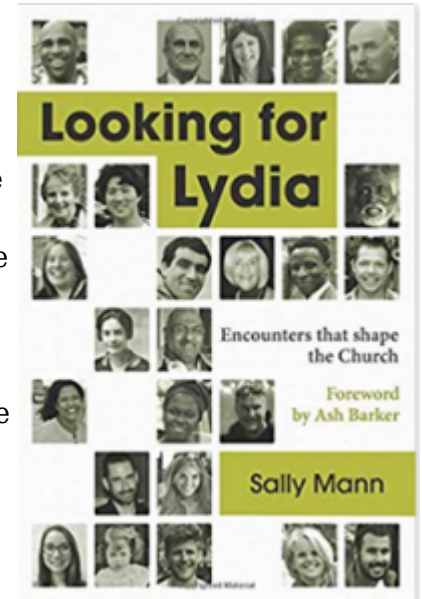




## BOOK REVIEW: 'LOOKING FOR LYDIA' BY SALLY MANN

This is a short, accessible and inspiring book about the journey Sally and Dave Mann have experienced in the East End of London. The subtitle of the book is 'encounters that shape the church' and they explore these by focusing on some of the key figures we read about in Acts and the epistles. In the foreword, Ash Barker observes that 'this book is what the world needs now' (p.1). Five generations of Sally's family live and minister in an East End Community. It evoked in me a memory of Simone Weil's writing on *The Need for Roots*.<sup>[1]</sup> As I read the book I envied the stability of a family that had been there for so many years; the Benedictine vow of stability<sup>[2]</sup> is one that resonates with me and which has shaped some of my decisions a little although for many reasons I have not been able to fully embrace it. It also reminded me of one of my favourite books, *Kids at the Door* <sup>[3]</sup> by Bob Holman and others. In a follow up study to this project <sup>[4]</sup> one of the clear messages that came across was that they hadn't stayed long enough in the community.



*Looking for Lydia* shows what happens when you do. I was also reminded, as I read, of my ordination training placement Mill Grove, another place where a family has had a long term commitment. I chose this placement as I so believed in the importance of learning from long term community.<sup>[5]</sup> I am very grateful that Sally has chosen to write the story of her community so that others of us can gain from this experience.

There are seven chapters in the book and these focus on Lydia, Ananias, Agabus, Cornelius, the authorities Felix, Festus and Agrippa, Priscilla and Aquila and Roman Brothers and Sisters. The verbs for the chapter headings are phrases like '*looking for Lydia*', '*meeting Ananias*', '*listening to Agabus*', and '*standing up to Felix, Festus and Agrippa*'. Reading the list of verbs gives an essence of both the simplicity and complexity of the book. In many ways they are all simple things to do but the challenge and complexity can sometimes be hearing and discerning God as we seek to do them.

One of the most challenging concepts in the book is the idea of 'missional remainers' who are described as those 'who have discerned that following Jesus, for them, means staying put, showing up and being deeply committed to a small geographic place' (p.5). Of the group of young couples who we first connected with when we moved to Birmingham, very few are left in the original church (which we left for my husband's curacy in the inner city) and most of the leaving related to neighbourhood, access to schools and lifestyle choices. I do not say that by way of a criticism, it is an observation that few seem to respond to the call of being a 'missional remainer'.

A further challenge is a reflection that the church in the West has not journeyed very far and is getting stuck in old familiar patterns. Sally wonders if it is God that is shaking the church out of these, while the church just tries to fix itself. She asks what sort of church has the community at its heart, this question rather than the more frequently used phrase about the church being at the heart of the community. It is the unexpected stranger that Lydia represents and our task is to look for our Lydias and embrace those we may have sought to exclude in the past.

Ananias is the example of a person who believes in us. Perhaps many of those who are reading this review are the people who have the capacity to believe in others and help them on their missional and community journeys. Others of us may be just about to embark on a God idea that seems crazy to us but where we need others to stand alongside and say, 'I believe in you'. The book is full of concrete examples and lessons for us in whatever context. Another example is meeting the need to truly belong because

*consumeristic attempts at community may meet our need to belong but exacerbate what they cannot fill: the need to be seen and to be known. In the midst of our culture of materialism, individualism and consumerism, many seek an authentic experience of belonging somewhere. (p.25)*

Some may fear a community focused approach to ministry means that the work is not gospel focused but Sally writes

*missional community life has not diluted the Gospel one bit. But it has helped shake off the prejudices which bolster a "Christian" identity which defines itself by a system of exclusionary practices and looks so unlike Jesus himself. (p.48)*

This book is rooted in scripture as a foundation for the way we do ministry and there is much to be learnt and applied. She finishes with the idea that

*followers of Jesus are called to build communities which serve as 'inns on the way' - a meeting place for people on a journey. The Christian community I see is a place to share stories, compare conceptual maps, warn of dangers and enjoy a good meal. Inns are open to everyone and judged by the quality of their welcome. (p.75)*

This is how the book draws to a close.

The book would make a great study guide series using the reflection questions at the end of each chapter and I could imagine those involved in the community work at our church finding it a rich resource to help reflect on where God is leading us in Hodge Hill.

The full details are *Looking for Lydia: Encounters that Shaped the Church* by Sally Mann. (Independently published, 2018). [Amazon link](#).

[1] Weil, S. *The need for roots: Prelude to a declaration of duties towards mankind*. (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[2] <http://www.e-benedictine.com/abouttherule/>

[3] Holman, R., Wiles, D., & Lewis, S. *Kids at the door: a preventive project on a council estate*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

[4] Holman, B. *Kids at the Door Revisited: A Follow-up Into Adulthood of Young People who Were Associated with a Community Project on Their Council Estate*. Lyme Regis: Russell House, 2000).

[5] See Nash, S. Lessons on love and family from Mill Grove for an ordinand and theological educator. *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 2012, 9(1), 61-77 and [www.millgrove.org.uk](http://www.millgrove.org.uk).



### Sally Nash

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