The synagogue in Philippi was a natural place to start, but Paul did not go there. Instead, Paul walked along the banks of a river, a location described as “a place of prayer.” This was a safe space for people who felt uncomfortable or not fully welcomed in the synagogue. Known as “God fearers,” these were Greeks, not Jews, but they had a fascination with the Jewish religion. The men among them could never fully convert to Judaism unless they underwent circumcision, a painful and medically risky surgery for adults. So, they and their families stayed on the fringes of the Jewish community.

One of those fringes was this place of prayer by the river. Paul shared the Gospel with the “God fearers” and a great many of them believed in Jesus. By the river, Paul met Lydia, a woman who hailed from Thyatira, a city in northwestern Turkey. Now Lydia lived in Philippi as a foreigner among the Greeks. Lydia was an independent businesswoman, “a dealer in purple cloth” (Acts 16:14), the most expensive of all colored cloth because the dye came from the lining of a rare seashell. Since it was costly and difficult to produce, only the wealthy could afford purple clothing, meaning that Lydia was well-connected and accustomed to trading among the rich.

Lydia was a woman, a foreigner, a woman of means, and probably the last person Paul expected to encounter at a Jewish “place of prayer,” on a riverbank, outside a Greek city. But when you are led by the Holy Spirit you must expect there to be a few surprises along the way. Paul appointed Lydia as a leader in the Philippian church, another unexpected move because in Paul’s vision it was “a *man* of Macedonia” who invited him to come and help. Lydia responded to Paul’s confidence in her by inviting the apostle and his companions to stay at her house, which soon became the center of Christian evangelization in Philippi. All this happened because Paul shared the Gospel of Jesus among the fringe-people, along the banks of a river, in a foreign land. Paul’s foray into new territory and his adoption of new mission tactics proved the maxim, “When God closes a door, God opens a window.”

Paul’s new model for mission also reminds me of the techniques we learned when escaping from a fire: Stop, Drop, and Roll. First, Paul *stopped* doing business in the usual places. When the Holy Spirit closed the door on Paul’s mission in Turkey, she opened the door to a new mission in Greece. Second, Paul *dropped* his typical pattern of ministry. When Paul arrived in Philippi, he did not connect with the religious establishment but chose to minister among people on the fringes of the community. Third, Paul *rolled* with the leading of the Holy Spirit who connected Paul with Lydia. Paul chose a woman to lead the new Christian community instead of choosing one of the male elders. Stop, Drop, and Roll. That’s a good ministry plan for our modern-day congregations, too.

Many modern churches boast stained glass windows that beautify the worship space by filtering light from the outside through the colored panes. The problem with stained glass is that it *does not* *let you see out*. Stained glass is symbolic of a problem among many long-established churches: after generations encountering God within their sanctuary walls, congregations associate spiritual life only with that sacred space. They forget what the book of Acts says about the place by the river and the meaningful encounters that happen with people on the fringes. Far from following Jesus’ command to go and make disciples of all nations, too many congregations are all-too- comfortable saying to the nations, “Stop by sometime and join us. The door is open!” Then they sit back and wait, wondering why so few who are different from them cross the threshold.

The challenge for today’s congregations, ours included, is how to move beyond *maintenance*, which simply keeps things as they are, and into *mission*, which follows the Holy Spirit into new territory and exciting encounters with people on the fringe. To discover if we are a maintenance church or a mission church, we need to consider our values:

* Maintenance churches measure *effectiveness* by asking, “How many pastoral visits are made?” The mission church asks, “How are lives improved by exercising the Gospel?”
* Considering *outreach,* the maintenance church says, “If it upsets our members, we won’t do it.” The mission church says, “If it reaches new people, we must do it!”
* Regarding *change,* maintenance churches ask, “How will this change affect *me?*” Mission churches ask, “How will this change affect our neighbors?”
* When articulating a *vision for ministry*, maintenance churches say, “We will be faithful to our past.” The mission church says, “We will be to be faithful to God’s future.”
* The maintenance church pastor says to the *newcomer*, “I’ll introduce you to some of our members.” Mission church members say, “We’d like to introduce you to our pastor.”
* When confronted with a *legitimate pastoral concern*, maintenance pastors ask, “How can I meet this need?” Mission pastors ask, “How can the faith family meet this need?”
* Maintenance churches ask, “How do I avoid conflict?” Mission churches know *conflict is a natural by-product of growth*, asking, “How do we work through conflict, learn from it?”
* A maintenance church’s leadership style is *managerial*, keeping everything in order and running smoothly. A mission church’s leadership style is *transformational*, casting a vision of what could be, and going as far as Macedonia to make the vision a reality.
* Maintenance churches focus on *members*. Mission churches focus on *neighbors*, talking to them, meeting their needs, sharing with them the transforming power of the gospel.
* In terms of *growth*, the maintenance church asks, “How many people of our denomination live within 20-minutes of this church?” The mission church asks, “How many unchurched people live within 20-minutes of this church?”
* The maintenance church asks of the community, “How can we get them to support our ministry?” The mission church asks, “How can our ministry support them?”
* The maintenance church burns a lot of energy thinking about *how to save their building*. The mission church spends its energy thinking about *how to reach their neighbors*.1

These are challenging notions, but a challenge is what you get when the Holy Spirit closes a door, then opens a window which leads you to places and people who live beyond the stained glass. Understanding that our purpose is outward realigns our vision with God’s Spirit. If we focus our ministries solely on ourselves, ignoring the new people and places the Spirit calls us to, we are in the business of maintenance, not mission.

One last example. Just over 100 years ago, the railroads reigned supreme. No industry came close to the railroads in wealth, power, and influence. Steel rails ran from one end of the continent to the other. Everything of importance moved by rail. Then came the automobile. When those first cars appeared, the railroad seemed ideally situated to deliver this new technology to the people. The railroad barons missed their chance because *they did not fully understand their business.* In management guru Tom Peters’ words, “they thought they were in the train business. But they were in fact in the transportation business. Time passed them by, as did opportunity. They couldn’t see what their real purpose was.” 2

Today’s churches need to ask: “Are we in the church business, propping up the institution? Or are we in the Gospel business, loving God and our neighbor? Is the focus of our attention primarily on the inside of the stained glass among our own members or on the outside among people on the fringe? Are we butting our heads against closed doors by using outdated ministry strategies or are we open to the Holy Spirit leading us into new territories doing new things with new people?” How we answer those questions will make all the difference for us as a mission church going forward.

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, God present within me, help me to know your will. Help me discern your timing. Guide me to places where I can be most useful to you in growing your kingdom, blessing your children, and reaching the lonely and the lost. Guide my life's direction and prevent me from mistakes of judgement, blindness, and inward focus. Adjust my steps when I miss where you want me to be, and gently put me back on the right road, the path aligned with your timing and purpose. To you be glory through your church and through my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Sources:**

1. Adapted from Harold Percy, *Good News People: An Introduction to Evangelism for Tongue-Tied People* (Forward Movement Publications, 1996). Adapted by Douglas Dent.

2. Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr., *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies* (Harper & Row, 1982).

**Beyond the Stained Glass**

Sunday, May 25, 2025 [Acts 16:9-15](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+16%3a9-15&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

We’ve all heard the saying, “When God closes a door, God opens a window.” It’s from the Bible, but Paul would get the idea. Paul traveled with Timothy and Silas through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), starting in Antioch, on the coast, and working in a zigzag fashion up towards the northwest corner. The Gospel they shared inspired the hearts and minds of many people, and the church grew by leaps and bounds. Then things abruptly stopped. We don’t know what happened, but Luke tells us that Paul and Timothy and Silas were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6). That door closed.

So, Paul, Timothy, and Silas headed to the region in central Turkey known as Galatia, and from there to the adjacent region of Phrygia. Their next destination would be the province of Bithynia, but Luke says, when “they attempted to go into Bithynia…the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:7). Why not? Again, we don’t know. Another door closed. All they could do was wait for a new window of opportunity to open.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit was not long in coming. Paul dreamt of a man from Macedonia, in northern Greece, who begged Paul: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” That may sound simple enough, but in Paul’s day the trip was anything but simple. You couldn’t walk from Turkey to Macedonia. You had to get on a ship and cross the sea. There were no compasses to indicate direction. There were no sextants to measure the distance between the sun and the horizon. Captains determined their position by “dead reckoning,” which is another way of saying “educated guessing.” Many ships set sail never to be heard from again. Travel by sea was risky. You didn’t go up the gangplank unless you had to.

So, when Paul shared his vision of a Macedonian man saying, “Come over and help us,” with Timothy and Silas, they did not take the decision to go there lightly. They went because the Holy Spirit had closed all other doors. They went because the great commission of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations still rang in their ears (MT 28:19-20). They went because this was a new window of opportunity to share Christ’s Gospel.

Paul and his companions arrived in the port city of Philippi in Macedonia. When he arrived in a new city, Paul would typically preach and teach in the local synagogue, because it was in the synagogues that the early followers of Jesus worshiped because Christianity had not yet distinguished itself as a religion apart from Judaism. In the synagogues Christians and Jews studied and debated the Scriptures. It was out of the synagogue communities that the followers of Jesus formed the first Christian communities.