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When I moved to Belleville 21 years ago, I had a hard time finding my way around town, for I discovered that none of the roads went a true north and south or east and west. Every street seemed to be on an angle, so getting my bearings straight was quite difficult. Even more challenging was finding my way around St. Louis, so I quickly purchased spiral-bound books with detailed maps of St.



Louis and the Metro-east to help me find my way around the area. Although they were very helpful, it was a bit tricky turning the pages of a map book while driving to certain locations, especially at night. At the time, however, I thought they were the most amazing technology I had ever seen for navigation. No longer did I have to unfold a giant map and then figure out how to fold it back up.



And then came MapQuest and the ability to plot out a map on the computer and print turn by turn instructions. Traveling to unfamiliar places became much easier.



Next came GPS, with a tiny screen mounted in my car. I could plug in the

coordinates of where I wanted to go, and an attractive voice would tell me where to turn.

Recently I was so excited when I could get Google maps on my smart phone. No longer did I have to hang a device in my car, for now I could carry a map in the palm of my hand.



And now new cars come with maps on screens in the dashboard; with voice activation one can ask the car how to get just about anywhere, and the map system will kindly offer turn-by-turn directions.



Can you imagine what traveling was like before our modern maps? Imagine trying to sail across the ocean using the map that Columbus had available! Before he had charted the New World, everyone thought if you traveled too far across the ocean you would wander off the map and drop off the edge of the world. Trying to find a New World would be a very risky thing to do when everyone was saying you will fall over the edge!



Peter, one of the followers of Jesus, was risking a lot too as he began wandering off the map, but he was taking a different kind of journey. Rather than

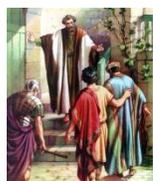
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wandering off the edge of the map of the world, he was wandering off the map of his faith. He was traveling into an uncharted territory of his religion. In the Book of Acts we hear the story of how Peter had been praying on the flat rooftop of his friend's



home, when he had a vision of various animals being lowered on a sheet. They were the kind of animals considered unclean according to the dietary laws, ones that no faithful religious person would ever eat. In this vision Peter heard a voice, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”

Peter resisted, replying, “I’ve never eaten anything that goes against the kosher food laws.” The voice in the vision replied, “What God has made ok, then it is ok.” As Peter puzzled over the meaning of this vision, Cornelius arrived at the door



saying he had a vision to come and meet Peter. Cornelius was not part of Peter’s religious group, for he was considered a Gentile, so at first Peter resisted having anything to do with him. But something about that vision of the unacceptable animals tugged at his mind. Something stirred within Peter to look “outside the box” of what he

had been taught for so many years. Suddenly Peter got it—he understood the vision; accepting the animals that he considered unacceptable was a vision of accepting this man who was considered unacceptable.

This new insight, however, led Peter to wander off the map of everything he had ever been taught. He not only greeted this man at the door, but he ate with him and told him stories about Jesus, with the result that Cornelius and his family made the decision to be baptized as followers of Jesus.

Wandering off the map got Peter into trouble when the leaders in Jerusalem heard that he was eating with outsiders, so they called him before the church council. As *The Message Bible* explains the situation:



The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates...called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re

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doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”

When Peter explained what had happened—how God had broadened his vision of who’s on the inside, “they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. ‘It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!’”<sup>1</sup>

Without Peter wandering off the map, the church might have remained stuck in Jerusalem, with members only speaking to those like themselves. What if those on the “outside” never got included on the “inside”? If that had been the case, we would not be sitting here today, for we might still be considered the outsiders.

Sometimes we remain so firmly stuck in how we see the world that we may even misread the maps, as in the case of a group of hikers who had spent half a day climbing a mountain. They began to realize they were lost, so they took turns studying the map trying to discern where they were. One hiker began to match up the surrounding landmarks with the ones shown on the map as he



confirmed his findings with his compass. After careful consideration, he announced to the others, “See that big mountain over there?”

“Yes, what about it?” the other hikers replied, irritated that he had been spending so much time looking at the map.

“According to the map, we’re standing on top of it.”<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we follow maps in the church that don’t really help us know where we are. For years, I’ve heard members of our congregation say, “There’s no neighborhood around us. We’re surrounded by restaurants and motels. We can’t ever attract anyone.”

As our Dare to Lead team has reviewed the demographic maps of the area surrounding our church, we’ve begun to discover how many people do live around us. For example, driving up the hill behind our church reveals numerous homes with people who may be searching for a place of hope. We’ve been using the wrong map, possibly thinking that no one around us would like us, or maybe we



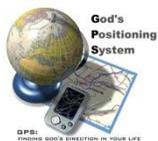
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even used the incorrect map labeled, “They may not look like us or think like us.”

Recently members of our congregation have begun to take more interest in what happens around us by attending city council meetings, discovering what activities are going on in town, and by trying to make ourselves known in the community. In a sense, we’ve upgraded our mental map to see things we’ve not seen before.

Sometimes we carry mental maps that tell us that people must look like us or act like us to be interested in us. Well, we are not the focus of the map. God is. People searching for hope in the world are looking for something more than just you and me, they are looking for hope, for meaning, for the message that they are loved through Jesus

Christ. They are looking for an updated GPS— God’s Positioning System, a revised map that helps us let go of the old maps in our heads



and embrace God’s Spirit that can lead us along new paths.

- Our old maps may tell us that no one is interested in the church, but God’s map tells us that we can change the way we do things so people can join us in the meaningful ministry going on here.
- Our old maps may tell us that we don’t know how to talk to someone about our faith, but God’s map tells us that we need to listen to God’s Spirit within us and trust that God will provide the words.
- Our old maps may tell us we’re running out of money in the church, but God’s map tells us we have plenty of resources and that God will provide.
- Our old map says we’re fine right where we are, but God’s map suggests that we wander off the map and try something new.

Are you willing to wander off the map? I invite you to journey together and discover who else might be searching for hope along the Way.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Ac 11:18). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. Acts 11:18.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, Michael Hodgin, p. 101.