn away from present conversations we are a part of, the sites that surround us, and our own inner thoughts and feelings. We have become accustomed to the constant interaction with, and navigation of, the online world in the palm of our hand rather than the physical world we are actually a part of. I wonder if Lydia, had she lived in our day and age, would have even heard Paul's message that day by the river if she was tethered, as we are, to a smart phone. Perhaps as soon as Paul mentioned the name of Jesus from Nazareth, she would have begun searching for his LinkedIn account or tried to find him on Instagram or locate the town of Nazareth on Google maps. As she engaged her phone rather than listening to the next words of Paul, maybe she would have been too distracted to hear the message that ultimately would change her life. Or if we place Paul in our current context, arriving

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Thibodeaux's *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen* which gives fresh and unique ideas on adapting the Examen to the various seasons of our lives.



in a new city in search of a particular person like the man from Macedonia in his dreams, would he have even noticed the women by the river in the first place? I often have my head down while walking or driving in a new place, maybe he would have done the same, focusing on the map on a portable screen as he followed the blue line towards some suggested destination of prayer. He and his companions may never have wandered outside of the city toward the riverbank at all, had all their search engines confirmed that no synagogue yet existed in Macedonia. How many “accidental” life-changing encounters do we miss out on these days due to our dependence on technology? How many adventures and unintended discoveries that lead to transformative moments that can never be planned for or designed were overlooked?

I’m afraid we have become absent in our own narratives as we have given the authorship of our attention over to the distractions of our devices. How tempting it is to quickly search the web for the answer to a question that was posed in a conversation with a friend, just a click away, yet in those few seconds we’ve missed the essence of what our friend may have been sharing. Then we look up a bit glassy eyed as we spew off the answer we just discovered, not fully absorbing the conversation or allowing it to guide us deeper into a critical examination of the collective thoughts and inquiries that can only be birthed between people who are listening well to each other. I sometimes find my dialogues have become a dog paddling around the surface of a pool, as I’ve lost my ability to dive deep into the uncharted territory of the beautiful reefs below the surface of my conversations as the search engine of my phone buoys me, not allowing me to ever get too deep. To examen our day in conversational prayer with God, we must be present

in the moments each day provides. To nurture a soil that can receive God's word and allow it to take root, we must decide what will rule our attention throughout our day.

Many other methods of prayer can be explored to nurture a deeper communion with God and provide the tools we need to cultivate rich soil ready for God's word to grow and bear much fruit. I've only touched on the few I've found most helpful and that fit my own personality and particular seasons of life. I would encourage you to explore different methods and see which one resonates with who you are and the particular love language that you share with God.

Regardless of the method you cultivate into your life, I'd encourage you to recognize that we are not alone on our daily journeys. As we abide with God, God abides in us and walks each moment with us whether we are aware of it or not. We are God's creation and God's very breath is what has given us life. Know this, embrace this through all the pain and struggle, joys and successes, and even the most mundane moments. Acknowledge God in your presence when your eyes first open in the morning, invite God into conversation through the moments of your day and into all the thoughts, both good, bad, and ugly, dialoguing with your Lord without ceasing. As this becomes a practice, it is amazing how our thought processes begin to change as we begin to see through God's perspective of grace, love, and mercy for ourselves and others and all the situations we find ourselves in. I pray for you and for us collectively as we continue to nurture a life that is founded on prayer in dialogue with our creator rather than a monologue with our own thoughts and perspectives. I leave with the words of Paul in the Ephesians passage I have built many of these letters upon.

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory,

God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with the power through God's spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Eph. 3:14-21.

## Chapter Four: Foundational Practices – The Art of Eagerly Listening

Dear friends,

I've explored with you how God uses unexpected detours as transformational journeys to prepare and guide us. We've also looked at the model of Lydia, Mary Fletcher, and others on the importance of living a life of prayer, abiding with God through daily dialogue which leads us to discovering God's Far Beyond, believing that God's power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than we could think or imagine. I'd like to now focus on another key tenet that Lydia exemplifies for us. In her few verses, we are given a glimpse into her life and the art of being an eager listener. Scripture tells us in Acts 16 verse 14 that Lydia was a worshiper of God and listened to the words shared with her and her companions by the river about Jesus Christ and that "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."<sup>1</sup> How do we also become eager listeners as Lydia was – as the Moravians who so impacted John Wesley, as Mary Fletcher and the many others who have come before us – ready to hear life changing words from our Lord?

I often wonder what is keeping us from hearing the voice of the One whose words spoke all creation into being. What noise have we allowed into our lives that keeps us from hearing this voice? During my devotions one morning, I read the following words from Rueben Job that I found particularly meaningful in shaping my thoughts on listening as a way of life rather than a scheduled event. Job states:

Finding God's voice in the midst of this noisy world is not easy. So many voices clamor for our attention, and so much noise tends to shield us from the voice of the One, who as Evelyn Underhill said, 'has everything to tell us and nothing to learn from us.' However, millions of people have

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:14.

learned how to ‘read’ the signs,’ that is, to observe how God has acted and is acting now, to listen attentively, and to receive knowledge and direction from a source greater than they are. The foundation for reading the signs is the desire to know God’s will and the confidence that God desires that we do know, understand, and obey God’s will. For some, such a desire has become a way of life. That is, there are persons who habitually ask, “Lord, what is your will in this matter? In my life, in my church?” For such persons, discernment is a way of life and an unconscious process. They do not look for special times to listen for God’s voice; they simply listen, trust, and obey. These persons see all experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, as conveying God’s presence and message. When such persons read the Bible or the daily paper, they are aware of another Presence speaking and guiding. These individuals experience the ordinary events of life as filled with meaning and direction from God. For them, all of life is a conversation, a dialogue with the One who made them. For them, discernment is a way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Recently I went on a weekend retreat to be able to escape my daily demands and be able to focus on writing. I am a bi-vocational pastor, working full-time with a family foundation that funds non-profits with a focus on youth. I am also a senior pastor of a local church in my community, while also working to finish a Doctor of Ministry at Duke Divinity. Three fulltime jobs in many ways that fill my seven-day week. It is hard to find down time, time to listen to God’s voice, or time for writing and reflection.

During a time when I was feeling particularly drained, some friends let me know about a spiritual ministry center run by a few sisters of the Church of the Sacred Heart who are dedicated to spiritual formation and discovery. I inquired and scheduled a weekend get away. I arrived one Friday afternoon, planning to stay through Sunday morning when I’d leave in time to officiate my Sunday morning service. Each day while at the center, you may choose to meet with one of the sisters for a session of discernment. My first session was scheduled soon after I arrived. After checking in, I organized my

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<sup>2</sup> Job and Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God: Deluxe Gift Edition*. 58.

books and clothes in my room and then answered emails and texts on my phone until it was time to meet. The silence in the room was more than noticeable, it actually felt loud to my senses. My ears seemed to be straining for a distinct noise I could decipher and give context to, but I found only silence. Finally, I heard a distant hum, and I felt a sense of relief as I could identify the sound as an Airplane. Time flowed by as I got caught up on emails and tests and, soon enough, I headed downstairs for my session.

In this session I ended up sharing about all the responsibilities in my life: a Senior Pastor of a church in crisis that was facing a lawsuit after clergy sexual misconduct; a full-time administrator at a local family foundation serving at-risk youth and families; a mother of four young adult children navigating pre-, present-, and post- college life journeys while planning the wedding of my eldest; a doctoral student at Duke Divinity School studying for a D. Min. Since taking on the pastorate, I hadn't had a day off for 15 months straight. Voicing my life's roles out loud was exhausting in and of itself. The nun asked if there was anything I could cut out of my life. With college bills, a wedding to pay for and the church being too small to cover much of a salary, there really wasn't anything I felt I could cut back on. I had such a strong peace about accepting the call to pastor the church, so I knew that was not an option either. Then we somehow got on the subject of my phone, a lifeline for all my roles, with my parishioners, my foundation job that expected my answer at a moment's notice, my children and spouse who are my first priority in life and to whom I always want to be available. I always had my phone with me as most everyone does. I had grown accustomed to accomplishing so much through emails, texts, shared docs, sheets, slides, and more at any time of day or night as I often wake up at 2:00am and rarely go back to sleep. The nun gently suggested that I set

business hours for my phone like I set physical office hours, even for my family, I nodded like it was a good idea I agreed with, but in reality, I was looking at this nun – who had just shared she had reached her 80th birthday – and thought how easy this advice was for her to share as she lived a quiet and secluded life, but how unrealistic this would be for me.

When I got back to my room though, I felt a strong conviction that I needed to rid myself of this device for at least the weekend. Before I could second guess my decision, I texted my family, church staff, and those who I thought might need to know where I was in case of an emergency to tell them I was on retreat and would have my phone off until Sunday morning, leaving the ministry center's number as a lifeline. I then turned my phone off and put it away so I wouldn't be easily tempted to check any notifications. That night I slept 10 hours compared to my usual 5 to 6. The next day my body decided to take unexpected naps in odd places, once while trying to write in a comfy chair and again while kneeling in prayer with my head laying on my arms, only to wake up twenty minutes later with my legs completely asleep and barely able to stand from my crouched position.

Fasting from my phone allowed me to realize what a slave I actually was to it and how it was a constant distraction from what was happening around me, the language of my own body's needs, and most significantly, the voice of God. I had given my phone power to falsely dictate what was important and couldn't be ignored, distracting me from the One most critical to hear from. That weekend I realized that, in nurturing my relationship with my phone, I had lost the ability to hear and truly listen to God's voice in my life. I had stopped fostering a spirit of actively listening and receiving God's word.

Looking at Lydia's story, draws me back to the importance of cultivating an eager listening spirit like she practiced enabling her to hear and receive Paul's words, allowing them to take root in her life and transform her and her household into God's vessels for ministry.

We are not given a detailed description of Lydia's prayer life that was foundational in developing an eager attentive ear, but the few sentences we are provided on Lydia relay to us that prayer seemed to be a consistent discipline in her life. It was when Paul and his companions sought a place of prayer on the sabbath that they first encountered Lydia, whose heart was ready and open to receive the Word they would share with her. This is what the consistent practice of prayer creates for us, a heart and mind ready to hear and receive God's word. Jesus describes this for us in his parable of the seed in Mark chapter four, when he asks over and over, are we listening, really listening? Are we preparing our hearts to be ready to receive God's word for us, as Lydia had through her consistent prayer life, and allow the Word to grow deep within us, taking root and extending through and beyond us to those God has called us to love and serve? For Lydia, her dedication to prayer had created fertile soil within her to receive Paul's radical news of a Savior who died a criminal's death so that she might live. Lydia was in the practice of opening the door to God through her consistent gathering for prayer, seeking God and receiving the words God had for her.

I think of many others who have come before us, who provide us with a wealth of examples of seeking God through prayer and listening with an eager heart like Lydia. Harriet Tubman, the "Moses" of her time, known as one of the most successful conductors of the Underground Railroad, was a devote woman of prayer and eagerly



listened to God’s guidance and direction, accomplishing far beyond what people could have ever thought possible during some of the darkest chapters of our nation’s history.<sup>3</sup> Heavily influenced by Evangelical Protestant Methodism, Tubman possessed a strong “religious fervor and trust in God to protect and guide her” throughout all her endeavors from leading countless slaves to freedom, assisting in various capacities during the Civil War, to her suffrage and community activism later in life.<sup>4</sup> Harriet was constantly in prayer with God, never making a move of her own accord but completely depending on God guiding her steps. One of her companions noted how she had “great confidence that God would protect her ‘in all her perilous journeys,’ for she never went ‘on a mission of mercy without [God’s] consent.’”<sup>5</sup> Harriet eagerly listened to God throughout her life and was confident God would speak to her and make known the paths she was to take. Thomas Garrett, one of her admirers during her time with the Underground Railroad, wrote of her strong faith in God and her dependence on God’s voice to guide her. In his letters he said that Harriet had great “confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul...that she talked with God, and he talked with her every day of her life, and...she never ventured only where God sent her.” How do we prepare ourselves to listen eagerly to God’s voice as Harriet, Mary, and Lydia did, and all the others who came before us, and allow it to guide our steps and transform our lives? This preparation takes intentionality as we till the soil of our lives as a farmer tills the ground to bear much fruit. I’d like to explore this more with you in a future letter as we look at the parable of the sower.

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<sup>3</sup> Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 133.



Dear fellow tillers of soil,

In an earlier letter, we looked at Harriet Tubman and her dependence on listening to God to guide her steps and I challenged us to examine how we prepare ourselves to be able to eagerly listen to God's voice as Lydia, Mary, and Harriet did. This question brings me to Jesus' parable of the sower in the Gospel of Mark chapter 4. As we read the parable, Jesus challenges his disciples several times asking if they are listening. I often favor the NRSV translation, but for this particular parable I most enjoy the way The Message captures the words of Jesus when he asks his disciples several times, "Are you listening? Really listening?"

I always thought of this scripture as a parable only about salvation, but in light of the stories of Lydia, Mary, and Harriet, I hear God drawing my heart in a new direction. I became a Christian at a young age, so for the most part, I've always considered myself the "good" soil that the seed landed on when I read this parable. I desire to bear much fruit for the Kingdom of God. The hard, rocky soil and the soil full of weeds, in my mind, has always referred to those who do not know Christ and who are unable or unwilling to accept the message of salvation. Yet, God has challenged me to see this parable differently, asking me if I, like the disciples, am really listening to the parable, eagerly listening to what it may be teaching me. I clearly remember an inner debate I had with God over this parable while I was preparing a sermon based on it. As I knelt in prayer, contemplating how God's word is unable to take root and grow in the lives of people with rocky, weedy soil, I felt an uncomfortable nudge in my spirit and then God's

voice telling me that I was actually the rocky and weed-filled soil. I immediately felt defensive. “Me? But how Lord?”

“I gave you a Word, Becky...A word just for you but you are unbelieving. You are allowing your fears and doubts to tell you lies. You are nursing these lies and considering them to be true. You are allowing the stress and your own insecurities to strangle out my Word for you, not allowing it to take root in your life and grow.” Was I listening, really listening? What did this mean? Where had I responded to God’s word for me in this way? God’s spirit then began to reveal how I often listened to the voice of another disguised in my fears and unhealthy patterns of thinking that I had developed rather than trusting in God’s call on life and boldly venturing as Harriet did wherever God sent me. I must admit, I felt a bit hurt and sensitive to this prodding and reached for my Bible to look back at Mark 4 and reread it again, word by word, thinking about what God was challenging me with. A couple verses stood out starkly – “Satan snatches away” and “the stress strangles.”

I was reminded then of a word from Isaiah 40 that had been planted in my mind as I wrestled with a difficult career change decision. “All people are like grass...the grass withers and fades but the Word of the Lord stands forever.”<sup>6</sup> I had been feeling uncertain about what decision to make and I had felt like God was telling me, in Isaiah 40 that taking the new job opportunity wasn’t even about me “You’re the grass, Becky. I want to do something here and I need you to be obedient and say yes.”

The question for me became whether I really wanted to listen or not. Which soil was this word from God going to fall on within me? Was I nurturing a rich soil, a rocky

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40

soil, or a weed-filled soil with which to receive the word God had for me? “All people are like grass.” I sat with these words and as I allowed them to settle in rather than close off my spirit to them in fear or mistrust, I was able to openly analyze they’re meaning for my life in dialogue with God. It was my obedience that was important to this equation. My realization that it wasn’t all about me, while humbling, also felt liberating. Everything wasn’t dependent upon my own skills, my own abilities, but rather on my obedience to God’s word.

I began to see what it meant to be grass, in a new light. I am used to creating, building programs, getting a ton accomplished within a week’s time, being in front of groups and having influence in many circles. Most of my roles did not reflect the image of grass in my mind. As I reflected on what grass is and the space it can provide in people’s lives, I began to realize what God was asking of me. Grass can create a calm place for rest and renewal. Grass doesn’t really do much on its own, but it can provide room for people to reflect, share and breathe deep like the image given to us in Psalm 23 of green pastures that restore our souls. It allows people to hear God asking “Are you listening to this? Really listening?” I had to intentionally seek God to adopt the vision God had for me in being grass and take particular care not to heed the many other voices trying to convince me that, “Grass is nothing! People walk on it. It has no real purpose.” The stress of these thoughts can threaten to consume me if I fail to listen to the voice that really matters. They can snatch away the word of God for my life and strangle it with anxiety and worry or concern of what other people may think.

I wish I could say that I’m always able to till rich and fertile soil in my life, ready to receive God’s word through ears that are tuned in only to God’s voice. It is a choice I

must make each day and one that does not come naturally. For example, I've never been a very sound sleeper, prone to wake in the middle of the night to find my mind racing over all the mishaps of the day before and the what-ifs of the future. It's odd. I consider myself one who trusts in God, yet I am also a worrier, thinking through the actions of my day, how I may have failed someone, tasks I left undone, things I forgot to do in the midst of life's demands, the thoughts and opinions of others about the worth of my work and ability to lead. For one who most consider to be strong and capable, I can be insurmountably insecure in my head and heart. Oh, how I long for my trust in God that resides in my words and convictions, to take root in my heart, mind and soul so that I exist for an audience of one while serving the world around me. Again, am I really listening and who am I listening to?

One of these early mornings, when I woke from my racing thoughts, I sat sipping on green tea in my favorite chair and began to reflect on this clash of selves: the one who trusts and listens to God and the one who listens to fears instead. I picked up my devotional book and read this prayer: "O God, sovereign Lord over all creation, without whom all purposes are futile, grant me today the assistance of your Spirit. In all the surprises and changes of life, may I fix my heart upon you, so that our eternal purposes may be fixed in me. In the name of Jesus, who came to make your eternal purpose clear. Amen."<sup>7</sup>

The words that first stood out to me were "without whom all purposes are futile". It was a clear reminder to me of why I often feel so exhausted in all my ministry efforts. While my intentions and purposes may be with good intent, I often function as a lone

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<sup>7</sup> Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Gods People*, Deluxe Gift edition (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998). 58.

ranger without recognizing that, if not for God, it would all be in vain. I have put myself in the center of everything as I work as hard and smart and efficient as I can, making sure that I'm doing a good job, trying to be relevant and effective. In reality, God is our sovereign Lord, and is the one who created all and in whose image we are created. It is God's creative power that works through us. It is important for us to understand ourselves to be conduits of God's amazing purposes, rather than the authors and creators of our own designs. Not that we cannot create in our own power, for God gave us free will, but that the creations and purposes of our own designs are limited and temporary when they are not birthed through our relationship with the giver of life and sustained by God's own power and design.

Looking at the prayer again, I read "grant me today the assistance of your Spirit." First, I often find myself designing the perfect plans and purposes for my ministry, my life, my goals, and then I try to obtain them through my own strength, will, knowledge and aptitude. When I do not rely on the power of God's Holy Spirit, I am quickly spent as the unexpected obstacles and life's circumstances strike. "In all the surprises and changes of life, may I fix my heart upon you, so that your eternal purposes may be fixed in me." When I have my eyes so focused on my own designs rather than keeping my heart fixed upon God, listening eagerly for God's voice, the surprises and changes in my life can quickly uproot my intentions, leaving me adrift with thoughts of uncertainty rather than rooted and secure with my heart and mind fixed on God and my ear tuned to God's voice so that God's "eternal purposes may be fixed in me". And the prayer concludes "In the name of Jesus, who came to make your eternal purpose clear. Amen." Jesus is the author and communicator of God's eternal purpose. How are we preparing the ears of our heart

to hear clearly from God the purposes we are to participate in, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Looking to Lydia, Mary, Harriet and others as our guides to consistently seek God through prayer, we can nurture a rich soil within us to listen and accept God's word for our lives rather than allowing it to be snatched away by the concerns that battle within us. Being the good soil is a choice and is developed through dialogue with our creator, asking God to help us be eager listeners, able to hear God's voice above all the others that clamor for our attention. As we actively seek God through prayer, we are able to respond to God's word and grow in the likeness of God, becoming holy as God is holy, and offer our lives as living sacrifices responding to God in obedience just as Lydia, Mary, and Harriet did. Following their example, the ability to hear God's voice comes through leading a life of prayer, not as an action we force within our schedule each day but as a practice that becomes naturally a part of who we are each moment. Elizabeth Johnson captures this well in *Women's Spirituality*.

The gift of holiness – which...is in reality the gift of our full humanity – is received when we are able to see the world in a new way, when in faith we are able to discern and respond to God's vision of the world through the eyes of Christ. This kind of seeing is the fruit of a contemplative vision – a vision that can only be nourished in solitude and in prayer. Prayer for the Christian therefore is not something added to our lives, something extra we do, but rather it is as fundamental to our lives as the act of breathing. It is through prayer that we are caught up in the rhythm and the energy of the Kingdom that is amongst us and learn to see in a new way.<sup>8</sup>

Let us nurture a rich soil within us through prayerfully listening to God, ready to receive the word God has for us and respond with abandon.

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<sup>8</sup> James C. Fenhagen, *Invitation to Holiness* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub Co, 1991). 55.

*“You lost yourself in the trackless groves of fruit trees by neglecting obedience. He, (referring to Christ), obediently came into the narrow confines of morality so that, by dying, He might search for you who were dead. You, though you were human, wished to be God and so got lost (Gn 3:5). He, though He was God, wished to be human that He might find what had gotten lost. Human pride brought you to such a depth that only divine humility could raise you up again.” ~ Saint Augustine<sup>9</sup>*

Dear brothers and sisters called by God,

Scripture is filled with God choosing and calling the most unlikely of characters to be leaders in the Kingdom of God. Joseph, not a first-born son, sold as a slave in Egypt where Jews were despised, became second in command only to Pharaoh to save the country from starvation. Rahab, a prostitute behind enemy walls played a crucial role in protecting God’s people and delivering their adversaries into their hands. David a child shepherd conquered a giant and became the King of God’s people. Mary, a peasant girl from a lowly town, was co-creator with God in the birth of our Savior, Jesus. Christ’s disciples who came from all walks of life from fishermen to prostitute, tax collector to physician were the first to witness God’s plan for salvation and share the Gospel with the world. And Lydia, who flourished from slavery to a successful business woman, became

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<sup>9</sup> William Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). 129.



first church leader for Paul in what is now the European continent; among many, many more.

You and I are among this list. Some of us may have more training than others when it comes to theology, church history, and Biblical exegesis, or we may have more titles framing our names through position and educational accomplishments, yet these differences do not define God's ability to work in and through us to glorify the Kingdom just as Lydia being a woman and former slave did not exclude her from participating in God's work to further the Gospel. In fact, I wonder sometimes if it's the lack of all these attainments that allows us to remain more open and ready to eagerly hear God's voice and allow God to move through us in ways that are beyond all that we can think or imagine. Do our achievements and labels create more boundaries than freedoms? Do we become so clothed in accolades and successes that the creativeness of God seems too childish for our arrived selves hardening our ear to the leading of God's spirit?

It was in reading one of our most esteemed fathers of our faith that these questions became unearthed within my soul and insisted on not being ignored. I believe Lydia's story relates to these questions and speaks to our need for dependence on God in order to eagerly listen to God's voice and be available for God to plant a word in our lives that will grow and flourish. I must admit that I first approached *Augustine and the Cure of Souls* begrudgingly, as one facing the most undesirable of tasks. Church history has never been one of my strong suits; however, by the fourth page I surprisingly found my thoughts captured rather than tortured by some unexpected statements and insights from Augustine. I was curious at how much I resonated with this celebrated, master orator, not because I have much talent in this arena but because his words brought me

back to my early years in ministry when I was extremely ignorant, childishly dependent on God, fascinated by prayer and still an eager ear to hear God's voice.

As I read, I was struck by Augustine's resolution to ignorance and claim of the status of the learner rather than one who others learn from. Augustine believed that "to ascend to a security beyond the mind itself, those listening would need to engage in a critical process of unlearning" or, as he states more positively, to "become ignorant of God in order to be worthy to find him." Augustine assures us that "cultivated ignorance is superior to the falsehood that usually passes for knowledge."<sup>10</sup>

This insight caused me to pause, I might say a bit uncomfortably. In my early years, I knew I was ignorant, I hadn't planned on ever becoming a preacher of God's word. As I relayed in an earlier letter, it had scared me to death when God revealed this unexpected call to me as I was about to graduate from college. I do not come from a line of preachers. My parents were both saved in the Nazarene church as teenagers and came from secular, alcohol ridden, tough backgrounds. As an English major in college rather than a theology major, I knew no Greek or Hebrew or church history. But when I accepted this call, I experienced a certain passion and hunger within me to pour over God's word like never before and seek the knowledge of those who had gone before me who were not ignorant and had dedicated their lives to discover and share the complex messages in scripture. I had no ability to speak of, no experience or knowledge that enabled me to rely on myself and my own talents.

Maybe in this obedient ignorance, God felt I was worthy to find him, as Augustine said, because in those early years, when I was asked to share God's word,

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<sup>10</sup> Kolbet, Paul R. *Augustine and the Cure of Souls* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010): Chapters 4, 6 and 7; Harmless, William, *Augustine in His Own Words* (CUA 2010). 170.

despite the church's refusal to recognize my call, strange things seemed to happen. Youths' lives, who many people had given up on, were transformed, people discovered God in new life-giving ways, and each time I stepped behind a pulpit, I myself felt broken and poured out, then renewed and more passionate than I had been before I began. Now, almost 30 years have gone by since I first heard God call me to preach and I've been blessed with amazing jobs, theological education, and remarkable experiences. Sadly, in many respects, as I began to become less ignorant through educational opportunities and career aspirations realized, my eager listening ear and dependence on God slowly decreased, and my fascination with prayer and the lively conversations I had with God were replaced with rational thinking and strategic plans.<sup>11</sup>

I wonder, my brothers and sisters, as I wrestle with Augustine's words, what would it look like for us to collectively cultivate ignorance as pastors and teachers? To "become ignorant of God in order to be worthy to find him?" As ministers and shepherds, I think we live into the expectation of being the ones who "know" and think we need to have all the answers. What would our congregations think if we spoke of actively cultivating our own ignorance and engaging in the critical process of unlearning? I find myself, after reading these texts, with a familiar hunger beginning to grow within me. I feel wakened from the trance created by my own acquired expertise and knowledge which I arrogantly assume has given me the ability to manipulate truth, and people and situations as a means to my desired end.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*. 80. This reminds me of the story Jones shares about Maggy Barankitse, a Roman Catholic laywoman in Burundi who miraculously survived the 1993 massacre who did not "believe in the Western preoccupation with strategic planning" as she believed that betrayed "a lack of confidence in God."

What has happened to our dependence on God? Augustine shared that even though we may be the ones preaching, “we are all hearers.” Yet, my sisters and brothers are we really listening? Augustine believed that “his task was not to expound his own opinions, but to interpret the scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> He was dependent on the Spirit in his sermons and listened for the Spirit’s leading. In one sermon Augustine shares with us that “as the hour when [the preacher] is to speak approaches, before he uses his tongue, he should raise his parched soul to God that he may gush forth what he has drunk in and pour out what has filled him up.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say for “who knows what is appropriate for us to say or for our audience to hear at the present moment except the One who sees ‘the hearts of all.’”<sup>14</sup> Augustine argues that if the Holy Spirit, who supplied the words for those who were persecuted to speak before their accusers in Matthew 10, why would God not “speak in those who deliver Christ to those intent on learning?”<sup>15</sup>

How often do we depend these days on the Holy Spirit when we step behind the pulpit or take each step throughout our day as Harriet and Mary did? I’m not saying that a lot of reading and preparation doesn’t go on beforehand, or that we shouldn’t do our due diligence in making plans for our initiatives, but as Augustine suggests, what if God decides that something different needs to be spoken to the hearts spread out before us or that a new path should be taken than the one we had originally made plans for? Are we dependent enough on God, and tuned into God’s voice with an eager enough ear to trust God’s Spirit to speak through us and guide our steps rather than the notes we’ve prepared or the plans we’ve made? Do we hear God as Paul did when he took an alternative route

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<sup>12</sup> Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*. 176.

<sup>13</sup> Harmless, *Augustine in His Own Words*. 126.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

on his journey and as Lydia did when she eagerly listened to the message Paul shared? Do we wait for a clear word from God as Mary did before embarking out on her own or as Harriet did when travailing the dangerous routes with enslaved people seeking freedom in tow? Are we speaking our own words and charting our own path or depending upon what the Spirit has filled us up with and laid upon our hearts? This dependence is cultivated through prayer, enabling us to be attuned to God's voice, ready to respond to the Spirit's leading and relinquish our own independent ways and what we may feel is right in our own eyes. May we be as dependent on the voice of God as Augustine, Lydia, Wesley, Mary, Harriett, and Richard were, and pursue God's course with complete abandon.

## Chapter Five: Foundational Practices – The Beauty of Abandoned Response

To those traveling in God’s Far Beyond,

As we prayerfully seek God and listen to where God is leading us through words, actions, situations, changing circumstances, and sometimes just through a gut feeling, and respond to this word with abandon as Lydia did, we will find ourselves living in God’s Far Beyond, inspired by a power not our own that is “able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.” (Eph. 3:20) Mary Fletcher described this abandoned abiding as “simple naked faith”. In her journals she shared that “by simple, I mean, taking God at his word without reasoning; and by naked faith, I mean, stripped of every other dependence but on Christ alone.”<sup>1</sup>

Abiding in God’s Far Beyond is not only experienced as our productivity and outcomes being off the charts and the continual experience of one miracle after the next. While this experience of being may find us in awe of God’s miraculous power, it may often look more like the peace that transcends our darkest moments, an offered cup of water that refreshes us both physically and mentally, the hope that lingers in the midst of anguish, an unexpected friend in our loneliest hour, the perseverance God gives us through a long and difficult journey. Richard Allen is an example of living in God’s Far Beyond during his “six-year journey from slave to born-again Christian to free person of color.” As a man of prayer, God journeyed with Richard and instilled in him an “unshakable sense of mission...that he could shape events seemingly beyond his control.”<sup>2</sup> This is living in God’s Far Beyond. It is often dependent on our ability to have

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<sup>1</sup> Moore and Henry, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*. 18.

eyes to see, ears to hear, and steady hearts that believe God is with us on our journeys to provide strength and insight and provision in ways we may not expect and the willingness to respond with obedience to God's invitation to get involved in the work set before us. Often, we may be too busy and preoccupied to hear the invitation and do not respond with abandon as we are tethered to our schedules, logic, fears, or other's opinions. To enter God's Far Beyond and abide there, we must be alert to God's continued creative work around us, inviting us into the story as we eagerly listen and respond with abandon.

In an earlier letter, I shared with you about our prayer walk through Raleigh, where we felt drawn to join God in ministry with the people living in the government housing complex of Walnut Terrace. After walking through several government-run developments throughout the day, we had ended our journey at Walnut Terrace where we passed the man who we sensed was a sign to both of us that God was inviting us to serve in this community. As it turned out, our sponsoring suburban church had already organized a couple of Christmas gift give-a-ways at Walnut Terrace before we arrived. We were open to building a relationship with a new neighborhood if God called us to, so we were a bit surprised when it felt clear to us that God was inviting us to work with the families in Walnut Terrace. We were young and probably a bit idealistic, desiring to pave a new and fresh path, yet even though we were surprised by this clear call to remain with the people the church had already been connected to, we agreed to obey God's invitation and to continue forging the path already begun for us.

Logically, it seemed at first that this previous relationship would help open doors for our work in Walnut Terrace, and while it did make a couple connections for us, we came to realize that some barriers had also been created that would take a bit of work to

undo. One such barrier is often a common one. When affluent people with good intentions decide they want to serve those they perceive as poor and in need of their assistance, a power dynamic can be created. Such an interaction cannot foster a collaborative relationship with everyone at the table participating as equal partners, but rather allows a top-down approach to fester, leading to more of a ministering “to” people rather than “with”. It is easy for us, who have a lot of support and means in our lives, to desire to help those who are “less fortunate” than us, not intending to hold most of the power in the relationship, yet often leading to our participation in actions that can be received as condescending, even unknowingly.

The holiday season was upon us within a few shorts weeks of feeling called to Walnut Terrace and our sponsoring church wanted to do their traditional Christmas party and gift give-away. My husband worked with the established ministry committee that had hired him and who planned to run the event as they had in the past, by collecting names and ages of children and providing gifts for them with a man dressed liked Santa. The chair of the ministry committee had already called together a meeting to be held at Walnut Terrace with the neighborhood’s governing body. The chair led the meeting in a lecture style with all of us committee members and neighborhood leaders sitting in rows. He shared his plan for how the event would go and when it would occur, then wrapped up by asking if anyone had questions. I remember him continually checking his watch while silence rang in the air as no one spoke up. My husband gingerly walked forward, not wanting to overpower the chair’s leadership, but concerned at how things were going. The chair introduced Kevin as the new director of this ministry. Kevin winced at the assumption that the people in the room needed “ministry” done to them but smiled and



expressed his thanks for being welcomed to be a part. He then began to ask everyone for their opinion, wondering how they would like the event to be, what they thought should happen and how they'd like us to partner with them to make it happen. All of a sudden, hands shot up and the people of Walnut Terrace began to share their ideas. They wanted to do a potluck instead of us providing pizza, with all the families involved bringing a main dish and desserts. They had ideas of activities we could do and decided on a time and date that worked best for their families. This dialogue continued well after the meeting's end, as Kevin and I continued to talk with the president of the neighborhood association who introduced us to several other resident leaders in the complex.

These acquaintances became key relationships that built us many long-lasting bridges with the residents of Walnut Terrace and the schools, agencies, and organizations that served the people who lived there. How important it is to realize we are only guests invited to join God's work and to take time to listen and learn from those we are invited to serve alongside. The people of Walnut Terrace, who became our dear friends, later told us how they had experienced so many groups of white people coming "down" into their neighborhood to minister "to" them through one event after another, but none took the time to get to know them or stuck around long enough to build relationships with them as they disappeared after the event was over. The Gospel of John tells us that the "Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14) God did not stay distant to yield power and control over our lives but became one of us, building relationships, walking beside us, eating, talking, laughing and grieving with us. As we accept this invitation to incarnational ministry we participate in God's Far Beyond, in the flesh.

One day, when we walked through Walnut Terrace, talking with residents we had met and checking in on how they were doing, we ran into Shianne, a woman we had met at the Christmas party planning meeting. We greeted each other as she closed her mailbox and then we asked how she was doing. She began to share about her oldest teenage son, still a minor, who had been convicted as an adult for a felony. She then shared how all government rental unit leases were up for review and it had been announced that they were not permitted to have anyone in the family with a felony record. Shianne was nervous of eviction, knowing of people who had been kicked out for similar situations and not knowing where she could go if this happened to her. We asked if she'd like us to pray for her and then asked for God's provision for her and her young son, who faced many years in prison for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and for God's guidance in the rent negotiations so Shianne and her youngest son could continue to live at Walnut Terrace without fear.

As we were finishing, we looked up to see a young teenage boy walking across the street toward us. "Are these my mentors?" he asked his mom. We had not met Shianne's youngest son yet and she introduced Augustus to us and told him our names. He smiled toward the ground and rocked from side to side shifting his gaze from us back to his feet. "Are these my mentors?" he asked again. Shianne explained to us that he had been wanting a mentor and thought maybe we were it. We smiled back at him and said sure we can be your mentors if you want. A big smile flashed across his face and he rocked a bit faster and then said, "What's up, Kev?" Shianne told us later that Augustus had autism and was struggling at his current school as they did not seem to understand his special needs which got him into trouble. She was afraid of what might happen to him

there especially after losing one son to the system. Augustus had been wanting a mentor like other students had at his school, but Shianne hadn't been sure how to make this happen for him. The day we met Augustus was the beginning of a life-long relationship that we still maintain now, almost 30 years later, and with whom we experienced many Far Beyond moments with God.

I cannot share them all but one in particular always stands out in my mind, which still leaves my husband and I in awe when we recall it. After we prayed for Shianne's rental agreement issue that day, she shared with us a week later that it all worked out and they were going to allow her to stay at Walnut Terrace despite her son's conviction. She called our prayers "magic" to her friends, and others at Walnut Terrace who knew her began to open up to us and many relationships were created. We also began to hang out with Augustus on a regular basis. It quickly became obvious that the suburban school he took a bus to each day, as part of the state's desegregation efforts, treated his autistic behavior more like criminal tendencies than the unique way people with autism engage their world; for instance, Augustus' need for physical space was different than most others and he did not like to be touched in any way unexpectedly. Only a few weeks after we met Augustus, we received a panicked phone call from Shianne. Through tears, she told us that the school had called the police and they had locked Augustus up in a mental institution for observation. We quickly drove over to the place where they were holding him. We found Shianne in the lobby beside herself with worry. No one would inform her of what was happening or how long they planned to keep Augustus in confinement. After speaking to the person at the front desk, we were finally able to get a doctor to come out to explain the situation. At twenty-four, my naivety of equality was again expanded as it

seemed that it was only because I was white that they responded to my requests to speak with someone while they had ignored Shianne's for the last couple of hours.

We learned that Augustus had become agitated in the hallway at school. The Vice Principal asked him to come inside and when Augustus continued to rock side to side and not comply with what was being asked of him, the VP grabbed his arm to physically make him obey. Augustus responded quickly by jerking his arm away and thrusting the VP's arm away from him. The VP felt assaulted and called the police saying that Augustus was out of control. The police arrived, handcuffed Augustus with difficulty and brought him to a mental ward to be analyzed for 72 hours. We shared with the doctor that Augustus had autism and that it was self-defense when he struck the VP's arm away as physical touch is found to be universally very sensitive for people with autism. Violent touch, like the VP had used with Augustus, was extremely threatening and unbearable. We asked if he could be released but they refused. We were sick with worry as we left with Shianne, not able to imagine what testing they were putting him through, or medication they may be administering, not to mention the negative impact of his confinement away from his usual surroundings and strict routine which he depended on each day to provide him the structure he needed to feel secure and at peace.

Three days later, we drove with Shianne to pick Augustus up. When he entered the lobby, I was sickened by the hallowed circles around his eyes, no trace of the spark that lit them up with his usual grin. His eyes darted back and forth as he saw us and then with his head down he headed quickly toward the door without saying anything to us at all. We followed him in silence as Shianne and I reached for each other's hand for a quick squeeze of reassurance. I prayed in silent fierceness with all that was within me,

begging God to heal him and provide a safe pathway forward for this precious young man.

While he was institutionalized, Kevin and I had called the local high school closer to Walnut Terrace and helped Shianne request a transfer. It was a magnet school and had a strong special education program that was known for helping students with special needs thrive through a mainstream pedagogy where they joined regular classes while receiving support tailored to their individual needs. The high school, while already at capacity, made room for this special situation once they heard Augustus's story. We went with Shianne and Augustus to meet with the educational team who would work with Augustus if admitted, including the principal, school psychologist, and special education instructor. They were an amazing team and spoke directly to Augustus, asking him about his hopes for his education and how he best liked to learn. They said if he came to this school, he would have a clean slate and they had high expectations of him, believing in his ability to do well and graduate from high school on time. Augustus responded well to the conversation and said he'd like to attend there.

The special education teacher then spoke up and shared a memory she had of Augustus. She asked if he remembered her son from elementary school who struggled with many special needs and physical limitations. When she mentioned her son's name, Augustus smiled and rocking back and forth in his chair said yes he remembered him and that he was his friend. The teacher became teary-eyed and shared that Augustus was the only student who had ever befriended her son in elementary school. She recalled how all the other students shunned him or were afraid of him as he had many behaviors other children could not understand, but that Augustus was always kind to him. She expressed

how grateful she was that her son had had a friend like Augustus during his difficult and short life as he had passed away a few years ago. She told Augustus how much it meant to her and then shared that when she read his name on the request to transfer to this school, she advocated on his behalf to make room for him to attend this school and be her student. As we all left, we shared our awe at how God had opened the doors for Augustus to attend there as we had been told the chances were very slim.

Augustus thrived at this school and three years later he was the first one in his family to graduate from high school. He found a full-time steady job at a grocery store in Raleigh after graduating and is still working there over 20 years later, helping to support his mom with the mortgage on the townhome they were eventually able to buy on the outskirts of the city. Many people may consider all these events as coincidence, but as I reflect back on this journey with Augustus, I see God walking with us through a difficult and unexpected detour that Augustus encountered. As we prayed with Shianne through this scary situation, we experienced God opening doors where there were none, accomplishing far more than we could think of or imagine. Through God's power working in all those involved, and by responding to God's lead without reservations, we were blessed to walk together with our creator, Shianne and Augustus in God's Far Beyond. May we continue to believe in the power and mystery of our Lord and Savior. How may God be asking us to respond with abandon and journey today with someone, bearing witness to the possibilities beyond our imagination? For those who have ears let them hear. Let us be the good soil for God's Word to grow and yield fruit far beyond our own endeavors.

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Dear friends,

It's hard to believe how fast the years in ministry pass by. The story of Augustus occurred many years ago in my first year of marriage, and soon my husband and I will be celebrating 28 years, almost three decades after we first accepted the call to move across the nation and minister with brothers and sisters we had never met. So much has transpired since then. After ten years of working alongside so many amazing people to plant a church and create a non-profit in Raleigh, NC, we experienced God opening doors for us to move back to California to work at a private Christian college in San Diego. My husband, after earning his doctorate at UNC Chapel Hill, was hired as a professor in sociology and social work and quickly became the department chair. For the first ten years in San Diego, I worked as a pastor on the same campus, organizing ministry opportunities for students and assisting faculty in weaving engaged learning throughout their curriculum. The housing prices in San Diego astounded us as we had been able to purchase a house in downtown Raleigh for seventy thousand which wasn't even a down payment for the half a million-dollar average in San Diego. After a year and a half of trying to navigate a crazy market, where houses were sold before even hitting the real estate listings, we were ready to give up and look at other job options across the nation. We drew a mental line in the sand together deciding that if we didn't find a house that week, we'd explore a couple other job opportunities that had materialized in states that were more affordable for a couple with four children. During lunch one day that same week, a house came on the market in an area of San Diego that most people called the "hood". Within a couple hours, we had seen the house, met the owners and shook on a price. Our heads were spinning but our hearts were at peace and excited to see how God

would invite us to serve in this diverse neighborhood where most of our friends discouraged us from living.

We've now lived in this amazingly diverse, global corner of San Diego for almost 18 years. As we walk the streets around dinner time, we can smell the aroma of kitchens from all over the world as families prepare cuisines from Somalia, Ethiopia, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Sudan, along with many other war-torn countries that people had to flee persecution. We have been blessed to experience God at work in mysterious ways as we tried our best to nurture healthy soil to receive the word God spoke into our daily lives and took steps to follow as best we knew how through faith. As I reflect on our time here in City Heights, I am reminded of several stories of experiencing God accomplishing more than we could ask or imagine through the Holy Spirit's power at work through us and those we've met. One in particular I feel led to share with you.

We hadn't lived in our house for very long when we decided to paint its exterior. It's a modern Spanish style home built by famous architects<sup>1</sup> who dedicated their design to help a group in San Diego try to create a home for large families at an affordable price through federal funding. They ended up only building one of its kind as it became more expensive than they had expected. The design incorporates the concept of using box-shaped rooms and bringing the outdoors in, with many windows and sliding doors opening onto an internal courtyard. I was on a high ladder painting the top of one of these box rooms in the back yard when I heard a young voice asking, "Why are you painting it orange?" I look down and saw a little girl, about five or six years old, peering up at me through our chain-link fence. She asked me again as I tried to register her question. I

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<sup>1</sup> Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines <https://www.safdierabines.com/profiles/>



chuckled a bit as I looked at what I considered a warm neutral desert color, and responded, “You’re right, it does look orange.” She scrunched her nose up and with that she skipped away.

Not long after that encounter, I discovered that our back fence lining the alley had been tagged. It was a large chain link rolling gate that allowed us to park our cars in the back, a common practice in San Diego as street parking is very limited. The previous owners had woven green plastic strips through the chain link to provide privacy. It made a perfect canvas for words to be spread across it in white spray paint. I decided to just take the strips off the fence and not replace them so we could talk with our neighbors more easily, and while I was painstakingly removing them through each little square of chain link, the little girl showed up again. “I know who did that,” she told me. “Oh, who is that?” I asked as I took a break from the tedious work to smile at her. She pointed toward a four pack of apartments next to our house. “They live in front of my place,” she offered. “Well, thanks for your help,” I said and then we talked a bit about what she liked about school and I learned that her name was Lorina before she set off again skipping around the corner of her apartment complex.

One day after our fence had been tagged, I was feeling empty and disconnected from our neighborhood, unlike how we had felt in Raleigh. It struck me that we had not prayed over this place when we arrived as we did in North Carolina. It’s interesting as you become more affluent, with well-paying careers and connections that your dependence on God can be stretched thin to non-existent. Our jobs at the university were all consuming and, honestly, very fulfilling work. I found myself moving from one day to the next swept up in the synergy of campus life with students, staff and faculty, enjoying

the ivory tower of great minds and thoughts and ideas on how to make a difference. A bubble of interesting and alluring theories, notions and debates enjoyed around the comfort of a conference table with a view of the Pacific Ocean while not requiring us to get our feet wet or hands dirty.

Each day I drove from this haven on a hill with manicured lawns and swaying palm trees and the ocean gracing the horizon outside my office, into the depths of an underserved neighborhood I called home where the horizon was engulfed with urban complexes, graffitied walls, and unfamiliar trees from people's homelands across the globe, brought here in suitcases as they fled their war-torn countries. I was a rare white woman residing on a street with only two other registered voters amongst many families who were undocumented or had recently arrived here from a refugee camp. The contrast was stark. I felt at home strangely in both settings, yet I had grown deeper roots in the affluent world of academia. So, when I sat that day on the top steps in my front yard overlooking one of the many canyons scattered throughout the neighborhood, I felt a keen sense of loss thinking back to our years in Raleigh and the deep connections we had with our community there. I called out to God and asked for my eyes to be opened to the needs around me and my ears to hear the stories of where God was involved and wanted me to join in ministry with my neighbors. I prayed that somehow, we could become connected to the families around us even though most of the adults spoke languages I could not. "Lord, show me your way. Open my heart to your call on my life here in City Heights," I remember praying, asking for the ability to hear and see and respond.

About a week later, there was a knock at my door. Lorina stood on the other side of our screen already pointing toward our rose bushes. "They're throwing eggs at your

rose bushes,” she told me. “Oh, well thanks for telling me. Are they still nearby?” I asked. She nodded her head vigorously and began to point in the opposite direction up the street. “Would you mind introducing them to me?” I asked. She nodded again and I followed her down our steps and up the street. Three boys that looked about middle-school age were standing on the steps at the apartment complex next door to where Lorina lived. She stopped a few yards away from them and pointed again without saying a word. The boys quickly turned their eyes to the cement avoiding both Lorina’s pointing finger and my gaze as I walked up to them.

“Hi, I’m Becky,” I introduced myself. “Lorina was telling me that you were throwing eggs at our bushes,” I began. They shuffled uncomfortably from side-to-side darting glances at each other probably trying to decide if they should run for it. “I was wondering if instead of tagging our fence and throwing eggs into our yard, you’d like to come over for dinner this weekend,” I offered. “It’d be great to get to know you better. You could meet my husband and four kids.” They looked up at me then with surprise on their faces. “What are your names?” I asked and extended my hand. They quietly told me as they took turns shaking my hand. “Well, Maricio, Marcos, and Angel why don’t you ask your parents if it’s okay to come over Friday at 5:00? We can grill hamburgers.” They all nodded, and I walked back to my house, thanking Lorina as I left. About an hour later there was another knock. I went to the door expecting to see Lorina again ready to share another story with me, so I was pleasantly surprised to see the three boys instead. They shared that their moms said they couldn’t come over at 5:00 but asked if 6:00 would work instead. “That’d be great!” I replied. “See you Friday!” They smiled big and bounded down my steps together.

That dinner with the boys turned into many dinners at our house and then many dinners at their families' houses celebrating birthdays, quinceañeras, making tamales, and cutting into Rosca de Reyes bread on Epiphany. That first barbeque, I asked them about their dreams and what they wanted to study in college. They shared they hadn't thought about college. I told them about a young man who was also from City Heights who went to the university I worked at and helped at a non-profit up the street helping young men like them go to college. I invited to have them over for dinner again if they'd like to meet him. They were excited about that, so we planned to have dinner again in a couple weeks and I'd encouraged them to bring their friends so Jose could share with them all about going to college. Five young men showed up the next time and Jose was able to share with them about the program that had helped him leave a gang, successfully graduate from high school and go to college. They could apply if they were interested. Two of them decided to join which led to more youth over the following years, a few of them becoming the first to go to college in their families and who are now working back in our neighborhood in non-profits and other careers. One young lady, the younger sister of Marcos, was even honored by being invited to introduce First Lady Michelle Obama when she visited one of our local urban gardens to talk about her "Let's Move!" campaign.

I do not view prayer as a magical potion or spell that opens the doors to amazing possibilities. I do, however, believe that unless we take time to seek God in our everyday lives and are willing to respond to God's invitations, we may miss out on being a part of something incredible. Lydia, Mary, Harriet and Richard provide rich examples for us of the amazing impact prayer had on their lives as it became part of the natural rhythm of

their days. As we read about each of their lives, they are living testimonies to this as particularly affirmed in Richard's example as he "began and ended each and every day with prayer."<sup>2</sup> Dialoguing with God through prayer requires taking time to stand still so we can hear God's voice and see where and how God would have us join in the work of the Gospel. It is through this intimate dialogue with God that we are able to hear and respond to God's guidance and experience God's far beyond. I like Catherine De Hueck Doherty's description, "Prayer is contact with God such as lovers have, such as friends have."<sup>3</sup> If we are not in communication with God, how can we hear divine words spoken to us and allow them to flow through us to guide, to heal, to awaken?

As I sat on top of my stairs asking God to connect me with my community, I didn't have a clue what all would transpire through the boys who threw eggs at my roses. I didn't know of all the doors that would open to life-long relationships bridging language barriers and economic divides. Let us stand still before God and ask how we might be used and what Kingdom work we might be privileged to be a part of, knowing that it is not through our own power but Christ's power that works within and through us to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine, as we simply make ourselves available and respond with abandon to the unexpected doors that may open.

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<sup>2</sup> Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Doherty, *Soul of My Soul: Coming to the Heart of Prayer*, 2nd revised edition (Combermere, Ont.: Madonna House Pubns, 2006). 120.

## Chapter Six: Foundational Practices – The Strength of Collective Resources

Dear friends and co-creators with Christ,

As we read scripture, I believe it is not just an activity of connecting words together to comprehend what the author of the text is trying to communicate to us, but rather it is an encounter with God, a dialogue with God's living word through the Holy Spirit that has the capacity to transform our imaginations. Scripture is not a history book but rather an ever-evolving story of God's continued engagement with us and our community, providing us a lens with which to see and engage our world; and in turn, our world shapes how we see and engage the text through our scriptural imagination.<sup>1</sup>

As I've engaged Acts 16 and the story of Paul's encounter with Lydia through the lens of my own experiences and the world that I find myself in as a pastor in an urban setting, I cannot help but consider what Lydia's life as a businesswoman who overcame the status of slavery has to teach us in today's context. I've shared in my letters the foundational examples Lydia provides us: to live an abundant life in Christ through the practice of prayer, the nurture of a listening ear and heart, and the habit of uninhibited response.

Now I'd like to look at one other model that Lydia provides us in engaging our world to advance the kingdom of God. Lydia used her connections and influence as a businesswoman to nurture a growing church in Philippi that became a pillar of support and a sustaining resource for Paul throughout his ministry.<sup>2</sup> Lydia is an example that challenges us to unfetter ourselves from the four walls of our church, work across the

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Jones - The Formation of Scriptural Imagination and the Renewal of the Church: A Panel Discussion with Richard Hays, Ellen Davis, and Stanley Hauerwas. *Divinity*. p. 28- 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess*. 53.

sectors in our community as Christian entrepreneurs and social innovators, and join our Savior, Jesus Christ to sit with the marginalized, challenge unjust systems, partner with those outside our faith traditions, build relationships with strangers, and work alongside those we may call the other. According to Gregory Jones, in his book *Christian Social Innovation*, “it is now often assumed that faith communities are irrelevant to social innovation and entrepreneurship or are a significant obstacle to it.”<sup>3</sup> Let us take part in changing this assumption and return to the roots of our Wesleyan heritage which throughout history has been a “leader in social innovation and entrepreneurship”<sup>4</sup> throughout history.

How do we, like Lydia, the Wesleys, Mary, Richard, and Harriet, creatively engage our communities as social innovators and co-creators with Christ? I’d like to explore a few local examples of ways churches have worked across sectors to be partners with God in spreading the Gospel, not just through word but also in deed. This requires us to work with others outside the four walls of our own church and beyond our denominational ties, joining leaders in our communities across the dividing lines of faith, politics, gender, class, sectors, and systems.<sup>5</sup> It necessitates us giving up control and walking alongside others different from ourselves as they lead the way, sharing of our resources and time in the initiative’s others direct, rather than managing, owning, and controlling everything ourselves. Richard Allen referred to this as our Christian duty to love and challenged Americans especially to “love one another no matter the class,

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 69. Jones reminds us in *Christian Social Innovation* that we are “heirs of John and Charles Wesley and the ‘people called Methodist’ [who] ought naturally be seeking collaboration, patterns of integrative thinking, and unconventional friendships.”

ethnic, or racial lines seemingly dividing” us.<sup>6</sup> It requires us to have an “orientation toward God’s reign, a belief that God is active in the world, and a willingness to think big.”<sup>7</sup>

As we submit to this duty to love and serve God through our connections, relationships, and influence, joining the Christian witness throughout the centuries,<sup>8</sup> let us remember Lydia’s example and build these pillars upon a foundation of prayer, listening hearts, and eager response to God’s leading rather than our own strength and ingenuity. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and spread the gospel and not take anything with them, making them dependent upon God and the hospitality and resources of others. We are to do the same. Paul and his companions accepted the offer of Lydia to abide with her household while in Macedonia and then monetarily throughout their travels; John Wesley received nourishment physically, mentally, and spiritually from the Moravian missionaries whom God brought along his path while his brother Charles bridged the cultural gap through turning bar tunes into spiritual hymns;<sup>9</sup> Mary Fletcher spanned her efforts across class after feeling God’s call in a dream telling her “I will send thee to a people that are not a people, and I will go with you” which began a flourishing ministry with those plagued by poverty and in need of God’s provision;<sup>10</sup> Harriet Tubman depended on the confidentiality and assistance of a network of people and organizations along the journey to freedom as God paved a clear and safe passage for the numerous

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<sup>6</sup> Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*.

<sup>10</sup> Moore and Henry, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*. 36.



enslaved people she saved time and time again;<sup>11</sup> while Richard Allen used his role in civic leadership to work across the lines of race, class, and politics.<sup>12</sup>

Many today are also accepting this call from God to engage their communities through Christian Social Innovation,<sup>13</sup> stepping outside the four walls of the church and working across sectors to help address the many ills that plague our society. I'm especially drawn to one couple, who serve as co-pastors of a local Episcopal church here in San Diego not many miles from my own congregation. They have engaged in many creative partnerships to serve the local community around them in untraditional ways. St. Luke's Episcopal Church was a struggling congregation as most people of means had passed away or moved, leaving a committed East African refugee congregation that could not financially support it. As their first senior pastorate assignment, the Diocese sent my friends to either close it or turn it around. Through prayer, they felt God connecting the dots of many of their passions and past experiences as the networks formed in their former secular roles began to emerge in new ways.

When they arrived, the property of the church had a vacant lot upon which sat a small condemned chapel that had been neglected and unused for many decades. They tore it down and connected with the San Diego International Rescue Committee (IRC) to use the vacant lot for a community garden. It now has a couple dozen garden plots on it from which the IRC cultivates produce to both sell and supply ingredients for the MAKE Café project, which trains refugees in the culinary arts, catering, and finding livable wage jobs. My pastor friends at St. Luke's were very savvy at raising money and secured over

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<sup>11</sup> Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero*.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*.

\$300,000 to turn their kitchen into an industrial commercial kitchen where IRC's chef is able to teach each cohort of refugees culinary skills. Each weekend they can put these skills into practice through a pop-up, farm to table café along with providing take-out meals on Thursdays featuring a new global cuisine from a different country each week. This partnership with IRC not only provides marketable skills in the culinary field but also paid internships for youth to learn all the skills for farm-table-production, from cultivation and harvesting to being a host and waiting on tables, providing them with first time job experience. This partnership has also provided a much-needed source of income for the church and has become an indirect outlet to share God's love with their surrounding neighborhood consisting of all walks of life. Along with this partnership with IRC, my friends have also partnered with a few other local non-profits that focus on a variety of needs from providing mailboxes for the homeless, to assisting newcomers to our country navigate all of our complex systems. Instead of creating their own programs that they must manage and staff, the co-pastoring couple has worked across sectors and faith traditions, partnering with established non-profits and agencies to help address the many needs of their community.

Another example of Christian Social Innovation through building networks outside the walls of our churches is a group I formed called City Heights United for Peace. In diverse communities such as City Heights – where I live, work, and pastor – it is important as church leaders to build bridges across sectors and faiths to learn from each other and identify our shared burdens for our community, so that we may work together to bring peace and unity and assistance for those who are oppressed and disenfranchised among us. In our diverse neighborhood of San Diego, which houses refugees and

immigrants from around the world, it meant inviting leaders from different faith traditions – Muslims, Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Jews – along with leaders of local non-profits who serve the many resettled groups living in our two-mile radius. Each month, we gathered to discuss the many concerns facing our community such as police relations, health access, food security, and more. We collectively hosted gatherings to build relationships with our local law enforcement, provided educational events to learn the different worship customs we each practiced across our faith traditions, hosted large meals featuring different cultural foods representing the various homelands of each leader at the table, and facilitated discussions while we ate, providing a safe space for us to learn from each other through asking questions and respectfully listening to each diverse perspective formed through our distinct narratives. The group does not always see eye to eye but together we have intentionally created a partnership ready to respond collectively to the many issues our community faces.

Many times, as church leaders, we arrive in the community where our church stands hoping to create a ministry that responds to a need we think our community has in order for our congregants to have something to be involved in. Often this leads us to assume we can become the experts in various areas to address the needs in our community; however, as we attempt to run our own programs, we fail to realize the amount of labor and management necessary which often leads to leadership and volunteer burn-out. Many of these programs tend not to be sustainable, which does not communicate a consistent presence and resource that the community can rely on. I recommend that we avoid trying to become the saviors of the various issues we assume our community is facing and instead become good partners with local non-profits that are already

addressing specific needs identified in our neighborhoods, and often need affordable or free space to provide services which our often-unused rooms during the week could provide.

These partnerships can complement our call to work with those on the margins of society without draining our congregation and leadership beyond their capacities. Jones assures us that as “we cultivate connections – with diverse ideas, diverse people, diverse sectors – we will likely discover the creativity that enables us to forge life-giving and transformational paths into the future.”<sup>14</sup> This approach offers opportunities for congregants to get involved where God has called them; ensures that experts are addressing the various issues correctly rather than depending on our passionate but less informed attempts; forms connection and unity with our community as we partner with established efforts rather than creating silos; creates vibrant and trusted connections that the people of our community can count on throughout the week as they come to us for guidance rather than only for Sunday morning worship; challenges us to think critically and through new lenses as we dialogue and work alongside people with different opinions and faiths rather than fostering an echo chamber with only our like-minded group. Some examples of these types of partnerships may be providing space for local non-profits to run ESL classes, tutoring programs, legal aid clinics for immigration, naturalization, and asylum, health and dental clinics, mobile showers or mailboxes for the homeless, federal application assistance (SNAP, WIC, school meals, etc.), re-entry programs, jobs initiatives, and more.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 69.

Other ideas on connecting with our communities across sectors could be to encourage our congregants and staff to serve on local committees and intentionally allow the information gathered in these meetings to inform our prayers as we seek God and the decisions we feel called to make. Our presence, in return, can provide a Christian witness in the secular settings we find ourselves in both directly and indirectly as we bring “the rich resources of the Christian faith to bear on the mindsets, practices, and traits of social innovation.”<sup>15</sup> We can also use our space more creatively throughout the week by providing a place for local artist exhibitions, plays, or concerts. We could partner with local universities or community colleges to hold classes locally to incorporate an engaged-learning style that is more accessible for our neighbors. We could look into hosting pop-up food markets run by local groups that accept EBT and support local urban farmers who need places to sell their produce. Each neighborhood will be different and have distinctive agencies that are addressing the needs particular to the local community. As church leaders it is our job to get to know these needs and the partners that address them, seeking God’s invitation to build bridges across sectors of which Paul, Lydia, Mary, John, Harriet, and Richard provide rich examples.

Another practice I’ve found helpful in guiding my congregation to catch a vision for building these bridges with groups and people they may not have ever rubbed shoulders with is to allow the pulpit to become a place they discover the story of God. One that overflows the pages of the Bible and into the lives of our neighbors who come from walks of life much different than ours. I’ve begun to invite people to share their stories during various Sunday worship services through an interview with me and allow

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 4.

the congregation to ask questions and engage our neighbors in a safe dialogue, offering us a chance to learn from each other. Providing education and awareness on different populations or faiths that reside in our neighborhood, various issues that our community faces, and struggles our neighbors experience can help our congregants to see and hear God's voice calling us to get involved in ways we may not have thought to ask or imagine ourselves. I've hosted several of these interviews during seasons like Advent to help my congregants explore the idea of who neighbor is and whether we are making room in the inn. I'd encourage us to invite a safe learning environment through interviews with refugees, families with special needs children, undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ neighbors, people who have journeyed through homelessness, friends from different faith traditions such as Muslims, Catholics, Jews, or others that reflect those call your neighborhood home. As we create a safe space to learn together and put a name and face to issues we have prejudged and have not taken the time to truly understand, we help our church body to soften their hearts through new lenses and enable them to look at people, situations and issues through God's loving and merciful eyes rather than label them as "other" and shelter ourselves against them. Let us, as Mary did, hear God convicting us of our instinct to pull away and avoid the strangers right outside our doors and accept God's commission through the words Mary heard God speak to her, "I will send thee to a people that are not a people, and I will go with you."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Moore and Henry, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*. 36.

## Conclusion

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I pray these letters have been helpful to you on your journey with God; perhaps you encountered God's Word in new ways as we explored the story of Paul's encounter with Lydia through our scriptural imagination. The truth is, our paths will continue to have their ups and downs, twists and turns, failures and successes but one thing is certain, we do not travel alone. We serve a God who is with us. My prayer for us is that we may "comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God"<sup>1</sup> as we navigate all that our journeys lead us through.

I have shared stories of unexpected detours from my own narrative and also the lives of many who have come before us like Paul and Lydia, John Wesley, Mary Fletcher, Richard Allen, and Harriet Tubman and how God has worked through these detours in transformative ways to prepare, shape, and equip us for the many experiences that lay ahead. As a current pastor of an urban church, I look back over the long road to ordination and am amazed at all the tools I've been equipped with and the life knowledge I may never have acquired had my journey been without the trials and obstacles that blocked the original paths I had planned to take.

Ultimately, I encourage us to embrace each step we take along life's passage and be open to the transformational power of God at work within us. Let us follow the example of Lydia and live a life of prayer: listening eagerly for God's direction, responding to God's Word with abandon, and fully sharing of ourselves and our

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3: 14 – 21 (Paraphrase of New Revised Standard Version)

resources as we work together across the sectors of our communities to advance the Kingdom of our God through Christian Social Innovation. God’s “power at work within us,” will “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”<sup>2</sup> Let us live boldly in God’s Far Beyond together, believing, expecting, waiting and trusting on our Lord as we say, “Let it be with me according to your word.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 3:20 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:38 (New Revised Standard Version)



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## **Biography**

Becky Modesto lives and works in the Mid-City area of San Diego, CA. She is a bivocation pastor, serving as the senior pastor of the English-speaking congregation at the Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City and working for the Price Philanthropies Foundation as a program officer. Her funding portfolio focuses on education, youth and families, and food security. She is also the primary liaison to the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Becky has extensive experience in linking colleges and universities to community-based programs and faith-based efforts. Prior to pastoring at Mid-City and joining the Foundation, Becky served as a campus pastor at Point Loma Nazarene University as the Director of Community Ministries, where she developed an academic immersion program in Mid-City, established an emphasis on Community Service Learning, and supervised community engagement programs averaging more than 300 student volunteers in the field each week. Additionally, Becky served as Coordinator of Compensatory Education at Wake Technical Community College, in Raleigh, NC where she helped establish a variety of community-based programs aimed at educating people living on the margins of society. Throughout her life, Becky has worked across sectors with community-based efforts in San Diego, Raleigh, and Los Angeles. She is an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene, has a MA in Intercultural Studies from Nazarene Theological Seminary, and a BA in Literature from Point Loma Nazarene University.