

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2016

**The Acts 16 Initiative**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
May 1, 2016

Acts 16:9-15

Several years ago, the Presbytery of Western North Carolina began a program called "The Acts 16 Initiative." Training sessions were held for pastors and elders to explain methods by which individual congregations could be transformed and hopefully learn to serve the Lord in a more effective manner than previously.

I don't know if Conley Memorial participated in these training sessions as they were before my tenure as your pastor began. If any of you did participate, I suspect that you were inspired by the training sessions and that they inspired you to be a more effective witness for Christ.

The program was called the Acts 16 Initiative after the general substance of Acts 16 which relates Paul's second missionary journey, a three year trip evangelizing in Syria and Galicia and then crossing over into Europe before eventually returning to Jerusalem.

On this long journey he established a number of churches, the first one in Europe being in Philippi, a town in Macedonia.

Philippi was named for Philip of Macedon who had rebuilt the town and renamed it after himself. It was a gold mining center but by the time Paul got there the mines had been worked out.

The town was a Roman colony and a retirement center for retired Roman army veterans. It was a Roman town all the way. There were very few Jews living there and there was no synagogue. Paul ordinarily sought out the synagogue in the places he visited and preached there, but there was no synagogue. Philippi certainly did not seem to be fertile ground at all for Paul, but he proved differently as is shown in our reading from Acts 16; a tale of Paul's initiatives in Europe, among other places.

Paul had been encouraged to cross over the sea to Europe by a vision of a man from Macedonia encouraging him to do so. How did Paul know that the man was

Macedonian? We are not sure. Perhaps it was the man's accent but, whatever it was, Paul took the vision to have come from God and he set sail for Macedonia.

One commentary that I looked at said that it was ironic that Macedonia and the town of Philippi became the first “...*toehold of the gospel on the soil of Europe.*” (Texts for Preaching – Year C, Charles B. Cousar, et al, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994)

Philippi was a strange place for Paul to first visit in Europe but visit he did with profound results.

Lacking a synagogue to visit and to use as the focal point of his message, Paul sought out the place where the few Jews in Philippi would gather for prayer. Typically without a synagogue the place of prayer would be by a riverside.

He did find the place and encountered a group of women to whom he spoke about Jesus. One of the women was Lydia of Thyatira, who is identified in Acts 16 as a worshipper of God, presumably a Jew. Paul found her on the Sabbath at the riverside and after listening to Paul, she accepted Christ and she and her household were baptized.

I find it very interesting that the first convert in Europe, in the paternalistic culture of the times, was a woman, in fact an obviously wealthy and influential woman.

It is also interesting that the presence of a group of women praying at the riverside and the absence of a synagogue seems to indicate that there were few Jewish men in Philippi, certainly less in number than the twelve required to make a minyan, the number of men required to start a synagogue.

Thyatira where Lydia had come from was a center of the indigo trade and there Lydia learned to deal in purple cloth which was very sought after. She apparently moved to Philippi to ply her trade there and became very successful.

If you read further in Acts 16 than our scripture reading this morning, two more Philippi conversion stories appear --- a demented slave-girl and a Roman jailer.

Paul's Acts 16 initiative brought the gamut of society to Christ, a wealthy business woman, one of the 1 percent of the times; a slave-girl, certainly a person at the bottom of the social ladder; and a Roman jailer, a typical middle-class member of Roman society.

What does this mean for us in today's world?

Paul could have taken the easy way out and concentrated his efforts in Syria and Galatia --- in places like Antioch and Ephesus. But he didn't. He crossed over the sea and reached out to non-Christians everywhere he went.

What Paul did was talk to people. He talked and shared his faith. He told them about Christ. He certainly didn't convert everyone he met but he converted many. He took the initiative to reach out as Conley Memorial Presbyterian must do if it is ever to grow.

In this congregation we support the needy with five cents per meal. We support the Senior Center and McDowell Mission. We support the Black Mountain Home and our missionaries. We help children in poverty through Lunch Bunch. We have our annual yard sale to raise funds for worthy causes. These are wonderful and are doing the work of Christ.

But are we sharing our faith with those who will listen? Are we inviting people to know Christ and to worship with us? Are we engaged in our own Acts 16 initiative?

Paul set the example for Christians everywhere. The Church of Jesus Christ has grown over the ages, not because of charitable activity, although that certainly is important, but by telling others about Christ.

**Think about it, pray about it, and go out and do it!**

**Amen.**