Writers in this issue

George M. Wieland is the Director of Mission Research and Training at Carey Baptist College, New Zealand. His background includes mission in Brazil, pastoring Baptist churches in the UK and teaching the New Testament. He is the author of *The Significance of Salvation* (Paternoster, 2006) and other publications on the Bible and mission.

David Dewey is a Baptist minister now serving both Baptist and Anglican communities in South Yorkshire. Alongside helping people engage with scripture, his interests include Bible translation and interpretation.

Kate Bruce is Deputy Warden at Cranmer Hall, Durham, where she teaches preaching at BA and MA level. She did her PhD on preaching and imagination and has written a number of books and articles on this area.

C.L. Crouch is David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of several books and numerous articles, including *An Introduction to the Study of Jeremiah* (Bloomsbury, 2017). She has particular interests in Old Testament ethics and in the prophetic books.

Andrew Francis is a URC minister, published poet/writer and community theologian. He is a popular conference speaker, congregational educator and Sunday preacher. His latest BRF book is *Eat, Pray, Tell* (2017).

Steve Walton is a researcher and teacher of the New Testament who serves as an Associate Research Fellow of Trinity College, Bristol. He is an Anglican priest, and has served in different ministries and taught in many colleges and universities. Steve has published a number of books and articles, and is presently working on a major commentary on Acts. He is a retired international volleyball referee, and was a torchbearer for the 2012 Olympics.

Neil le Tissier is a Regional Minister with the Heart of England Baptist Association, having previously served as Minister of Southborough Lane, and then Sutton Coldfield Baptist Churches. He is married to Anne and they have a daughter and three grandsons.

Henry Wansbrough OSB is a monk at Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire. He is Executive Secretary of the International Commission for Producing an English-Language Lectionary (ICPEL) for the Roman Catholic Church, and lectures frequently across the globe.

Conrad Gempf has been a Lecturer in New Testament at London School of Theology for more than 25 years. He is the author of several books on New Testament subjects, including *How to Like Paul Again* (Authentic, 2013).

Acts: participating in the unfolding mission of God

George M. Wieland

In Luke's gospel, Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, announces and demonstrates the arrival of the long-awaited kingdom of God. A group of followers gathers around him. They begin to comprehend who he is and to learn a new way of living, relating and serving together under his leadership. In Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, those followers, empowered by the same Spirit, witness to the world that their risen, exalted Lord calls all to acknowledge him, trust in him and enter into the reality of shared life under his rule.

The narrative of Acts pulsates with movement. It unfolds geographically, from beginnings in Jerusalem through Judea, across into Samaria and around the Mediterranean world until the book reaches its conclusion with the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Rome, the capital city of the empire. Political, ethnic, social, religious and cultural boundaries are crossed as the radical nature of this kingdom comes into sharper profile in the context of mission. A remarkably diverse cast of characters comes into view, proclaiming, receiving or resisting the new kingdom. Diverse, countercultural communities emerge in which the risen Jesus is active and kingdom life is shared.

Old disputes over whether the book of Acts should be regarded as history or theology are now seen to be outmoded. The writing of history always involves interpretation and an account may be written in such a way as to draw out theological significance while still being true to what actually took place. Acts may be read as a narrative of real people and events through which the activity of God's Spirit is discerned and God's mission is realised. Furthermore, since that mission continues today in our own contexts, we should expect resonances between the story recorded in Acts and the continuing story in which we participate.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised).

1 Give up your own agenda

Acts 1:1–14

In the opening paragraphs of Acts, we meet people who were to be leaders in the church's mission. There was a major obstacle, however, to their effectiveness in that role. Even after the risen Jesus had spent 40 days with them, 'speaking about the kingdom of God' (v. 3), their vision of that kingdom was far too small. 'Lord,' they asked, 'is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' (v. 6). In their minds, this kingdom was surely their kingdom, for their people, in their place, with a king ruling in their city and no doubt significant positions for his friends. Their best hope for the future was a restoration of their nation to the glories of a past age.

Jesus' reply (vv. 7–8) pointed them to a new way of looking for the kingdom that went far beyond those expectations. It was to be not only in their place but in every place; not only for their people but for all peoples; realised not through the acquisition of political power but by the empowering of God's Spirit for witness to Jesus, risen and reigning. This constituted a challenge to surrender their own agendas and have their horizons of what God was intending to do stretched beyond their own immediate interests and concerns. It also shifted the question from what Jesus would now do for them to what they were to be and to do as his servants and as participants in his mission.

Even with that reorientation, do we detect some reluctance on the part of the apostles to move on from the place where they had witnessed the ascension of Jesus, as there had been at the transfiguration (vv. 9–11; compare Luke 9:28–36)? That's understandable. The mountain was a place of peace, remote from the everyday world, where they had been enjoying the company of the risen Jesus, having their hearts stirred as he spoke of the kingdom of God. The city, by contrast, was a place of challenge and vulnerability. It would have been easier to wait on the mountain for the promised power, and then venture more confidently into the hard place. But the promise to them, and to successive participants in God's mission, is of enabling at the point and in the place where it is needed. Mission requires going vulnerably into that place, and waiting there for the Spirit to enable and help.

2 To all the world, through all God's people

Acts 2:1–21

When it did come, the empowering that the disciples received was utterly different to anything they might have envisaged. There, in the city and at the right time, the Spirit enabled them to communicate the reality of God and his saving power, with the result that the ears and hearts of thousands were opened to the good news about Jesus. And who were those thousands? Luke emphasises the presence in Jerusalem of 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven' (v. 5). They were diaspora people from the Jewish communities scattered around the Mediterranean and beyond. On that significant day when the Spirit of God was poured out in a dramatic manifestation of the presence and glory of God, it was people of the diaspora who felt the impact. The Pentecost miracle meant that they not only heard with their ears but also knew in their hearts that what had happened in Jerusalem in the raising up of Jesus as Lord and Messiah (2:36) was of urgent relevance not only to them but also to their places and peoples.

There are more diaspora people in the world today than ever before. According to United Nations statistics, there are currently 244 million people who have moved from their countries of birth to live elsewhere. Migration and migrants have always had a vital role in the mission of God. The experience of dislocation often results in greater openness to new learning and, indeed, to God. Once the gospel has become known, the transnational networks of migrants become avenues along which it can spread. An urgent task for the church in migrant-receiving countries and other contexts of increasing diversity is to learn how to relate and communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers so that dislocated people may find a place of belonging with them in God's kingdom.

A remarkable feature of Pentecost was the participation of the whole community of believers in this witness to the nations. Peter recognised the fulfilment of God's promise to pour out the Spirit not only on a handful of key leaders but on 'all flesh', women and men, young and old, slaves and free (vv. 17–18, quoting Joel 2:28–29). Where churches understand ministry as the activity of a few overworked professionals, and formally or informally restrict access to those roles on grounds of gender, age or socio-economic status, Pentecost continues to present both an uncomfortable challenge and an exhilarating promise.

3 Sharing life in the kingdom community

Acts 2:37–47; 4:32–37

Coming under the lordship of Jesus and entering into life in the Spirit brought the believers into community with each other. And what a community! They were always found together, at the temple and in homes, worshipping, praying, learning eagerly from those who had been with Jesus, experiencing God's power in remarkable ways. They also enjoyed the mundane but no less remarkable miracle of enough to eat every day. This happened as those who had food shared it generously and those with material wealth offered it to meet the needs of those without. Little wonder that their witness to the risen Jesus was powerfully effective (4:33) and many were drawn to join them (2:47).

That principle of living generously so that no one in the community would be in need was part of the blueprint for the communal life of Israel set out in the book of Deuteronomy. The promise that there would be 'no one in need among you' (Deuteronomy 15:4, echoed in Acts 4:34) becomes a reality as those who have resources open their hearts and hands to those around them who are in need (Deuteronomy 15:7–11). Luke is indicating that where Jesus rules, God's intention for flourishing community is realised.

There were in Israel groups that went beyond acts of generosity to renouncing personal ownership of their possessions and embracing a communal economic life. These were the Essene communities that, according to the Jewish writer Philo, were found in many of the towns and villages of Judea. They functioned socially and economically as kinship groups, substitute families for those who became members. Like monastic communities in later Christian traditions, they maintained houses of hospitality for the poor, the sick, lepers or travellers. It is possible that it was an Essene hospitality house in Bethany ('Beth-anya', possibly 'house of the poor') that Jesus and his disciples stayed in as pilgrims from Galilee to the Jerusalem festivals.

Whatever specific form it might have taken, the shared life of the Jerusalem church went far deeper than is suggested by the English term 'fellowship' (2:42). In the privatised cultures of much of the western world, it might seem adequate to chat over coffee after a Sunday service before plunging back into individual lives largely disconnected from those they

refer to as their family in Christ. The arrival of refugees and other migrants shaped by communal cultures, however, might catalyse a rediscovery of more authentic community and kinship.

4 Prayer in alignment with the mission of God

Acts 4:13–31

Prayer percolates through the narrative of Acts. It is the constant activity of the groups of disciples as they wait in Jerusalem between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost (1:14); it is through prayer that this group commits to God the choice of an apostle to replace Judas (1:24–25); prayer characterises the daily life of the Pentecost community (2:42); they continue to participate in the regular temple prayers (3:1); it is a ministry priority for the apostles (6:4); with prayer people are commissioned for ministry (6:6); the last breath of Stephen the martyr is prayer, entrusting his spirit to Jesus and seeking forgiveness for his killers (7:59–60); and on through some 32 specific references. Prayer is intrinsic to the story of mission.

For all that, the actual content of the prayers is not reported, with the exception of Stephen's dying words (7:59–60) and this prayer of the church (vv. 24–30). The setting is the first recorded experience of official persecution. Peter and John had healed a beggar at the temple gate and proclaimed that this had been done in the power of Jesus, who had been raised from the dead and was now exercising divine authority (3:1–26). This had led to their arrest, imprisonment and appearance before the council. Hoping to put an end to this new movement before it spread any further, the leaders of the people had warned the apostles to stop what they were doing and specifically to speak no more in the name of Jesus.

At this crisis point for the Jesus community, their immediate recourse was to prayer. They affirmed who God is, the ruler and creator of all things; they found in scripture (Psalm 2) a framework within which to interpret the opposition that first Jesus himself and now they were experiencing; they held to what they had come to believe about Jesus and had experienced of God's Spirit; and they prayed, not for their own safety but for God to continue to act, for courage to play their part and for the name of Jesus to be vindicated.

In post-Christendom societies, where assumptions of the church's place in national life still linger, it can be difficult to comprehend the threat to the very existence of Christian communities that followers of Jesus face in

many other contexts today. For them and for all of us, the response of that first Christian community models prayer in alignment with the saving mission of God.

5 From problems of difference to the potential of diversity

Acts 6:1–15

Cross-cultural mission generates multicultural community. The Pentecost miracle had brought into being a diverse body of people. There were the Galilean followers of Jesus and others from Jerusalem and the regions round about. They would have been among the 'Hebrews' that Luke mentions (v. 1). The Pentecost miracle had then added a large number of diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem at that time. Some would have travelled to worship at the festivals; others might have relocated permanently to Jerusalem. Luke calls them 'Hellenists' (v. 1): not Greeks but Jews exhibiting aspects of the Greek cultures of their places of origin and probably using Greek as their main language of communication.

It was not long before this new community, trying to function as a kinship group for purposes of mutual support, was experiencing tensions. But the strains exposed a cultural fault line. The diaspora 'outsiders' had the impression that the local 'insiders' were getting preferential treatment. It came down to access to resources, which involved having the connections with the people responsible for them; locals tend to have such connections, while immigrants do not.

It began as grumbling. Wisely, the apostles didn't get defensive. They acknowledged the problem and offered a pathway forward. New appointments were made to the community's leadership. But look at those names (v. 5) – all seven are Greek. Those appointed came from the 'outsiders' group that was feeling discriminated against and wondering if they really belonged with the local 'insiders'.

Tracking the Acts narrative, this episode precipitates a dramatic reorientation outwards. Those Hellenistic believers appointed to community leadership roles did much more than 'wait at tables' (v. 2). Stephen, now validated by recognition within the community, reached out boldly to other diaspora Jews. This provoked a violent backlash (vv. 8–15), but out of his

martyrdom came both increased persecution and exponential growth. It was Philip, not the original apostles who had heard Jesus' commission to go beyond Jerusalem (1:8), who crossed the boundary separating Jews from Samaritans to take the gospel to Samaria (8:4–25).

The grumbling was not only silenced; it was turned into growth. And that continues to happen when 'outsiders' who have natural openings into a wider world join the church's leadership and, with the church's backing, extend the scope of its mission far beyond the imagination of the 'insiders'. There is enormous potential for the church's health and mission in recognising and affirming gifted people from outside traditional leadership groups.

6 Who's passing through?

Acts 8:26–40

So far in the mission narrative of Acts, we have seen crowds impacted with the witness to and demonstration of the kingly authority of Jesus. The next three chapters, however, relate how God dealt with individual people to bring revelation of and commitment to Jesus. In each case, human agents are impelled by divine communication to travel to specific places to encounter particular people in whom God is already at work. Mission often seems to take the form of God bringing people who are seeking him into engagement with people whom he is preparing to act as his messengers.

In today's passage, Philip, one of the seven Hellenists appointed to serve the Jerusalem church and subsequently the pioneer of mission to Samaria, is prompted by an angel to travel to a desert road. There, he receives further prompting from God to enter into conversation with a distinguished traveller, the royal treasurer of the Candace, queen of Ethiopia. Luke does not make clear the precise relationship of this man to Judaism, whether he was a diaspora Jew or a Gentile God-worshipper. It is also uncertain whether the term 'eunuch' necessarily represents a castrated male; it could refer to a court official more generally. It could well be, however, that the appearance of this traveller in the unfolding story of mission points to the extension of the witness to Christ in two ways. The witness is carried to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8), which for some ancient writers was represented by Ethiopia. It also includes people, such as eunuchs and foreigners, who had been marginalised and excluded from full participation in the worship of the people of God (compare Isaiah 56:3–8).

Philip's part in this story repays reflection, with his attentiveness to God's prompting, his obedience, courage and willingness to (literally) journey alongside the seeker, and the dialogical and responsive mode of his engagement. The place of the encounter is also significant. The witness of a community of believers in a settled location can be very effective, as it had been in Jerusalem (2:43–47). There, the church's shared life as well as its words had impacted those who lived in proximity to them. The story of this Ethiopian traveller alerts us to the potential of encounters on the road for revelation and transformation. Who is passing through? And what might be the questions that are occupying them on their journey?

Guidelines

- What is your understanding of the scope of the kingdom of God? What does it mean for you to seek it?
- Does your ministry and mission agenda align with that which Jesus articulates in 1:7–8?
- Do the diaspora people in your neighbourhood know that the God whom local Christians worship also cares about them? Do they ever hear about this God in their native/heart languages?
- Are there people in your own church or mission context of whom little is expected because of their gender, age or socio-economic or other status? Consider the potential if their participation were empowered.
- What could the economic dimension of life as a kingdom community look like in the context of your local church? If realised, what would be different about its worship, discipleship and mission?
- Consider a particular challenge facing the Christian community in a local, national or international context that you know. Using 4:24–30 as a template, compose a prayer bringing that situation before God and seeking alignment with the mission of God in it.
- Do issues in your faith community reveal inequities between more- and less-privileged groups? If so, how might those be addressed?
- Does the leadership team of your church or Christian organisation reflect the diversity of the community it serves? How might able people from under-represented groups be identified and validated in ministry?

- When did you last follow the prompting of the Spirit to go to a surprising place?
- What may be learned about a mission approach from Philip's engagement with the Ethiopian eunuch?

1 'Brother Saul'

Acts 9:1–31

A 'road to Damascus' experience has entered the English lexicon to refer to a dramatic change in attitude and direction brought about by a sudden insight. It is possible, however, to overstate how instantaneous the change in Saul was, and to overlook other factors that contributed to his transformation from persecutor of the church to proclaimer of the faith (Galatians 1:23).

When official opposition to the Jesus movement was gathering momentum, there was a telling intervention by a respected Pharisee and council member named Gamaliel. With the mood of the council turning towards ordering the execution of the apostles, Gamaliel advised caution. 'If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin,' he argued, 'it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!' (5:33–39). Gamaliel was Saul's teacher (22:3). As the young man relentlessly pursued those who professed allegiance to Jesus, did his teacher's warning niggle in his mind?

Saul first enters the Acts narrative as an observer at the lynching of the first Christian martyr (7:54—8:1). Stephen's challenging witness to Jesus as the righteous one whom God had raised up as prophet and ruler had so inflamed the council that they apparently abandoned due process and took the law into their own hands. Saul was there, approving, guarding the coats of those who stoned him to death. But he saw Stephen's Spirit-filled adoration of his Lord and heard his testimony to the exalted Jesus and his prayer of forgiveness for his murderers. Did this prepare Saul to hear from heaven the one whom Stephen professed to see there?

And there was Ananias, devout, law-observant, respected within the Jewish community in Damascus (22:12). He was a believer in Jesus, and

it was Jesus himself who charged him with the terrifying mission of seeking out his persecutor, praying for his healing and embracing him into the community that he had set out to destroy (vv. 10–18). Was 'brother' the first word that Saul heard from a follower of Jesus after his encounter with the risen Lord?

Gamaliel offering godly wisdom; Stephen uttering Spirit-enabled testimony; Ananias extending Christ-like grace – none of them could have comprehended exactly how they were participating in a process of grace that Paul was later to affirm had begun in him in his mother's womb (Galatians 1:15).

2 Discomfort

Acts 10:1–23

The dramatic encounter between the apostle Peter and his companions and the household of the Gentile army officer Cornelius is of such significance for Luke that, as with the meeting of Saul with the exalted Jesus on the road to Damascus (9:1–19a; 22:6–16; 26:12–18), he includes it three times. A full account is given in the third person (10:1–48), then Peter provides a first-person account (11:1–18), and it features again in Peter's decisive intervention in the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council (15:7–11, 14). Evidently, for Luke the historian-theologian, these two incidents are central to his narrative and its message. One relates the calling of the apostle to the Gentiles. The other describes the saving of a Gentile household. Both involve the reorientation of key participants towards the goal and character of God's mission to the nations.

While it might be natural for Christian readers to identify with and focus on Peter the missionary, this episode begins with Cornelius. The one to whom Peter would be sent was already a worshipper of God, eager to know and serve God. It was Peter who had to be 'converted' if he was to be a participant in what God was doing. This process involved intense discomfort. Perhaps he had already moved some way towards the margins of religious acceptability by accepting hospitality in the home-workshop of a tanner, but the vision that he received startled and challenged him to go beyond anything he could have imagined. While he waited for dinner on the flat roof, the smells of the tannery wafted around him and the sun beat down on a tarpaulin that provided some shade. Suddenly, the scene morphed into a

sheet lowered from heaven bearing all manner of living creatures, which he was invited to take as food. To his horrified objection, on grounds of dietary and religious purity, he received the reply, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane' (v. 15).

Of course, this profoundly disorientating experience had implications for how Peter should regard not only food but also people whom he had placed in the category of religiously unclean and unacceptable to God. As his prejudice began to be broken down, three people in that 'unclean' category arrived at the house. It took direct reassurance by the Spirit to persuade Peter to act in accordance with this developing reorientation, and welcome them in.

3 Discovery

Acts 10:23–48

The concept of liminality (from Latin *limen*, 'threshold') was utilised by anthropologist Victor Turner and others to denote that in-between state experienced when one settled mode of existence has been left behind and what will be the new settled state has not yet been entered into. Liminality is a space of disruption, loss, uncertainty, anxiety; but it is also pregnant with new possibilities. Peter and his companions were already experiencing such liminality as they struggled to make sense of the disorientating journey, both outer and inner, that they had embarked upon. Now, they were to enter a literal liminal space as they crossed the threshold into a Gentile home.

Peter's discomfort is visceral. First, as is often the case in initial cross-cultural encounters, there had been a painfully awkward moment. In his overeagerness to welcome and show respect to God's messenger, Cornelius had prostrated himself before him in worship (v. 25). 'Stand up,' Peter protested, 'I am only a mortal' (v. 26). Once inside, his discomfort and inner tension show through in his need to make clear to this unprecedented audience of a Gentile household that 'you yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile' (v. 28).

Discomfort precedes discovery. As Peter heard Cornelius' testimony of his experience with God and saw that home crowded with Gentiles eager to hear whatever message God had for them, something happened. 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality' (v. 34), Peter's words, could be

read as the statement of a settled conviction explaining why he had made the decision to take the gospel to Gentiles. The Greek verb *katalambanomai*, however, is in the present tense, and is better understood as an exclamation of a dawning realisation: 'I'm really getting it!' (The NIV translation tries to capture this sense with 'I now realise…') It is as he steps out in obedience, despite his discomfort, that Peter is able to grasp more fully the scope and character of the mission of God.

From the day of Pentecost onwards, Peter had been proclaiming that Jesus is Lord of all, and that all who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness of sins. Now, however, the presence and activity of God in that Gentile home, evidenced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, persuaded Peter that the 'all' whom God was eager to accept extended beyond those with whom he shared a geographical, cultural or religious identity.

4 Grace seen

Acts 11:19–26

The establishing of the first genuinely interethnic Jesus community, in the Syrian city of Antioch, is of incalculable significance for the mission story of Acts and indeed for the history of Christianity. This was to be the church that commissioned Barnabas and Saul for the work of mission that occupies much of the remainder of the book.

It is not always noticed that those whose witness and courageous boundary-crossing pioneered this remarkable Jesus community were refugees. Taking the gospel to Antioch had not been the result of a strategic plan nor a well-resourced mission enterprise. It was people scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem who had made their way up the coast to another country, where they would have arrived like all refugees, suffering trauma and loss, without resources or a right to belong, hoping to find some place of safety and means of survival. Yet these 'scattered' people (Greek *diaspeirō*, v. 19; compare 8:4) was at the same time a 'sowing' people (Greek *speirō*; see Luke 8:5). Their witness to Jesus and the message of the kingdom went with them.

The great breakthrough in Antioch happened when some of these scattered believers looked beyond people like themselves and shared the good news with people of a different ethnicity and culture. Most of the believers related only to people like themselves (v. 19), but there were some who had

the capacity and the courage to reach beyond their own group (v. 20). It is no accident that these were bicultural people, diaspora Jews (from that same term, *diaspeirō*) originally from Cyprus and the North African region of Cyrene. They inhabited both the Jewish world and the Roman world, but were on the margins of each. Perhaps it is those who live on the margins who are best able to cross boundaries.

When the Jerusalem church heard reports of non-Jews being brought into the community, there may have been concerns. Barnabas was sent to investigate. He 'saw the grace of God' and rejoiced (v. 23). As Luke glosses, it took 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' (v. 24) to see beyond past experience of God and the church to discern God's grace operative in fresh ways. It was also Barnabas who was able to see beyond what Saul had been to envisage what, by God's grace, he would become, and open a door for him to exercise the ministry to which God had called him (vv. 25–26).

5 Grace extended

Acts 11:27–30; 12:25—13:12

The Antioch church, built by bicultural people who could reach beyond people like themselves, nurtured by pastors who could recognise and rejoice in the surprising grace of God, was a church that soon learnt to respond to the needs of others. They were evidently not only open to God within their own fellowship, but also receptive of the ministry that came to them from other churches. It was through a prophet from Jerusalem that God let them know that a severe famine was ahead, bringing insufferable hardship for the remnants of the persecuted church in Judea. Their response was to determine to give. This church, born in a refugee community, understood hardship, and they responded with empathy and generosity. The first mission from the Antioch church was to take financial help to brothers and sisters in Christ who were in desperate need elsewhere (11:27–30).

The work of mission had been very fruitful in Antioch. The church had grown in numbers, was being built up in faith and understanding, was open to God's voice and was living in loving relationship with other believers. A foundational role in all this had been played by the pastor-teachers, Barnabas and Saul (11:26). But along with the Cypriot Jew Barnabas and Saul, the rabbi from Tarsus, there were others: Simeon, whom they called Niger ('Black'), an African; Lucius, who might have been among those

Cyrenians (from North Africa) who broke through to reach non-Jews with the gospel; and Manaen, probably of a noble Jewish family connected with the Herodian dynasty. They not only ministered together but also practised spiritual disciplines of worship and fasting together. And it was this diverse, multicultural ministry team that was able to hear the Holy Spirit's prompting to look beyond themselves, their own ministries and the church in which they had invested so much, and to embrace the call to a wider participation in God's mission to the world.

The cost to the Antioch church must have been immense. But the grace that Barnabas had discerned at work in them from the beginning was now extended through them to other regions and peoples. In commissioning their valued ministers and friends Barnabas and Saul (13:3), this mission community was so attuned to God's heart and purpose that the sending by the church was at the same time a sending by the Holy Spirit (13:4).

6 Resources for transformation

Acts 15:1–35

Reaching out generates issues of receiving in. As the mission narrative of Acts has progressed, an increasingly diverse collection of people have been finding themselves in relationship with each other through their shared allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. This has raised important issues. Who may be received into the Jesus-worshipping community, and what is asked of them in order for that to happen? And what changes in attitude, practice and even belief are required of the church so that it is able not only to include those who had previously been outside the group but also to embrace a new, more diverse identity? Acts 15 describes a process of communal discernment that enabled key changes to be named and a new identity owned. It opened the door for Gentiles to be welcomed into the Jesus movement and brought the church to understand itself as an ethnically and culturally diverse community of people who acknowledged each other to be equally loved, called and accepted by God.

That process drew on several resources. There were stories from the edge of missional engagement, as Paul and Barnabas shared things they had encountered beyond the existing church that they were convinced were God's doing (vv. 3–4, 12). There were questions from the centre, as the holders of the traditions of the community that had come into being

in Jerusalem highlighted issues that those new ways posed for what they had previously thought and practised (v. 5). There was personal testimony, as the respected and trusted leader Simon Peter told of how God had dealt with him to challenge his assumptions about God and others, and to reveal God's heart for people whom he had considered outside the scope of God's acceptance (vv. 7–9). There was wise leadership, giving space for all those voices, articulating what was being discerned as the direction in which God was leading, and offering a pathway forward (vv. 13–21). And, crucial for the community's recognition of God's purpose in those strange new circumstances, there was scripture. Rereading the text in the light of those experiences and issues, aspects they might not have noticed before were thrown into sharper profile (vv. 15–17; compare Amos 9:11–12) and its significance for their time and its challenges were unleashed. Through all of that they came to have confidence that the Holy Spirit was leading them together in the direction of God's purpose and mission (v. 28).

Guidelines

- Reflect on the work of God in your life. Who are some of the people who have participated in it?
- What opportunities do you have to contribute godly wisdom, costly testimony or gracious acceptance to other people's journeys of faith, growth and service?
- When did you last feel challenged by God to change your attitude to other cultures or behaviours?
- How are you going to act on a changed or changing attitude to a person or group?
- Find – and take – an opportunity to enter what for you will be liminal space. What are you discovering there?
- Reflect on the key truths about Jesus that Peter shared in 10:34–43.
- Are there people whom you find yourself reluctant to welcome into your church community? What would it take to change your mind?
- Consider some new or experimental expression of church or mission. Can you see the grace of God in it? How do you recognise it?

- Is there someone whom others struggle to accept because of their past life for whom you could open doors into the service to which God has called them?
- Read or listen to reports of hunger or other tangible need beyond your own immediate community. Consider the response that you could make, according to your ability.
- If you are involved in church or other leadership, how would you be able to hear if God were requiring you or a colleague to serve elsewhere?
- Identify an issue currently presenting challenges for your Christian community. Consider how the resources utilised by the Jerusalem Council might be drawn upon in a process of communal discernment. How are voices from the edge going to be heard; questions from the centre welcomed; personal testimony respected; scripture reread in relation to that issue?

20–26 May

1 When doors close

Acts 15:36—16:10

Acts 16:9–10 is sometimes cited as a paradigmatic story of God's guidance in mission. Certainly, Paul's vision of the Macedonian appealing for help had the effect of stretching the mission horizon and bringing clear direction. The full story of God's leading, however, can be traced back to the beginning of this episode in 15:36. There is no mention there of any special sign, simply a good idea: something like 'Let's go and visit the new believers and see how they're doing.' It was no light matter to consider returning to the scenes of hostility, misunderstanding and violence that they had experienced in those locations (chapters 13—14). Paul's proposal was evidence of an attitude of selfless concern for those who had become believers. Sometimes, that is all the guidance that is needed.

The two leaders, however, found that they were unable to agree on the composition of their mission team (15:37–40). Perhaps Barnabas, the persistent encourager, wanted to reinstate John Mark after earlier disappointment (13:13), whereas Paul felt that mission required proven participants.

Ultimately, tempers flared ('sharp disagreement' doesn't quite do justice to the colourful Greek term *paroxysmos* in 15:39). Was this disruption in relationship going to derail the mission? In the event, each continued to serve, but, for now, they served separately. And the personal notes in Paul's letters show that at some point relationships were restored (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11).

There were further obstacles. The Roman province of Asia (roughly present-day Turkey) appeared to be a strategic mission destination, but the missionaries were 'forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word' there (16:6). In fact, chapters 19—20 describe the spectacularly effective mission that Paul exercised later in Asia's main city, Ephesus. Perhaps the Spirit's 'No' was, in this instance, a 'Not yet'. The team then set its sights on the north-eastern province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit did not allow them (16:7). As far as we know, Paul never did reach Bithynia, but it is listed among the communities addressed in 1 Peter 1:1. Perhaps this 'No' was a 'Not you'.

Finally, when they were literally at the end of the road, the sign was given (16:9–10). But it still had to be interpreted, in community (now including Luke, as indicated by the shift from 'they' to 'we') and within the framework of their understanding of God's purpose of salvation for the world and their call to participate in it.

2 Households in mission

Acts 16:11–40

The shift of scene in this episode represents new challenges for the mission group. They are now in the province of Macedonia and in Philippi, which took pride in being a 'leading city' (v. 12) of the region. Since it was neither the capital nor the largest city, this designation probably reflects its status as a *kolōnia* of Rome. Paul's usual practice as he travelled was to join the Jewish community in the synagogue, where, as a visiting rabbi, he might be invited to bring a message (13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–3, 10, 17; 18:4; 19:8). In Philippi, however, Paul and the others went looking for a 'place of prayer' (v. 13) outside the city. Possibly the Jewish community in that city could not muster the requisite ten males to form a synagogue, but there was a group of women who met to pray, at least one of whom was very receptive to their message.

Thyatira, in Roman Asia, was the source of dye used to manufacture the expensive purple cloth that was restricted to people of high status and

wealth. Dealers in purple cloth could themselves become quite wealthy, though it's possible that Lydia was a freedwoman (former slave) who continued to work in her master's business. In any event, the absence of any reference to a husband or other *paterfamilias* (male household head) suggests that she herself was the head of the household, probably comprising slaves or other employees in addition to Lydia, into which she invited the missionaries (v. 15). This was more than the provision of accommodation. Lydia's household became the relational nucleus of a new community of believers (v. 40). She was the 'person of peace' for Philippi (compare Luke 10:5–7).

A second household comes into view. Beaten and imprisoned after Paul had released a female slave from spirit-possession, with economic consequences for her owners, Paul and Silas refused to profit from a sudden earthquake that created opportunity for escape. The officer in charge could well have been a retired centurion, settled in the colony after his military service, where he could at last establish a home and raise a family. He and his entire household responded to the missionaries' message and were baptised.

A woman, a slave and a Gentile. Mission in this Roman colony demonstrates the nature of another kind of kingdom, open to all without distinction of gender, social status or ethnicity.

3 Common ground and holy ground

Acts 17:16–34

Visitors to Athens today are still awed by the distinctive Acropolis, the immense temples and the larger-than-life statues. Those sights greeted Paul on his arrival. Athens was not actually in the strategic mission plan! The situation in Macedonia had become threatening, and the new believers had hurried Paul away and sent him off by ship. Friends got him as far as Athens, where he was to wait until the rest of his team joined him. What ensued, however, was not an uneventful few days of rest and recuperation. The unplanned stopover yielded an astonishing example of cross-cultural, contextual mission engagement, demonstrating dispositions, practices and a theological perspective that are exemplary for mission in any place and at any time.

Paul looked (vv. 16, 22–23), but not merely to take in the sights. He 'looked carefully' at the shrines, temples and idols (v. 23), making an effort

to understand the people of that place and what and whom they worshipped. He opened himself to be emotionally engaged by what he saw (v. 16), responding with a deeply felt concern for the honour of the one true God and compassion for those whose hopes, prayers and religious activity were futile. And his stance was positive. In all that activity, he was willing to recognise an earnest quest for God (vv. 22–23).

He listened. Paul's address to the Areopagus, the council that governed the religious life of the city, displays a thorough knowledge of the Stoic philosophy that framed the worldview of many in the Greek world in terms of human origins and divine rule (vv. 24–27). He also, astonishingly, cites affirmations about the deity that might be heard in pagan worship addressed to Zeus (v. 28). He travelled as far as possible on common ground before introducing the distinctive difference in his Christian witness (vv. 30–31).

This reveals the theological perspective out of which Paul travelled, engaged, suffered and hoped. He ventured into the world confident that, wherever he went, God was already there. Each place had been created by God, and its people were there by God's purpose. It was God's intention that in that place those people might yearn for and reach out to God. Mission was not taking God into a place from which God had been absent and to people who were far from God. It consisted of opening people's eyes to the God who was there,and not far from any of them. The common ground was indeed holy ground.

4 'I have many people in this city'

Acts 18

Whereas much of the activity in the gospels takes place in towns and villages, hillsides and seashores, the mission story of Acts is predominantly urban. It therefore resonates increasingly in this 'urban century', in which for the first time in human history a majority of the world's population lives in cities. Of course, the size and scale of today's cities are far greater than those of the cities where the first Jesus communities lived out their new faith, but there are certain urban features experienced across time. Cities typically have diverse populations, ethnically and socially, with relatively high degrees of mobility. They are destinations for the poor and the uprooted, for seekers of opportunity or anonymity. They require administrative, economic and service infrastructures. They exist in dynamic relationship with both their

rural hinterlands and with national and transnational political, economic and cultural forces. They are centres of manufacturing and trade, of education and popular entertainment. Then, as now, cities presented both daunting challenges and stunning opportunities for mission.

The narrative of Paul's 18-month stay in Corinth is richly peopled with urban characters. There is the Jewish couple, Priscilla and Aquila, on the move because of political hostility in Rome (vv. 1–4, 18, 26). It might have been economic opportunity that drew them to Corinth, as the Isthmian Games, temporarily swelling the city's population, meant business opportunities for tent-makers. There were leaders of the strong Jewish community in Corinth, such as Crispus and his household (v. 8) and Sosthenes (v. 17). There is the Roman Titius Justus, who, as a Gentile God-fearer, had joined with the worship of the synagogue next door to his house (v. 7). There is the proconsul Gallio, enjoying a notable political career comparable to that of his better-known younger brother, Seneca (vv. 12–17). From the dates of Gallio's proconsulship, we can place Paul's stay in Corinth at around AD50–52.

Urban mission practitioners know the sense of being overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of their urban contexts, by teeming, diverse populations, by the pressures of political, economic and social forces. They can feel vulnerable, impotent, isolated. This seems to have been Paul's experience. It took a gracious divine intervention in the form of a vision to reassure him that, although to his eyes that great population might have seemed unknowable, the Lord saw it differently: 'I have many people in this city' (v. 10, NIV).

5 Who am I? And for what?

Acts 21:37—22:29

'Saul of Tarsus' identifies Paul as a native of a notable Mediterranean port and centre of Greek learning at the south-western corner of what is now Turkey. At some point in his family's history, they had acquired Roman citizenship, possibly after military service. But it was in Jerusalem, at the heart of Jewish life and faith, that Saul had received his training in the Jewish law. A Greek, a Roman and a Jew, Paul was something of a cultural hybrid.

Back in Jerusalem after many years in the Gentile world, Paul had been urged by leaders of the Jesus community in Jerusalem to allay suspicions by demonstrating his adherence to Jewish customs (21:17–26). It seems

the plan backfired, however, as his presence in the temple provoked a riot (21:27–36). From the Fortress Antonia that towered over the temple, troops poured down to enforce order, and Paul, evidently at the centre of whatever the trouble was, was seized. In the ensuing sequence of events, all three aspects of Paul's identity come into play.

As Paul was being bundled up the steps into the garrison, the senior officer was startled to be addressed by him in very correct Greek: 'May I say something to you?' (21:37). That immediately refuted his assumption that he already knew who he was dealing with. When he allowed Paul to speak to the crowd, there was another surprise. He addressed them in Hebrew: 'Brothers and fathers, listen' (22:1). Whether by 'the Hebrew dialect' Luke means Hebrew or Aramaic is not clear, but it had the effect of hushing the crowd and giving weight to Paul's claim to be indeed one of them, a faithful Jew educated in the scriptures. The third strand emerges later, as the standard interrogation method of flogging a suspect to get at the truth was about to be implemented. Again, Paul asks a polite question: 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?' (22:25). Again, there was consternation and a dramatic change in attitude towards the prisoner.

Greek culture and language; Jewish training and observance; Roman citizenship – all those strands of Paul's hybrid identity and formation were woven into who he became and what he was equipped to do in the service of Christ. And as Paul told his story, it found its coherence and purpose in relation to Jesus' story (22:3–21).

6 The empire and the kingdom

Acts 28:11–31

To some readers, the ending of Acts seems anticlimactic. Why does Luke not complete the story and tell us the outcome of Paul's anticipated trial in Rome? Should there have been a subsequent volume, or at least a chapter 29? This, however, is to miss Luke's point. Compare the beginning and the ending of the Acts narrative. It starts with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, giving evidence of the reality of his risen life and teaching about the kingdom of God (1:1–3). It concludes with Paul, in alignment with the Holy Spirit's revelation through scripture and with the boldness that is a mark of the Spirit's empowering, testifying to Jesus and teaching about the kingdom of God (vv. 23–31).

This *inclusio* indicates the central focus of the book. It is on the interconnected themes of Jesus, the kingdom and the witness and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

As anticipated in Jesus' promise in 1:8, the witness has been carried out from Jerusalem, at the heart of the faith of Israel, to the world beyond. Now it has reached Rome, at the centre of the empire that dominated the world in which the New Testament events were played out.

There is a breathtaking audacity here. Jesus is declared to be Lord in the very city from which Caesar claimed universal dominion; the kingdom of God is announced not by a conquering general but by a prisoner who to all appearances is subject to the authority of the regime. This, too, is Luke's point. Whether met with approval or opposition, the message about Jesus has proved unstoppable and the kingdom community has continued to grow. This has been affirmed by a series of summary statements (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 19:20). This final summary looks forward: 'This salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles [or 'nations']; they will listen' (v. 28). This is not the end of the story, but the launching point for a further phase of mission to the nations.

There is a footnote to this stunning image of the message of the kingdom being unleashed at the heart of the empire. It took place in rented accommodation, probably a tenement apartment in Rome's Jewish quarter (vv. 16, 23). Who paid the rent? Then, as now, mission in strategic locations requires not only the bold messenger but also those unknown supporters who provide the means for mission practitioners to live and minister in those contexts.

Guidelines

- Do you agree that, in the absence of some special sign, it can be enough simply to act out of selfless concern for others? If so, what will you do?
- Reflect on your experiences of doors closing. Have any been a 'not yet' or a 'not you'? What does it look like to keep on journeying after such an experience?
- Think of your church and its local witness, discipling and community life. Now think again, but instead of picturing a church building, imagine the households of members of the church community as the loci of worship, learning, sharing and mission. What would be different?
- Go for a walk around your neighbourhood. What do you see, hear and feel? Are there indications of a spiritual quest, or of hopes and beliefs that you can affirm?
- Spend unhurried time in a place where there are people – a square, a shopping centre, a market. Practise attentiveness to people and place, and availability for interaction.
- Pray for Christians who live, serve and witness in daunting urban contexts, that they will be assured that among the anonymous masses God actually has many people.
- Consider the elements that make up your own identity and that have shaped who you are. How might each of those resource your unique participation in the mission of God?
- List any circumstances that seem to obstruct your participation in the mission of God. Reflect on the final scene of the book of Acts, and Paul's testimony that, no matter what his personal circumstances, 'the word of God is not chained' (2 Timothy 2:8–10; compare Philippians 1:12–14).