

## Finding Lydia

A couple of weeks ago I traveled to New York City hoping to find Lydia.

I did not go to New York alone. I went as part of the Mission Innovation Team of Resonate. It is our task as a team to help lead Resonate and the Christian Reformed Church in finding Lydia.

Our search for Lydia was prompted by our reading together of Acts 16:1-15. Paul was a man who appreciated clear plans. He usually knew exactly where he was going and what he wanted to accomplish.

Yet as he embarked on his second missionary Paul found himself and his companions inexplicably "prevented by the Spirit" from preaching the word in the province of Asia, only to find shortly later that the Spirit also would not "allow them to" enter Bithynia.

It was in the mess of disrupted plans and deep frustration that Paul had the surprising vision of a man from Macedonia literally begging for help. So Paul and his companions went not to Asia but to Europe.

Now the story gets really interesting. When Paul and his companions arrive in Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia, they find not a man but a tiny prayer gathering of women alongside a river far from the city center.

And more specifically they find Lydia. Lydia was a business woman from the very area of Asia where the Spirit had prevented them from entering. The long and short of it is that the household of Lydia becomes the launching pad for the church in Europe. How did Paul and his companions find Lydia?

*Where did Lydia go?*

At least since the late 70's I have wanted to spend time in New York City and specifically in Harlem in Upper Manhattan. I thought I could find Lydia there - - particularly since I was someone in the Christian Reformed Church interested in urban mission.

Manhattan Christian Reformed Church in Harlem boasted the first African-American CRC pastor, Eugene Callender. My mentor in Denver in my mid-20's, Rev. Gord Negen, had later also been pastor of that church. Manhattan Christian Reformed church had birthed a groundbreaking addiction recovery program in the 60's. Many of the CRC urban ministers of that era had done their seminary internship



Mission Innovation Team and staff of City Seminar

at that church. Later, when Jeannie and I moved to Grand Rapids in the 80's we were very influenced by Rev. Dante and Jackie Venegas. Dante and Jackie had met at Manhattan Christian Reformed Church.

If the Christian Reformed Church had a plan for urban ministry in the 60's and 70's Manhattan Christian Reformed church would have been up front and center in those plans.

Yet when I finally was able to spend time in New York City a couple of weeks ago we did not find Lydia at Manhattan Christian Reformed Church. The building that once housed the church still had the fading logo of the addiction recovery program on the door pane. But no one seemed to remember the church that once had been there. Where did Lydia go?

*Lydia on the bank of the Hudson river*

Our host in New York City was not Manhattan Christian Reformed Church. Our host was City Seminary, only five minutes in walking distance from the former location of Manhattan Christian Reformed Church.

Mark Gornik, the CRC pastor who founded City Seminary told us how he came to New York City from Baltimore in the early 90's expecting to plant a church in a very secular city. But instead of a secular, post-Christian city, Mark found a city pregnant with Gospel life.

Yet the fount of this Gospel life was not first of all what had been the legendary churches of New York's past. It was rather to be found among the numerous immigrant groups that had brought a vibrant Christian faith with them to America. Mark had discovered a global church alive and well in the heart of the Big Apple. He designed

City Seminary to serve this church. He had found Lydia on the "riverbanks" outside of what had once been the great centers of church life.

As the Mission Innovation Team we also found other "Lydia's" in Manhattan. On the Wednesday morning of our stay in New York we went to a prayer meeting at an art gallery owned by an Asian American business woman. It was a prolonged time of fervent prayer with a diverse group of about 30 people, most of them artists.

Then on Friday morning we went the offices of a hedge fund investor in the New York Times building. Every week a group of 20-30 Wall street types gather here as well as in other office spaces in Manhattan simply to hear Scripture read. Some of them are mature believers. Others are seekers. There is no program other than listening together to an audio reading of Scripture.

*My other hat*

One of my hats with Resonate is to coach our regional teams for Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. But my other hat is to lead the holistic mission network strategy (similar to the transformation network strategy we began with the Nehemiah Center) as part of our Mission Innovation Team.

You might imagine the Mission Innovation Team as pointy-headed ecclesiastical experts inventing a magic bullet that



Aian-American business woman talks about her art gallery

will solve the problems of the church's decline. But that would be the wrong way to help the church find Lydia!

God still works the way he did in Acts 16. More often than that we find our best-designed plans blocked. But God does still give the church 20/20 visions of people begging for help if we have eyes to see. And God does still place unexpected Lydia's on the riverbanks of our lives if we but have ears to hear their invitations

Pray that the God would grant us eyes to see and ears to hear.

- Joel and Jeannie

**PRAISE:**

- A great time with all of our kids and grandkids in Dallas between Christmas and New Year's.
- Move in January to a different house that provides us with more space.

**PRAYER:**

- Work of the Mission Innovation Team as we learn to follow the Spirit in finding Lydia and to equip others to do so.
- Jeannie and Joel's trips to the Philippines and Japan in the second half of February to attend the regional team meetings for Southeast Asia and East Asia.



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