

godsend – learning for mission

Bible study resources

Unit 17. Do It Again

“Background to and reflection on Acts 11.18–23” based on Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life* (SCM Press, 2017), pp. 405–406.

The Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit led to new home-based communities in Jerusalem. Presumably, converts among the Jews visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost and the other Jewish festivals joined these communities while they stayed in the city.

Then, it seems, they returned home and started Christian communities where they lived. That is how the church sprang up in places as far away as Rome.

Meanwhile, new believers, dispersed from Jerusalem by persecution, founded churches where they settled, as in Crete and Cyrene (Acts 11.19–20). Missionaries then went out from these new churches to found further ones, as in Antioch.

The pattern was repeated with Barnabas and Paul, who were sent out from Antioch to plant churches further afield (Acts 13.1–3), and it kept being repeated over the next three centuries.

Believers founded churches even though they were often new to the faith.

It was of course a minority activity. Starting a new church would have been unrealistic for most wives and slaves who were not head of the household, for example. They were not in a position to gather a church by making their homes available.

Not least, most Christians would have had no need to start a church. Towns were much smaller than today. Home, work, and social life were more integrated. And networks had a stronger neighbourhood basis.

So believers would have found it relatively easy to invite the curious to meet leaders of the church and get involved. More than today, a new Christian community would have been geographically accessible to members’ family and friends.

Circumstances now are very different. Our more affluent, networked, and entrepreneurial culture creates a greater willingness and more opportunities to found new Christian communities.

Larger cities and increased social differentiation make it harder for any one believing community to serve all the different networks of its members.

Moreover, as new believers mature in faith, their gatherings tend to pull away from the values and priorities of their social hinterlands. They become increasingly “Christian.”

Like many conventional churches, the more Christian new communities become, the more distant they will grow from people outside.

The ancient church solved this by inviting enquirers to become “catechumens” (we would call them “enquirers”) for perhaps several years, providing a bridge into the church.

But in today's low commitment culture, that solution is problematic. Lengthy church-based courses are going out of fashion.

To counter the cultural separation of new Christian communities from their networks, further communities may be needed to reach others in the network or in other networks.

What can better focus discipleship than to find a friend, discover a simple way to love people, build relationships with them, share good news when opportunities arise, and encourage people coming to faith to start a new Christian community themselves?