

***Standing Still, not an Option!***  
***Acts 16:6-15***  
***May 26, 2019***

The history of God's people is one of movement, reaching new goals, never standing still too long in the same place. From our early ancestor, the wandering Aramean of Genesis, to the children of Israel journeying through the wilderness to the Promised Land, to Jesus going from village to village with the good news, we are a restless, travelling people. There is the famous story of the Irish priest, later to be named Saint Columba, who set out from his homeland in a rudderless boat in 563 AD, allowing God's providence to lead him wherever God wanted him to go. He landed first on an island but, because he could still see his native land, he pushed off again. The second place he landed was Iona, the island where Christianity touched Scotland for the first time. There he founded his mission. It would be the centre from which Christianity would spread across Scotland.

Central Church in the heart of Hamilton was restless also and looked west to the developing neighbourhood of Strathcona. There it planted a mission in 1874 that would grow into a church by 1880. The Spirit led the mission to form a congregation named Erskine in 1880. Numbers had grown in the mission so a new large building was planned. The sanctuary and Sunday School Hall were opened in December 1884 in the North West corner of Hamilton.

It would become a centre from which the Gospel would make an impact on the Strathcona district in West Hamilton. For the next sixty years the Erskine Christian family reached out into the neighborhood with food, clothing, and programs for children and adults that embodied a message of hope and grace.

Congregation can't stand still. Here in West Flamboro you too have been on the move. As I read your history it is obvious that this community of faith has been involved in several important missions for over 100 years. Your mission projects building homes in Mexico for two years saw over 30 of the congregation involved and many others through the raising of funds for the project. Your ministry to children and youth has been a blessing to many homes. Your food

ministry in the north End of Hamilton continues to bring hope and healing and blessing to many families. The Spirit will not allow us to stand still. She continues to push congregations outward in mission.

This has always been God's vision for the church. It has always been about the Spirit moving, transforming, shaping, and encouraging mission outward. Our reading from Acts reminds us of this fact.

Paul tried to move his mission into parts of Asia, familiar home territory, but stumbling blocks kept them out. We don't know exactly what the barrier was for his team; Luke tells us simply that the Spirit didn't allow them. Twice their plans were frustrated. Then Paul had a dream of a man calling to him from Greece to come over and help them. Immediately the team set out to enter Europe with the Gospel for the first time. Greece wasn't part of Paul's plans. Perhaps he had felt a return to home base was best. But God took him and his team on a wild adventure that he probably couldn't have imagined. Perhaps Paul's vision was pretty conservative, a little modest. But the Spirit had much bigger goals in mind. She pushed them forward.

You can imagine just how much history would have changed if this crucial western turn hadn't been taken. But think of it: Notre Dame Cathedral, Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and the Scottish Kirk exist in no small part because of Paul obeyed a vision to go to Greece. I know perhaps God would have found another way. But I'm just wondering!

A man called from Greece, but it was a woman who answered the call to Jesus. Paul and his team arrive in Philippi and spend a few days looking around, not sure how long this would have been. They had to be patient. What they knew for sure was that Philippi was a city that represented Rome in Greece, a place that lived like an extended section of Rome itself. While the faith found its way into villages and rural outposts, it was great cities, like Philippi, Corinth, Thessalonica and Ephesus, which God sought to win for Christ. But, like so many of our efforts today, nothing much seems to be happening for Paul and his team. It has been a collective effort to date: prayer, interpreting the vision, employing each one's gifts. We ought to notice the collective "we" that has entered Luke's narrative.

So they wander outside the city gates and go down by the river where

they have learned women gather for prayer. There is no synagogue in Philippi so they have to seek out worshippers. It's Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and they sit down with the women. Among them is a prominent businesswoman called Lydia who is successful and wealthy. Curiously, she is from Asia Minor, a place Paul had just left. She sells the purple cloth made from the dye of a sea snail. She listens to Paul's teaching on Jesus. She was a god worshipper, meaning she was a believer in one or many of the gods offered throughout the Roman Empire. God opens her heart to receive the message and she becomes a Christ follower, and both Lydia and her household are baptized. You wouldn't have picked her out of the group to be open to Paul's teaching. She is one who has her life together: rich, influential in the community, owns property and is an upstanding citizen. But appearances can be deceptive. Like all of us, Lydia is open to something deeper; she is open to God's Spirit. It is not Paul's skills that move her. It is the Spirit, we are told, who opens her heart to believe. The Message puts it this way:

*As she listened with intensity to what was being said, the Master gave her a trusting heart—and she believed!*

Her first act in response is hospitality. She invites Paul and his team into her home. Imagine how radical this would have been. The Gospel breaks down social and cultural barriers, and this corner of the empire is beginning to be changed by God's grace. God's Spirit has a mission for the church, then and now; she seeks to transform lives and build a new community of faith. This is our mission from the Spirit today.

And I believe the Spirit calls us beyond our safe assumptions and into ministries that are daring and unpredictable. We need not play small in our churches. We have this amazing message that changes people, like Lydia, like you and me, and reaches inside us to places untouched by any other.

So as I reflect on this story I wonder what God's Spirit is moving West Flamboro to be and do? If it is true that the heart of God is for mission and that the church can never stand still, what is it that the Spirit is telling us today, and where is she moving you?

My wife Gail told me about a workshop her church held last Sunday.

One of the things they learned was that the most important gift a church needs to exercise is hospitality and welcome to the stranger and seeker. People need to be invited! The statistics tell us that 85% of those who become part of a church are those who are personally invited. Only 15% of church growth comes from other advertising.

Often we feel reluctant to invite our families, our neighbours and friends. Perhaps we are afraid they will not feel welcome; perhaps we are afraid they will not find our service, our preaching, and our music engaging. Perhaps we have simply got tired of trying! Whatever the reason, we are missing something critical in the life and witness of the local congregation. People join church congregations when they are invited. Some find it good for a while and leave. But others stay because they have found a place where they are welcomed and their faith spiritually strengthened and deepened.

Standing still is simply not an option of us! God's people have always been on the move. We cannot live off the mission of twenty years ago, or thirty years ago, or fifty years ago. We cannot live off the faith of all those saints who gave of themselves over the past hundred or so years to the life and mission of this congregation. We today are called by God to continue the mission as the Spirit leads us.

So where is God leading us today? What ought we to start and what ought we to stop doing? What is the Spirit telling our leadership at West Flamboro today? I wonder! That is a question I believe we need to begin, at least, to try to answer.

***Amen***