

Compelling Vision

Together, as the Church of the Brethren,
we will passionately live and share the radical transformation
and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood
engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and
equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Bible Study Series

Church of the Brethren



Introduction

The compelling vision conversations affirmed the centrality of God's word in our life together—God's Word as recorded in scripture and God's Word as revealed through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

God's Word as recorded in scripture is our written rule for faith and discipleship. However, it is not a static document, but rather, "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). By the power of the Holy Spirit, as we gather around the Word in the context of community, God still speaks to us.

As we prepare for discussions about the compelling vision at Annual Conference and as your congregation imagines what it might look like to live into the vision, we encourage you to spend time in Bible study and prayer. We have designed this Bible study series to help you do just that. Each of the thirteen studies focuses on a different word or phrase from the compelling vision, inviting us to engage with God's Word with the hope of deepening and enriching our understanding of each word or phrase in particular and the vision as a whole.

Each session has been written by a different writer. This was an intentional choice. Our team of writers reflects the rich theological, geographical, ethnic, and gender diversity of our beloved denomination. Not only does this enrich our collective perspective, but also fosters understanding—a value that has undergirded the entire process of discernment. We are grateful for their willingness to share their gifts in support of this project and hope you will be inspired by their contribution.

In scripture, we are told that God is doing a new thing. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19a). It is our fervent prayer that these Bible studies—and the compelling vision itself—will inspire greater openness to, awareness of, and focus for that new that God wants to do through us.

Compelling Vision Editorial and Design Team:

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Adapting for Online Use

- If the session suggests dividing participants into small groups, you can either remain in a large group or make use of a break-out room option in your virtual meeting software.
- If the session suggests participants write or draw something and then share it with the group, there are a couple of options. One option is to invite participants to write/draw with paper and pencil and verbally describe it or hold it up to the camera on their computer to share it with the rest of the group. A second option is to invite individuals or small groups to take notes in a word processing system on their computer and then use the “share screen” feature in their virtual meeting software to share it with the rest of the group.
- If the session suggests use of a video, there are a couple of options. If you, or another member of the group, has a very good high-speed connection, you may be able to use the “share screen” feature to watch the video together; however, it is essential to have a high-speed video connection for this to work. Be sure to click the “share computer audio” box in “share screen” so that people can hear the audio. An alternative would be to share the video link and invite participants to watch it in advance of the session.

Other Tips for Leaders

- Feel free to print and distribute or email the first two pages of each session to the group prior to your meeting. Encourage participants to read the scripture texts, the *Reflecting on the Texts* essay, and browse the media suggestions.
- Whether you are meeting in-person or online, gather supplies ahead of time and have videos or other media easily accessible on your computer’s desktop.
- Take care to create a worshipful and welcoming atmosphere for your meeting. Have a volunteer in your room or on your virtual meeting platform to assist you in welcoming people into the meeting space. Light a candle and, if meeting online, encourage participants to light their own candle to symbolize welcoming the light of Christ into your midst.
- Media suggestions can add creativity and relevance to your session. They can enlarge your understanding of the Bible text and prepare you to offer additional experiences to your group. Always use media suggestions as a *beginning point*. Postings may change, and media suggestions come from a variety of sources and perspectives.
- Is your group weary of meeting online? Consider repackaging the Bible study sessions as weekly devotionals that include the *Reflecting on the Texts* essay and several questions from the session. Or use these sessions as a resource for worship and sermon preparation.

Our Writers

Session 1 writer **Brandon R Grady** pastors the Black Rock Church of the Brethren in Pennsylvania. He is a graduate of Bethany Seminary. Brandon is blessed with physical blindness. Adopted from India at age two, Brandon strives to make the most of the lease on life he's been given!

Session 2 writers **Audrey and Tim Hollenberg-Duffey** co-pastor the Oakton Church of the Brethren in Virginia. Both are graduates of Bridgewater College, Bethany Seminary, and the Westminster (MD) COB Nursery. Audrey continues her studies as a DMin student concentrating in Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary.

Session 3 writer **Denise Kettering Lane** serves as the Associate Professor of Brethren Studies and Director of the MA Program at Bethany Seminary. She is a graduate of Ashland University, Candler School of Theology, and The University of Iowa. She also serves on the Brethren Historical Committee and is the editor of *Brethren Life and Thought*.

Session 4 writers **Ilexene and Michaela Alphonse** are a pastoral team in the Atlantic Southeast District. Ilexene pastors Eglise Des Freres Miami, a Haitian multi-language congregation. Michaela pastors Miami First Church of the Brethren, an English-speaking congregation in North Miami.

Session 5 writer **Thomas Dowdy** serves as pastor of Imperial Heights Community Church of the Brethren, Los Angeles, California. A graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, he serves on the Mission and Ministry Board and Local Community Foundation Boards. He has a passion for peacebuilding and uses his musical talent as a bridge to connect all people towards a beloved community.

Session 6 writer **Gail Erisman Valeta** holds master's degrees in Theology from Bethany Theological Seminary and Conflict Resolution from the University of Denver and serves as affiliate faculty in Conflict Resolution for Regis University. She is the pastor of Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren in Colorado.

Session 7 writer **Jennifer Quijano West** is a high school Chemistry and Physics teacher and member of the Brooklyn, First Church of the Brethren in New York. Jennifer graduated from Brooklyn College and Bethany Seminary and enjoys working with youth and young adults.

Session 8 writer **Val Kline** serves as pastor of the Pleasant Chapel Church of the Brethren. A graduate of Manchester College and the Education for Shared Ministry program, Val enjoys serving with the district youth cabinet, volunteering at camp, and photography (and posting to social media)!

Session 9 writer **Ryan Cooper** is pastor of Beaver Creek Church of the Brethren in Rockingham County, Virginia. He serves as chair of the Ministerial Leadership Team for Shenandoah District, on Standing Committee, and as Vice-Chair of the Christian Growth Institute executive team, teaching both Old Testament and Biblical Interpretation.

Session 10 writer **Becky Zapata** was born in Mexico. A COVID-19 survivor, she is a wife, mother of two, grandmother of four with a passion for church growth and community engagement. She has completed the SeBAH training and is in the process of ordination with the Church of the Brethren.

Session 11 writer **Andy Hamilton** serves as pastor at Stevens Hill Community Church of the Brethren. Educated at Ashland Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and the University of St. Andrews, Scotland (M.Phil.), he taught as an adjunct instructor at Ashland Theological Seminary for 15 years.

Session 12 writer **Bobbi Dykema** holds a master's degree from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and a PhD in Art and Religion from the Graduate Theological Union. She pastors First Church of the Brethren in Springfield, Illinois, and serves on the pastoral team of the Living Stream online church.

Session 13 writer **Eric Landram** is pastor of the Litiz Church of the Brethren in Pennsylvania. He is a graduate of Bridgewater College and Bethany Seminary. Eric enjoys good music, being with friends and family, and Wilbur buds.

Our Vision, God's Vision

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To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

What is vision? Why is it important for the faith community to have vision?

Scripture Texts

Philippians 2:1-5; Luke 4:14-21

Focus Statement

Paul and Jesus hit us between the eyes with the reality that to be led with a vision we cannot be walking alone. Rather, even when circumstances are difficult, we must always walk the journey together. Both preach to firmly formed communities in their day and urge them to have a sense of redirection. This is an appropriate call for us to hear today, as we consider ourselves in our own form of the Philippian church and Nazarene synagogue. As followers of Jesus, we must be united in our vision with Christ's light leading us.

Supplies

- Candle or battery-powered light
- Blindfold for each participant
- Mini LED keychain light for each participant (*optional*)

Media Suggestions

- **Article:** [“Six Surprising Ways Jesus Changed the World”](#) by John Ortberg on Huffpost
- **Song:** *Light One Candle* by Peter, Paul and Mary; *It's About Time* by John Denver
- **Poem:** “When You're Delighted” by Deborah Ann
- **Audio:** [Philippians 2:1-5 NIV](#) audio file from BibleGateway.com
-

Room Setup:

- The room should be as dark as possible, with curtains drawn, and lights off. The only light should be a battery-powered candle or light on a center table.
- Arrange chairs in a circle, with the light or candle on a small table in the center.

Reflecting on the Texts

What is vision? Why is it important for the faith community to have vision? As we begin to think about these questions, Paul and Jesus remind us of the importance of having unity, purpose, and passion as we journey with God.

In Paul's and Jesus' day, people struggled to understand each other. Major questions of future survival and direction persisted. Concerns over one's place and that of the faith community's role in the current society were very much present. And yet, these two Spirit-led individuals still came and ministered, calling their audiences to bond together and reach out to one another in the love and joy of the Lord.

In the times in which we're living, shouldn't we want to adopt the same mentality in our local churches and our beloved denomination as sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus? As we continue his work, shouldn't we form our vision having his mind, his attitude, and his joy in our hearts? It seems such a simple concept, but it is not easy. We all have different ideas of who Jesus is and what Jesus means to us. So did the original hearers of Paul and Jesus. They were followers, yet they still needed the reminder to keep going where Jesus led them.

So is our joy in Christ complete? I attend Annual Conference year after year. I have friends with many theological understandings. I have the blessing of deep connections with family and friends in my own life. I love them all. I appreciate them all. And when I lose those connections, well frankly, something is missing.

In my mind, Paul is calling the Philippians not to miss opportunities to bond together and think of others first. As a denomination, our vision will be missing something if everyone is not coming along. We must heed Paul's call not to miss opportunities to be together and serve others. Let us encourage one another in love, compassion, mercy, and complete joy in Christ in our lives and our churches!

In Luke 4, Jesus goes back to Galilee early in his ministry and spreads the good news in various synagogues. Then a special reunion happens at Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. To the attendees, Jesus says that he is anointed to bring good news to the poor and sent by God to release captives, give sight to the blind, and free the oppressed. Jesus tells them they are tasked with that same mission. They are to work together to fulfill the vision of equality, freedom, justice, and love for all.

Jesus challenged and changed not only those in his hometown but so many others in his ministry. He fed the multitude on a hill with a boy's lunch and turned water into wine for a wedding feast. He changed the hearts of the thirsty Samaritan woman at the well and the skeptical but curious tax collector, Zacchaeus. He showed compassion for Mary and Martha as they sought the best way to serve him.

In our vision, we must have the mind, the attitude, and the joy of Jesus. We must seek to be unified in our call to serve and reach others. We must have a purpose and passion for welcoming more and more sheep to Christ, all while not assuming that anyone who disagrees with us is automatically a goat. We are simply urged to answer the call from Jesus to his disciples to go into the world and preach the gospel to every nation. Let us do so with complete joy in our hearts and with our eyes fixed on Jesus! Our best vision is his vision!

Gathering

Choose one of the following activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—How do you define vision? How might we live the qualities of Jesus, captured in the fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) for the church to form a vision? How might we work towards attaining those qualities? What gifts do you offer to contribute to the church’s vision moving forward?
- *Option 2*—Give each person a blindfold to put on. Ask them to walk around the circle of chairs or the room in their house if you meet online. Then ask, can you go outside the room and come back to where you were seated still blindfolded? Once everyone is seated again, discuss their experiences. Was it easy or difficult for you to find your seat? Did you feel alone, or did you feel the presence of others encouraging you? What feelings surfaced as you participated in this exercise?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Ask participants to blindfold themselves again to concentrate on hearing God’s word.

Luke 4:14-21

Assign readers as follows: Reader 1 as Narrator, Reader 2 as Jesus, and read the passage twice. Pause to give participants time to reflect, then ask: What words catch your ear? How might you feel if you were Jesus or an audience member in the synagogue?

Philippians 2:1-5

At least twice, play the NIV audio version of this text using the link provided in Media Suggestions. An alternative option would be for one person in the group to read the passage twice. Invite participants to share words or phrases that stood out to them as they listened.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Have participants remove their blindfolds and bring up the lights. Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- If you consider the setting and time for Paul and Jesus, how were their messages similar? How were they different?
- Later in Luke 4, we find that the hometown crowd rebuffed Jesus’ message. What might that tell us about life within that faith community? Why would that community have found Jesus’ message so challenging?
- Read Philippians 2:1-4. What struggles might the church at Philippi have faced? What vision is Paul putting in front of them amid these challenges?
- Read Luke 4:21 and Philippians 2:1. How do these passages inform the new Compelling Vision for the Church of the Brethren?
- The Luke 4 text lays out Jesus’ mission, while in Philippians 2, Paul urges his readers to take on Jesus’ attitude of humility as they continue that mission. Why do you think the Compelling Vision Team chose these two texts to begin a discussion around a vision for the church?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on today's text as you discuss the following.

- What does it mean to you to be anointed and unified with the Spirit of God?
- What does Paul mean when he says, "make my joy complete" (Philippians 2:2)? What hope is he expressing for his readers as individuals and as a community of believers?
- How can we, as individuals and as churches, consider everyone's perspective and not be oppressors to anyone in any way?
- Jesus and Paul both challenged their faith communities with their vision. How does the Compelling Vision challenge our faith community?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Read or summarize the brief article "Six Surprising Ways Jesus Changed the World" by theologian John Ortberg, listed in Media Suggestions. Discuss the following.
In these times, how might Jesus change the way we think about:
people we agree with, people we disagree with;
people who support us, people who ignore us;
people who we don't understand, or who don't understand us;
people who are privileged, people who are less fortunate;
neighbors; enemies; strangers;
and people who wonder why should I be part of the church?
- *Option 2*—Darken the room and pass the center light from one participant to another as you play the song "Light One Candle" listed in Media Suggestions. As the light is passed from one person to another, encourage participants to see the light of Jesus reflected in each brother and sister.

Sending

Share this unison blessing to close your time together.

We are Christ's ambassadors in this time. Are we joyfully ready to be vessels for change? Are we open to seeing everyone as a child of God who, even if it's hard to see it, offers a ray of Christ's light? No matter whether others say Christ and the church are dying, let us vow to live the reality that he's alive, he's shining, he's always guiding us! Let us leave shining his light in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches, with our neighbors, with strangers, with everyone we meet. When people are around us, may they see Jesus reflecting in our faces, forming our attitudes, and captured in our open minds. To God be the glory in Jesus' name. Amen!

Optional: Distribute keychain lights or mini flashlights to participants to take home as a reminder to be Christ's light throughout the week and look to that light as the source of the vision for their life and the church.

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Focus Question

What binds us together in Christian community?

Scripture Texts

1 Peter 2:9-10; Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17

Focus Statement

Whose responsibility is it to bind the Christian community together? Does God alone bind us together? Or is the formation of a Christian community solely our responsibility? When we study 1 Peter 2:9-10 and Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17, we discover that God initiates binding the faith community together, and it is the responsibility of the Christian community to maintain this bond. Both God and the people contribute to the community that gathers in Jesus' name. Jesus Christ has called us into one body, but that body is not to be taken for granted. There is plenty of work for us to do.

Supplies

- Paper and pen or pencil for each participant
- Whiteboard or newsprint with markers

Media Suggestions

- **Song:** "The Body" by Steven Curtis Chapman
- **Videos:** "[1 Peter](#)" and "[Colossians](#)" by The Bible Project (YouTube)
- **Books:** "Forgiveness: We all fail and miss the mark" and "The Body of Christ: Community of Believers" from *A Dunker Guide to Brethren Beliefs*
- **Website:** World Council of Churches resources from their annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at <https://www.oikoumene.org/>

Reflecting on the Texts

Both texts for this week's study are about forming and maintaining God's community. 1 Peter 2:9-10 names the purpose and origin of God's community, while Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17 names how a community chosen by God should act.

1 Peter 2:9-10 contains several allusions to Hebrew scripture. First is a reference to the titles given to the Israelites upon their arrival to Mount Sinai. Before giving the ten commandments to the people, God consecrates the people, calling them a *priestly kingdom* and a *holy nation* (Exodus. 19:6). Second is a reference to the prophet Hosea who symbolically named his children to represent both God's judgment and God's restorative power. God commands Hosea to marry a "wife of whoredom" as a metaphor for Israel's unfaithfulness to their God. When they have children together, he names one Lo-ruhamah, which in Hebrew means "not pitied" (Hosea 1:6) and another Lo-ammi (Hosea 1:9), which in Hebrew means "not my people." However, when God reveals plans to restore Israel, their names are changed. God will have mercy on Ruhamah, and the ones God had called "not my people" would once again become God's people.

In using these allusions to Hebrew scripture, the writer of 1 Peter wishes to convey a similar purpose to the new community gathered together in Jesus' name. Those who believe Christ Jesus are people of a new exodus, having been freed through God's mercy from slavery to sin and death. They have likewise been consecrated and brought together to be God's people. At one time, they had nothing of significance to bring them together, but through Christ, they became a people with a sacred bond. As such, they are a holy community, consecrated like those who were first brought out of Egypt by God's mighty hand. Both the Hebrew people and those who bear the name of Christ are beneficiaries of God's salvation. Faith in Christ means adoption into a heritage, a family of God's chosen ones.

The Colossians text likewise reminds followers of Christ that they are holy and beloved of God. The author of this letter tells us that we have the responsibility to reveal Christ through our living. In doing so, we maintain the bond established by our new calling—our common heritage. The community that is gathered together in Christ's name is a gift. Its strength and unity are the responsibility of the ones who have been brought together. We maintain the bond by clothing ourselves with attributes that build each other up: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (3:12). For this to be possible, we need to disrobe the things that weaken our bond: anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, and dishonesty (3:8-9).

Those who have already received mercy through Christ Jesus should be quick to extend mercy to others. And if there is any question about the attitude of Christ that binds us together, it is Christ's love manifested in his peace. A community that becomes one body is filled with gratitude, which spills over into genuine praise of God the Father.

Gathering

Choose one of the following activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Discuss: The Church of the Brethren believes that baptism is an “initiation rite into the church, the body of Christ. . . .” (*For All Who Minister: A Worship Manual for the Church of the Brethren*). Why did you decide to engage in this congregation? Why do you continue in this particular faith community?
- *Option 2*—Play a round of “would you rather” to relax and gather the group. Have participants raise hands or move to opposite sides of the room as these questions are posed. Would you rather have one really close friend or ten not so close friends? Would you rather play dodge ball with or against your pastor? Would you rather cram into a stadium for a sporting event or a theater for a concert? Would you rather worship with ten thousand people or ten people? Would you rather be famous for your Netflix comedy special or your bestselling theology book? Would you rather spend time with someone who is genuinely kind but boring or someone who is fascinating but, at times, mean?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to listen to the texts in an attitude of prayer while you guide them in this meditative reading. Participants may close their eyes and bow their heads or have their Bibles open and ready to follow along.

God of the Church and these sisters and brothers, open our ears to hear these scriptures anew. We pause in silence and make room for your Spirit to flood our consciousness.

As we read 1 Peter 2:9-10, help us connect to your stories of creating community throughout the Biblical narrative.

[Read 1 Peter 2:9-10, then pause for a moment of silence.]

As we read Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17, help us make connections to experiences in our congregation.

[Read Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17, then pause for a moment of silence.]

Lord, come alive again in our community as we engage these lessons. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- Consider the allusions in 1 Peter to Exodus 19:6 and Hosea 1:6-9. In these verses from the Old Testament, how does God bring people together? Share other biblical stories where God works to form community.
- Consider the descriptions for God's people from 1 Peter 1:9. What is the significance of each of these titles for the church? Which titles might hold special meaning for the Church of the Brethren and your local congregation?
- Both letters for this study were written to communities that were likely a mixture of Jew and Gentile. How do Peter and Paul attempt to unite these different cultures?
- Colossians 3:12-17 contains advice for maintaining Christian community despite conflict. What does this scripture teach us about forbearance? How and when ought it be used?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on today's texts as you discuss the following.

- What stories are often told by elders about your congregation? What is it about these stories of God's activity among you that bind you together as a congregation?
- What patterns, traditions, or activities does your congregation participate in that maintain and strengthen this bond? How might your congregation better strengthen these bonds? Be specific.
- Invite participants to write a brief letter to the congregation in the spirit of Colossians 3:12-17. What themes would you emphasize when writing to your community? What of Paul's advice translates well into your context? Encourage participants to read their letters aloud and discuss similarities and differences.

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Churches are a network of relationships. Each of us plays a role in the health of our union. What is one piece of advice from Colossians 3:12-17 that you need to practice more deeply in your relationships? How might you add habits and disciplines to your life that contribute to this practice?
- *Option 2*—Write a community covenant outlining the responsibilities of God and the people for maintaining a unified community. This covenant will not be a perfect statement but allow it to help you explore specific ways your congregation can grow into a healthier community. There is always room to grow. Work on this activity as a group, utilizing a whiteboard or newsprint. A covenant could look like this: "We are the Body of Christ, seeking to be united in purpose and mission. We believe God has made us one body by. . . . In pursuit of such unity, we believe it is our responsibility to. . . ."

Sending

Join in a closing prayer from the World Council of Churches materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021.

*Holy Spirit,
vivifying fire and gentle breath, come and abide in us.
Renew in us the passion for unity,
so that we may live in awareness of the bond that unites us in you.
May all who have put on Christ at their baptism,
unite and bear witness together to the hope that sustains them.
Amen.*

Who Are We?

Together, **as the Church of the Brethren**, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How does scripture and tradition inform our current denominational identity?

Scripture Texts

Matthew 22:34-40

Supplemental texts: Matthew 5-7, Matthew 25:31-45, Matthew 28:16-20, John 13:1-17, John 17:20-26, Matthew 18:15-22 (35)

Focus Statement

“For the glory of God and our neighbor’s good” has long been a phrase that Brethren have used to express the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor. This passage, Matthew 22:34-40, stands at the heart of how Brethren have tried to be disciples, obedient to the Gospel message. Examining this passage with other favorite Brethren texts reveals that this emphasis from our tradition remains strongly present in our current denominational identity. The question that Brethren have continued to struggle with over time is how these commandments best describe our interaction with our communities, both local and global.

Supplies

- Bibles or print out of key text (Matthew 22:34-40)
- Whiteboard or Newsprint
- Paper, crayons, or markers

Media Suggestions

- **Book:** *Matthew: Believers Church Commentary* by Richard B. Gardner
- **Art:** ["A Mural History of the Church of the Brethren"](#)
- **Video:** ["A Mural History of the Church of the Brethren"](#)
- **Game:** Forerunners Card Game
- **Song:** “If all you want, Lord” by Thomas H. Troeger, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #512

Reflecting on the Texts

The words “For the Glory of God and Our Neighbor’s Good” reportedly hung on the wall in Christopher Sauer’s colonial American printing shop in Germantown, Pennsylvania. While Sauer himself was not Brethren, his close ties to the early Brethren allowed the phrase to become ingrained in our hearts, minds, and communities. At graduations from Bethany Theological Seminary, this phrase is a part of the charge that the president gives as students receive diplomas. The phrase also frequently appears in our periodicals and history books, a constant reminder of our core values as Brethren.

At its root, this phrase that encompasses so much of Brethren tradition and identity reflects the scripture passage from Matthew 22:34-40. In this passage, the Pharisees are once again questioning Jesus, continuing a pattern throughout Matthew’s gospel. The Pharisees often appear in Matthew as Jesus’ fiercest critics, who challenge him on many points of the law. This particular text falls within a series of debates Jesus was having with religious leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees, around common issues of the day. Here, one of the Pharisees questions Jesus about which commandment is the greatest. This question was not unusual in Jesus’ time as there was much debate around the significance and importance of different parts of the law. By asking Jesus this question, the Pharisees invite him to engage in an ongoing debate. Jesus responds by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 or the command to love God with one’s whole being. When questioned about the second greatest command, he responds by citing Leviticus 19:18 about love of neighbor. According to Rick Gardner in his *Matthew* commentary, Jesus linked these two passages together in a way that was unique in first-century Judaism (329). Jesus emphasizes that everything in the law and prophets that corresponds with these two commands is valid.

At the heart of these texts is the notion of obedience. Loving God with one’s whole being creates a desire to obey God’s commandments. Loving God with one’s whole being leads to loving our neighbor more fully. However, this does beg the question, how do we know what loving God looks like? And, of course, there is the critical question of who exactly is our neighbor?

Brethren have typically interpreted love of God and neighbor through reading the teachings of Jesus found in other Gospel texts. These teachings give indications of what living out love of God and neighbor look like in the world. Brethren have used other scripture to interpret and enliven this key passage about the two great commandments. Primary among these texts has been Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. These texts, full of ethical teachings, have served as guiding texts for Brethren positions on peace and discipleship. Matthew 25:31-45 has likewise informed Brethren attitudes towards mutual aid and service in its encouragement to feed the hungry, take care of the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger. Matthew 18:15-22 has provided a way to deal with conflict among neighbors all with the aim of trying to achieve the unity that Jesus prays for in John 17:20-26. These texts have formed a backbone of belief and practice for Brethren, who have sought to live in obedience to these commandments.

Matthew 22:34-40 provides a framework for Brethren belief and practice that remains critical to denominational identity today. The question that remains for congregations and the denomination is how our worship and ministry live out the commandments for the glory of God and our neighbor’s good.

Gathering

Introduce the theme of today's session using one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—What scripture passages do you think have been central to Brethren life in the past and today? Why do you think those texts are so important?
- *Option 2*—Invite participants to draw a scene from Brethren history or an image that they associate with the Church of the Brethren. Allow 5-7 minutes for drawing. Invite participants to share their creations, what biblical passage they might associate it with, and why it is significant.

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Read the text using a modified *lectio divina*. Have all participants read Matthew 22:34-40 silently, using either their own Bible or a handout of the key text. Provide 3-5 minutes for participants to read the text silently. Invite them to read slowly and note words or phrases that jump out in the passage.

Next, have a volunteer read the passage slowly out loud. Invite listeners to focus on the words or phrases that stand out to them.

Invite participants to take turns sharing the words or phrases that stood out to them in the passage. Leaders can list these words or phrases on a whiteboard or newsprint. If meeting online, the leader could list key words or phrases using a document share. Invite participants to spend 2-3 minutes in silent contemplation of the list and their own reflections.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's text(s) with these questions.

- Jesus uniquely combines these two commandments in ways that differentiated him from his contemporaries. Why do you think that Jesus identified these commandments as the two most important commandments? What might that tell us about Jesus' life, ministry, and mission?
- How do you understand the relationship between the command to love God and neighbor? As a Christian, how does loving God and neighbor show up in everyday living?
- Where do you find yourself in this passage? Where do you find the Church of the Brethren in this passage?
- What other texts do you think inform or enhance our understanding of Matthew 22:34-40? What light do these other texts shed on the great commandments? Why did you select those texts? (Feel free to use the list of accompanying texts above.)
- Earlier generations of Brethren interpreted these passages as a way to be obedient to the Gospel. What does it mean to be obedient to the Gospel in the 21st century? How do you feel about the concept of obedience? Why? How does this passage help us understand obedience?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Either in small groups or a whole group, make a list of ministries in which your church participates. Consider ministries in your local congregation, district, and the denomination. You may also want to include ecumenical or interfaith ministries. Think about ministering to members (worship, education, visitation, etc.) as well as outreach ministries (food pantry, disaster ministry, etc.).

Then go through your list and label whether you think that each ministry demonstrates love of God most prominently, love of neighbor, or both.

Share your lists if you were in small groups. How do you think the Church of the Brethren lives out these two commandments in its ministries? Do Brethren tend to emphasize loving God or loving neighbor more? Or are they held in a balance? Looking at your lists, which do you emphasize more? If you see an imbalance, how might you correct it? What new ministries might you engage with or begin that would demonstrate love of God and neighbor? Where is God leading you?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—What are two ways that you can live out love for God and neighbor this week in your life or community? What do you need to do in order to make these two things happen?
- *Option 2*—Divide into groups of 3-4 people and brainstorm for 2-3 minutes how you might enliven or develop a current or new ministry in your congregation to better exemplify love of God and neighbor. Come back together as a whole group and share ideas. Pick one idea and develop an action plan to work on in the coming week about how together you can make the ministry be more “for the glory of God and our neighbor’s good.”

Sending

Close with the hymn, “If all you want, Lord” by Thomas H. Troeger, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #512.

If the group is hesitant to sing the hymn, consider reading it as a litany or use it as a closing prayer.

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Focus Question

What does it mean to be spiritually passionate?

Scripture Texts

Matthew 5:14-16; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Focus Statement

Being spiritually passionate means having a palpable enthusiasm informed by God's Word and evidenced by obedience to Jesus Christ. The purpose behind this spiritual passion is not self-glorification or selfish satisfaction. This spiritual passion, or zeal, exists to bring glory to God and bless others by supplying their needs. Being spiritually passionate draws others to see God's goodness through Jesus Christ.

Supplies

- Internet-connected device
- Paper, pens, or pencils

Media Suggestions

- **Books:** *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of Jericho* by Timothy Keller; *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* by Timothy Keller
- **Songs:** "Heart with Loving Heart United" by Nicolaus L. von Zinzendorf; "[This Little Light of Mine](#)" by Mutual Kumquat; "[Establish the Work of Our Hands](#)" by Porter's Gate Worship Project (YouTube)
- **Videos:** "[READ, THINK, PRAY, REST: A Simple Approach to Lectio Divina](#)" by Tricia Rhodes; "[Lectio Divina](#)" by Unhurried Living; "[Know Your Why](#)" by Michael Jr. Comedy

Reflecting on the Texts

"...they put [the light] on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:15-16

In a dark room, the smallest light draws attention. A pinch of salt can enhance the flavor of food.

Using these two common concepts, Jesus gives us an idea of what it means to be spiritually passionate. Being spiritually passionate means having an observable zeal, or an enthusiasm, directed by the Holy Spirit for the same things that God is passionate about (Matthew 22:37-39). This kind of zeal is informed by God's Word (Jesus) and radiates from within. It manifests itself in how we live, and it affects our surroundings. Like salt with food, this spiritual passion preserves and enriches its environment. Much like a lit candle in a dark room, this spiritual passion is ignited by Christ to provide illumination and warmth for those who are in the dark and cold.

"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." 2 Corinthians 9:12

Spiritual passion, or zeal, that honors God does not exist for itself, but is to be shared. Salt is still salt even if it loses its flavor and is no longer useful. Light that is too intense can cause irreparable damage (think cancer) or blind those around it rather than help them see. A person with spiritual passion guided by the Holy Spirit considers context and others' needs to be effective in bringing glory to God.

It is important to remember that salt and light have distinct characteristics that set them apart from each other. Salt is a mineral. Visible light is electromagnetic radiation. They are not the same, yet the nature of both profoundly impacts our lives on earth. Each of us is unique and wonderfully made by God, the Creator (Psalm 139:14). Because Christ's nature is at work within us, we can live out that nature in an expression that is authentic to how God has fashioned us.

"...others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ. . . ." 2 Corinthians 9:13

Spiritual passion is observed through obedient action to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Period.

"And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." 2 Corinthians 9:8

Spiritual passion is often dampened by the idea of being consumed with nothing left to offer. Burnout is a real thing felt by many. Spiritual passion is also dampened by the idea of scarcity—not having enough (fill in the blank). Amid the reality of burnout and scarcity, one must look to God. Zeal for the things of God should consume us, but we must turn to God often for replenishment. God's replenishment can come in the form of material goods, extra hands to help, and rest. We do well accept these blessings so that we can continue every good work God has for us to do.

Gathering

Choose one of these options to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—What is your passion in life? How does your life give evidence of this passion? In the eyes of your family, what is your passion? If your answer and your family's answer are not the same, explain the difference. Consider the statement: "Following your passion is a very me-centered view of the world." How can this statement be false? How can this statement be true?
- *Option 2*—Before the session, gather a lighter and candles of various sizes and colors—enough for each person to light a candle. Arrange the candles in a designated space that all can see. Before the session, light one candle. Open the session by singing along with the music "This Little Light of Mine" by Mutual Kumquat (see Media Suggestions). While singing, invite participants to take turns lighting a candle. At the end of the song, say a prayer thanking God for Jesus, the source of our light.

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Engage the scripture through contemplative reading. Lectio Divina is a form of contemplative reading that incorporates prayer, meditation, and contemplation between multiple readings of the scripture. Refer to videos in Media Suggestions on the steps of Lectio Divina, if needed. Lead your group through the following steps, reading the passages aloud, asking the questions, and allowing time for participants to reflect in between.

Step 1: Read Matthew 5:14-16 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 aloud slowly and deliberately. What word or phrase stands out to you? Hold that word or phrase in your heart and mind.

Step 2: Reflect. Read the passages aloud again. Why do you think this particular word or phrase stood out to you? What does it bring to mind? How does it connect to what is going on in your life right now?

Step 3: Respond. Read the passages aloud again. Ask what God is calling you to do through this word or phrase. Pray for God's wisdom to guide you.

Step 4: Rest. Let yourself rest in God's presence. Listen for what God is saying to you through this time of reading and reflection.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- In reflecting on Matthew 5:13-16, what reason does Jesus give us for why we should be salt and light?
- What qualities of salt and light help us understand how Jesus wants us to make a difference in the world around us?
- In 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, what phrases does Paul use to stir passion in the hearts of the Corinthians for the work Christ is calling them to?
- According to Paul, why should we be passionate about serving?
- When have you experienced burnout or fear related to a sense of scarcity? How do these, or other passages, help us maintain our passion (retain our flavor, keep our light burning bright)?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Watch the video "Know Your Why" by Michael Jr. Comedy (see link in Media Suggestions). Divide your group into pairs or triads to reflect on the video and share their thoughts.

Then, invite participants to consider these statements:

"The first time I asked him to sing, he knew what he was doing. The second time, he knew why he was doing it. When you know your "why", your "what" becomes more impactful because you're walking in or towards your purpose."—Michael Jr.

"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."—Matthew 5:16

Is your "why" the same as Jesus' "why"? Is your "what" the same as Jesus' "what"? What about the "why" and "what" of your congregation?

In prayer, ask God to align your "why" and "what" to Jesus' standards, personally and as a congregation. Ask for clarity and guidance from the Holy Spirit for a renewed sense of purpose and spiritual fervor.

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Consider the statement: "When you go through life, what you'll find is what you take out of the world over time—be it money, cars, stuff, accolades—is much less important than what you've put into the world. So my recommendation would be to follow your contribution. Find the thing that you're great at, put that into the world, contribute to others, help the world be better and that is the thing to follow."—Ben Horowitz, Commencement Address at Columbia University (2015)

Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and discuss the following. What has God equipped you to be great at? Reflect on your life experiences, skills, education, and background to formulate your answer. *Remember that what you were well-equipped to do in your 20s may not be the same as what you're well equipped to do in your 40s, 60s, or 80s. How will you use it to honor God and bless your community?

- *Option 2*—Write or sketch how you plan to live out what you have heard and discerned from the session. Allow sufficient time for reflecting, writing, and drawing. Write down one thing you can do within three days to ignite or renew your spiritual passion or that of your congregation.

Sending

Pray for everyone gathered and the communities they represent. End the session with the song "Heart with Loving Heart United," in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #420.

Radical Transformation

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share **the radical transformation** and holistic peace **of Jesus Christ** through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

What does it mean to be radically transformed through Jesus Christ?

Scripture Texts

John 3:5-7; Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 12:1-2

Focus Statement

The Christmas season is my favorite time of the year. It reminds me of the most significant radical transformation of all time when God became flesh for our benefit. This transformation, also known as incarnation, is beyond human comprehension; we accept it by faith or reject it. The next most significant radical transformation is God living inside us, daily converting us for the new kingdom.

Supplies

- Internet-connected device
- Copies of the handout on page 25
- Pens, pencils, markers or crayons

Tip: According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, radical is "having a profound or far-reaching effect." Transformation means "a complete or major change in someone or something's appearance, form, etc."

Media Suggestions

- **Videos:** [“The Poinsettia: Jesus' Life Story in a Plant”](#) by United Methodist Videos; [“Caterpillar Transforming into a Butterfly”](#) by In the Know; [“Growing Sunflower Time Lapse”](#) by Boxlapse
- **Poem:** “Though I Am Born Again” by Deborah Ann Belka
- **Song:** [“In the Bulb There Is a Flower”](#) by Natalie Sleeth, sung by Ashley Wagner Arts (YouTube)

Reflecting on the Texts

John 3:5-7 – New Birth - Transformed from Above

Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who came to Jesus at night, asking a profound and pressing question about entering the Kingdom of God. He was earnest about knowing what he needed to do. Maybe he thought coming to Jesus away from the other leaders would give him an edge on how to get into the Kingdom of God. Jesus replies to Nicodemus that the only way to enter the kingdom is through the radical transformation of being born again. To be reborn was confusing to Nicodemus as he asked Jesus how this physically could be done.

Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know that radical transformation of rebirth only comes from God. There is no shortcut to enter into the Kingdom of God. The process is very different than our normal way of thinking. We can't enter the kingdom by our human effort or ingenuity. It is a spiritual transformation that comes from God alone. Our responsibility is to faithfully align ourselves with God's process to be spiritually reborn.

Galatians 2:15-21 – Accepting the New Birth

Paul's radical transformation occurred on the Damascus road in Acts 9. After his encounter with Jesus, Paul understood that he had lived for the law, which was different from what God intended. Paul spoke of himself as chief of all sinners because he lived and did what he thought was right. Paul was determined to live by the law as a faithful and dedicated Jew. He believed that the law was the only way Jews could become the kingdom people of God. But God had a better way for Paul to spend the rest of his life. When Jesus confronted him on the Damascus road, Paul's mind became regenerated, and he became a radically transformed, faithful follower of Jesus Christ, caring for all people.

Paul's radical transformation provided him with three important insights. After God opened Paul's spiritual eyes, he could see his mistakes and cautioned others to avoid doing the same. Second, Paul recognized although he made great mistakes against Jesus, Jesus' love was unconditional. Third, Paul's transformation caused him to rededicate his life, reaching out to Gentiles and Jews for the Kingdom of God.

Romans 12:1-2 – Submitting All for Jesus

In his appeal to the Romans, Paul urged them to be a living sacrifice for Jesus, submitting their whole being—body, mind, soul, and spirit. The outcome would be pleasing to God. God is merciful to all humankind. Although we are all sinners saved by God's grace, our spiritual and physical response is to submit to God. God's act of mercy and grace comes out of God's LOVE for all humankind.

To be non-conforming to the world system requires an act of God in us. God knows that we are challenged every day with temptations to conform to the world around us, so God equips us with the Holy Spirit to guide our daily decisions. Although we can choose to submit to this guidance, God provides us with this guidance to aid us in our kingdom seeking. The reality is that when we submit all of ourselves to God in sacrificing time, talent, and desires, we begin our radical transformation into a love experience that transforms our action into true worship.

Gathering

Choose one of these activities to introduce the theme of the session.

- *Option 1*—Invite participants to share examples of where they see radical transformation in nature. Does this transformation take place slowly or is it more immediate? Does it happen in darkness, in the light, or both?
- *Option 2*—Watch one of the two time-lapse videos listed in Media Suggestions. What is the nature of the radical transformation taking place in the video? What do these transformative processes in nature tell us about how God might work in us?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to listen to the texts in an attitude of prayer while you guide them in this meditative reading. Participants may close their eyes or have their Bibles open and ready to follow along.

Loving God, open our ears to hear these scriptures anew. We pause in silence to allow your Word to transform us.

As we read John 3:5-7, open our hearts to being born anew by the power of your Spirit.

[Read John 3:5-7, then pause for a moment of silence]

As we read Galatians 2:15-21, open our lives so that Christ may live in us.

[Read Galatians 2:15-21, then pause for a moment of silence]

As we read Romans 12:1-2, open our minds that we may be transformed.

[Read Romans 12:1-2, then pause for a moment of silence]

Lord, transform our minds, our hearts, and our lives that we may be a living sacrifice for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's texts using these questions.

- How do you see yourself in these three texts—as the main character, the receiver of the instruction, or the audience? With whom do you most identify?
- Nicodemus was a devout Jew, committed to the law. How was his thinking transformed as he listened to Jesus answer his questions? What was so radical and new about Jesus' teaching?
- In the Galatians text, Paul calls out Peter for forcing Gentiles to follow Jewish laws and customs. What arguments did Paul use to counter Peter's opposition?
- Paul gives encouragement to the members of the church at Rome because he knows the pressure they face on a daily basis to conform to the world rather than the will of God. He urges them to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” How do you think that happens? What resources or guidance does God provide to aid in this transformation? How does this transformation help them resist the pressure to conform to the world?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on the meaning of the texts using these questions.

- How has your radical, transformed life allowed you to see your mistakes in life? How can you use those mistakes to help others live a better experience in Jesus?
- In your commitment to follow Jesus, what confrontations have you encountered?
- Paul's radical transformation caused him to reach out to all people. How can you do the same today? How will you deal with the internal opposition of acceptance of all people within the church or family?
- What does it mean for you, or your faith community, to be a living sacrifice? What do you, or your faith community, need to let go of to become a living sacrifice?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Distribute copies of the handout on page 25. Read the information provided about the poinsettia and discuss the following questions.
 - Invite participants to share their own experiences of radical transformation. Was your transformation immediate, or, like the poinsettia, did it take a while? In what ways is it still ongoing?
 - How did your encounter with the risen Christ impact your daily life? Your relationships? Your overall outlook on life?
 - When have you seen this radical transformation take place within a faith community? In what ways did the church's transformation impact its community?
- *Option 2*—Distribute copies of the handout on page 25 along with markers or crayons. Invite participants to write words or phrases on the leaves of the poinsettia to remind them of the challenge given in today's texts. Play the song listed in Media Suggestions as participants reflect on today's texts and the discussion of radical transformation.

Sending

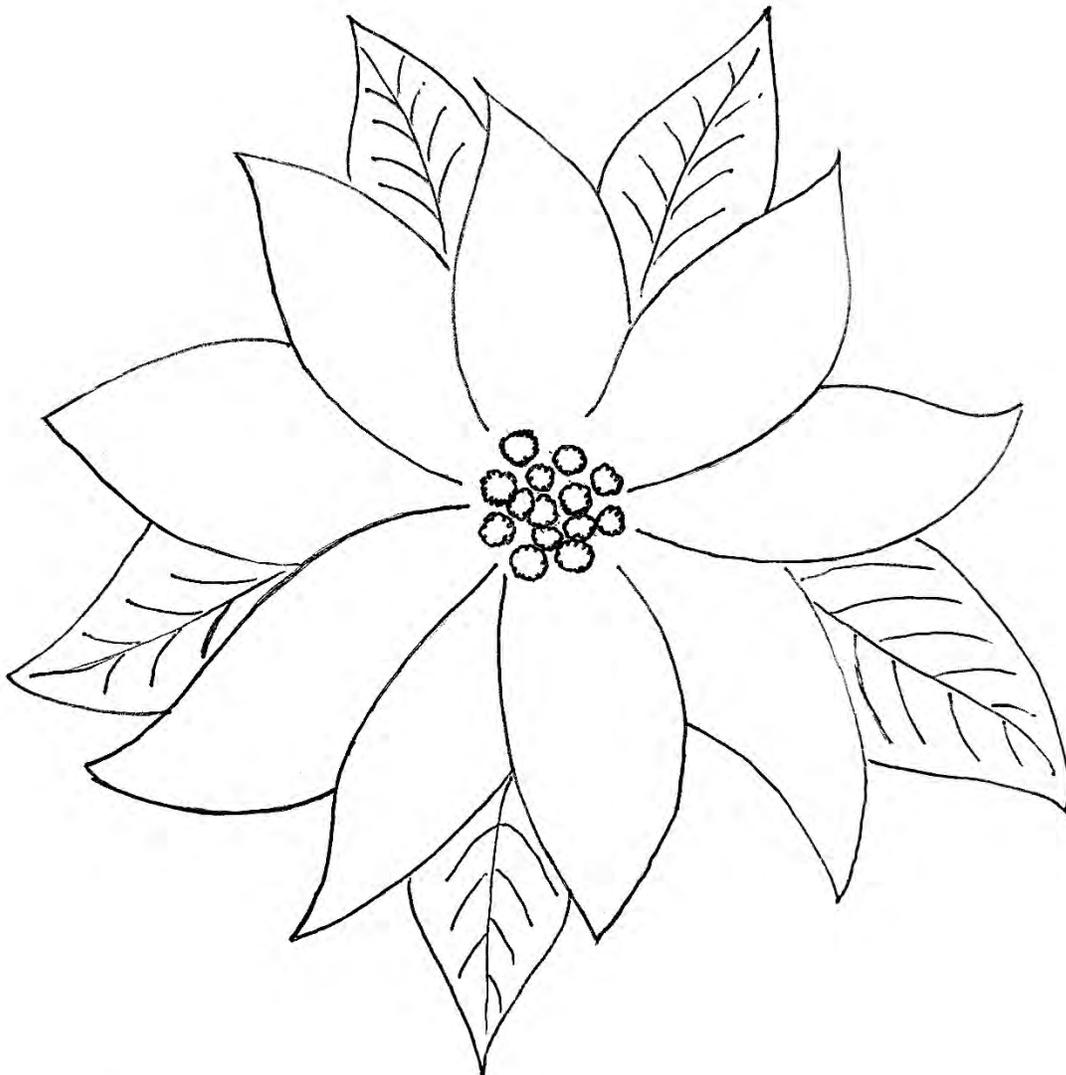
Close your time together with prayer.

Dear Lord, we thank you for salvation based on your love for us. Help us to be faithful followers of your intent and purpose for your church. As we seek your kingdom, transform our hearts, minds, and lives to be open and loving to you and those around us. Please give us the strength and courage to face opposition with wisdom and loving guidance. Amen.

The Poinsettia: A Symbol of Radical Transformation

Most people love to have a poinsettia plant during the Christmas season. For most of the year, the leaves are green like common plants and go unnoticed. However, around early October, the leaves start to change from dark green to red. When the process is complete, it becomes a unique, attractive red plant that accentuates the holiday season. Christians can liken the poinsettia's transformation to our Christian process. We start like everyone else, but when the conditions are right and set by God, we are radically transformed, which dictates our actions for the world to notice.

Like the poinsettia plant displayed at Christmas time, the church is on display to the rest of the world. When acting out its intended purpose, the church radiates God's beauty through its act of LOVE developed within. This display occurs after the church experiences the radical transformation that brings about development and growth. The key is for the church to persevere daily. As we go through our personal transformation, we eventually become one of the bright leaves on the branches of the loving community tree of God.



Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and **holistic peace of Jesus Christ** through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

What is the nature of the holistic peace of Jesus Christ, and how are we called to embody it?

Scripture Texts

Matthew 5:9, 38-48; Ephesians 2:11-22; Micah 4:1-5

Focus Statement

The Church of the Brethren holds an understanding of peace that the world needs so very much. We have declared that “All war is sin.” Yet, the holistic peace of Jesus Christ goes far beyond war to touch on all aspects of life. We live in the tension between personal peacemaking and systemic peacemaking (addressing systems, policies, and procedures that perpetuate a lack of shalom). Because both lessons are taught by Jesus Christ, and both are important, we have the opportunity in a divided world to bring about justice with peace for all God’s children and all God’s creation.

Supplies

- Prepared cookie batter, bag of chocolate chips
- Newsprint or whiteboard
- Markers
- Internet-connected device

Media Suggestions

- **Books:** *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* by Drew I.G. Hart or view [Drew Hart’s presentation at NOAC](#), starting at 19:00
- **Video:** [RAWtools: Gardening with Guns](#) (YouTube)
- **Articles:** *Messenger*, “Choosing to be Black and Brethren,” by Eric Bishop, May 2019; *Christian Century*, “Why do Christians protest?” by Benjamin D. Wayman, November 2020.
- **Song:** [“We Are One in the Spirit”](#) by Mark Swayze Band (YouTube)

Tip: “Holistic” is defined as “the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.” **Holistic peace** illustrates the Hebrew concept of **shalom**, or **total well-being** (which includes wholeness of persons and all of God’s creation). **Personal peacemaking** represents the peace of Christ that the world cannot give and the world cannot take away (John 14:27). **Systemic peacemaking** represents the systems, policies, and procedures that call forth a society or “Kingdom of Heaven here on earth” that promotes justice and peace for all.

Reflecting on the Texts

Who was Jesus talking to in these scriptures found in Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel?

Evidently, people were following Jesus, and crowds gathered when word got out that he had paused in his travels to speak with them (Matthew 4:24-25). In came the sick with all sorts of diseases and pains, as well as great crowds from Galilee and other countries to hear his sermon. The first thing that Jesus does for this crowd is to bless the people who are not usually blessed. There is no blessing for the rich, powerful, successful, and sophisticated.

Jesus did say some earth-shaking things like "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (5:9). This is one example of the *Upside Down Kingdom* that Mennonite author Donald Kraybill invites us to see. This demonstration of "another way of living" allows the ways of heaven to come bursting in upon earth.

Our peacemaking did not die out with Jesus' death. This has been one of the treasured gifts that we have helped shape for the times we live in and passed on to each generation of Brethren. Not only a historic peace church, the Church of the Brethren is called to be a Justice with Peace church. (See Eric Bishop's article in the May issue of *Messenger*, p. 10-13).

What else did Jesus say? "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. . .'" (Matthew 5:38 ff) Theologian Walter Wink (*When the Powers Fall*) offers a different twist regarding how the crowd might have understood those words of Jesus. It was not a call to be a wimp. It was a justice wake-up call!

Turning the other cheek to a "superior" who has backhanded an "inferior" is an act of defiance, not submission; stripping naked when a creditor demands one's outer garment brings down shame on the head of the creditor for causing the poor debtor's nakedness; . . . (Matt. 5:39-41). These acts do not *at all* mean acquiescing passively in evil, but are a studied and deliberate way of seizing the initiative and overthrowing evil by the force of its own momentum. (9)

Howard Thurman, author, student of Gandhi, and Christian theologian, was a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr and thousands of men and women. While in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) with a student-to-student "friendship delegation," he was asked by a Hindu man,

"What are you doing here? More than three hundred years ago (now 400 years) your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Why are you, a black man, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition?"

In *For the Inward Journey*, Thurman explained that Jesus grew up in the Roman empire as part of the underprivileged, non-powerful disinherited. Those who are also disinherited know, "Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage, for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred. . . need have no dominion over them." (133)

Perhaps this is the treasure that Jesus asks us to share which helps bring about holistic peace!

Gathering

Choose one of these activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Invite participants to imagine two strands of a rope. One strand represents the personal peace that we can experience in relationship with Jesus. A second strand represents systemic peace experienced in society's systems, policies, and structures that promote justice and peace. Which of these two understandings of peace do you think is stronger in your life? In our church? How does weaving these two understandings of peace together make our witness to the world stronger?
- *Option 2*—Holistic means "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Set out prepared cookie batter and a bag of chocolate chips. Ask participants if they prefer having the batter baked with or without the chocolate chips mixed in. What do the chocolate chips add to the cookies (texture, flavor)? How do you think the cookies will taste without the chocolate chips (bland, salty)? Many ingredients make up the Hebrew concept of shalom or holistic peace (note the tip on page 26). What happens to our peace witness as the Church of the Brethren if some of those ingredients are missing?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Share today's text using the "Good News and Good Trouble" Scripture Jam on page 30. You will need three readers.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's texts using these questions.

- Why do you think people traveled 70 to 100 miles on foot to see Jesus? Check out Matthew 4:23-25. What lack of peace in their lives might have motivated them to seek Jesus? What motivates you to seek the holistic peace of Christ?
- Watch the 3-minute "RAWtools: Gardening with Guns" video listed in Media Suggestions. How does this almost literal interpretation of the Micah passage of beating "swords into plowshares" apply to Jesus' idea of holistic peace in today's world? In your neighborhood?
- In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul says that Christ has made Christians and Gentiles into one group, "breaking down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." While Christ has accomplished this work, what is our responsibility?
- Using newsprint or a whiteboard and markers, make a list of issues that divide people today. Highlight in yellow issues that are best addressed within personal relationships? Highlight in green those issues that need a more systemic approach. What difference might it make if we addressed these divisive issues with holistic peacemaking? In what ways might this counteract negative stereotypes of Christianity that turn people away?
- What insights and tools from today's texts nurture a sense of Christ's peace that passes all understanding? What insights and tools from today's texts might help us tear down divisions in our own families? In our church family? Our community? Concerning the ongoing global pandemic? Concerning the care of God's creation and the ongoing climate crisis?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on the meaning of the texts using these questions.

- The Howard Thurman quote in *Reflecting on the Texts* speaks about the disinherited. Who are the disinherited in Jesus' day? In your neighborhood or our society today? What would holistic peace look like for those who are disinherited or outsiders? Invite participants to share stories from their lives or your congregation about welcoming and including someone considered an outsider.
- In what ways does the vision of holistic peace inspire you? In a world that attempts to undermine our personal sense of peace and create divisions, what Church of the Brethren "treasures" of holistic peace would you want to introduce or re-introduce into your daily life? Or pass along to the world?
- In the November 4, 2020 edition of *Christian Century* magazine, Benjamin D. Wayman writes, "Our faith does not align with any political party, but our politics displays how we choose to live together. As Christians, we are commanded to live with our neighbor in love, pray for our enemies, and bless those that persecute us. It's a peculiar politics, but it's the politics of the kingdom of God." (25) How would living out this "peculiar politics" change your daily life, your interactions with neighbors and co-workers, or even life within your faith community?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Congressman John Lewis challenged justice and peacemakers to get into "Good Trouble." Describe how your congregation or our denomination has accomplished "Good Trouble" in the past. If you or your church community wanted to start a new "Good Trouble Initiative" inspired by the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), what would be the first step that you could take?
- *Option 2*—Invite participants to think about how they might illustrate the concept of holistic peace or shalom. One famous example is the painting *Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks. Provide art supplies for individuals or groups to create their own illustration of shalom. Allow time for people to share their creations.

Sending

Challenge participants to look for ways to be a holistic peacemaker, chipping away at dividing walls this week. Close your time together by singing or listening to "We Are One in the Spirit" (see lyric video link in Media Suggestions).

Good News and Good Trouble

Voice 1: Hear the Good News of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount.

Voice 2: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Voice 3: If we are called “children of God” does that mean we will look like God?

Voice 1: Does that mean we will all have white hair and beards?

Voice 2: Of course not. But we might learn that the Hebrew word “Shalom” means total well-being. And we might start implementing new ideas on how to be God’s children.

Voice 1: Does this mean that we might get into Good Trouble, as God’s children, like Congressman John Lewis learned from his Christian mother and father?

Voice 2: Well, the Sermon on the Mount does say, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Voice 3: So, what do peacemaking children of God do anyway?

Voice 1: In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says we get to build up the kingdom by tearing down the dividing walls.

Voice 2: I love tearing down stuff.

Voice 3: And then you get to replace all that hostility with shalom: total well-being, peace that passes all understanding, caring for all God’s creation, and belonging in the family of God.*

Voice 1: Just like Jesus taught us.

Voice 2: Good Trouble. Like turning the other cheek and getting into Good Trouble by sharing another way of living.

Voice 3: Like the prophet Micah said:

Voice 1: They will beat their swords into plowshares.

Voice 2: And their spears into pruning hooks.

Voice 3: nation shall not lift up sword against nation.

Voice 1: Neither shall they learn war anymore.

Voice 2: But they shall all sit under their own vine and fig tree.

Voice 3: And no one shall make them afraid.

Voice 1: Do justice.

Voice 2: Love mercy.

Voice 3: Walk humbly with God!

*Psalm 122:6, Philipians 4:7, Psalm 24:1, Ephesians 2:19

Session 7 *Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer*

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of **Jesus Christ** through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How do we understand Jesus as Redeemer?

Scripture Texts

Exodus 6:6-8; Colossians 1:13-14

Focus Statement

From the start of the biblical narrative, it is clear that humanity is in need of redemption. We can see God's redemption in many stories but in particular within the history of the Israelites. God redeems Israel from the bondage of Egypt and their periods of exile. God later sends into the world a son, Jesus, that will redeem the nations through his blood sacrifice and set the example of how to care for the slave, the weak and vulnerable, the children and family, and those who are treated unjustly. This serves as our model as we envision the role of the Christian disciple and the Church as it continues to follow Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

Supplies

- Internet-connected device
- Newsprint or whiteboard
- Markers
- Four posters

Media Suggestions

- **Video:** ["What's A Kinsman-Redeemer?" by Daily Grace 459](#) (YouTube)
- **Article:** [Jesus the Messiah in the Four Cups of Passover](#), Chosen People Ministries
- **Songs:** [Since I Have Been Redeemed | Accompaniment](#); [Redeemed How I Love To Proclaim It](#); [Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It! | Accompaniment](#)

Reflecting on the Texts

The Easton's Bible Dictionary defines Redeemer as one who has “the duty of restoring the rights of another and avenging his wrongs.” The Hebrew Bible referred to such a person as “go’el,” the one who “go’al” or redeems. The word for redeem or redemption appears about 149 times alone in the First Testament and is an essential theme in the Israelites history. A “go’el” was one who would serve as a protector in four main aspects illustrated and named in scripture.

- A redeemer is one who would care for a slave and restore their freedom (Leviticus 25:48).
- A redeemer is one who would care for the weak and the vulnerable (Proverbs 23:11; Jeremiah 50:34).
- A redeemer is one who would step in to care for a widow or an orphaned child (Ruth).
- Finally, a redeemer is one who often offers blood as atonement for sins (Leviticus 17:11).

In the First Testament it is clear that God or YHWH serves as this redeemer as Israel is redeemed from Egyptian bondage, exile, and as their sins are atoned through the shedding of sacrificial blood (Exodus 6:6-8). Hundreds of years later we can see that these illustrations of God as Redeemer directly foreshadow the life, ministry and death of Jesus as he restores justice, cares for the weak and vulnerable, tends to the children, redefines roles in marriage and social power dynamics, and lays down his own life.

In the Second Testament, the book of Colossians, we encounter a church community who has fully accepted this message of hope and deliverance through Jesus Christ but Paul writes to them from prison to encourage them on the next phase of their spiritual journey and prays for their understanding and wisdom. Here the church at Colossae is being constantly pressured by the predominant religions of the time, Greek Polytheism and Judaism via the Torah, and Paul wants to encourage them to stay steadfast and dedicated to Jesus’ mission. “The Messiah is in you all, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

Paul encourages the young church to keep living into the new humanity, ordained by Jesus to be merciful, generous, forgiving, and loving. He redefines the roles of the household—wife and husband, parent and child, slave and master. He provides an outline for them to reshape their Roman ways into the ways of the Redeemer who embodies a love that is self-giving. He reminds them that a life following Jesus means no part of human life goes untouched from his merciful and liberating rule. He has now experienced their suffering, their temptations to compromise their beliefs and morality and even the social dynamics of power.

Paul’s plea to the church at Colossae through Jesus’ example echoes God’s own actions as redeemer to care for the freedom of the slave, care for the weak and vulnerable, care for children and family, and bring justice to those who have been wronged. It is in Colossians 1:13-14 that we are again reminded that God has redeemed us from darkness and has brought into the Kingdom where sins are forgiven and justice restored. Paul reminds the church that they can be a new creation in their present time. I believe these words reverberate to us now in our present time. We must continue to represent God’s redemptive love, in all we do as a body in Christ, our Redeemer, and hold steadfast to our joined vision as God’s Church. Amen.

Gathering

As Christians, we feel great joy following a risen Savior who we proudly call our “redeemer” and friend. We sing songs expressing our joy and proclaiming we are cleansed of our sins because of this precious gift. As you begin this study of Jesus as Redeemer, reflect on what the words “redemption” or “redeemed” mean to you personally before diving into their biblical meanings and contexts. Choose one of these options to introduce today’s theme.

- *Option 1*—What does it mean for you to be redeemed? Using newsprint or a whiteboard, create a list of words that describe redemption. Reflect on how Jesus’ life, ministry and death have led to our redemption.
- *Option 2*—Listen to the popular hymn, “Redeemed How I Love to Proclaim It” (see links in Media Suggestions). Reflect on the following questions in small groups and allow time for sharing. What words or phrases stand out to you? What makes you feel joy about the word redemption or being redeemed? Why is redemption important to you?

For more on the author’s understanding of and personal experience of redemption, see “The Author’s Testimony” on page 35.

Discovering God’s Story and Vision

In Exodus, we see God acting as redeemer as God answers the cry of the Israelite slaves in Egypt and sends Moses as a leader and advocate to represent them before Pharaoh. In Colossians, Paul is writing to the church with encouragement that they seek wisdom and spiritual understanding to hold steadfast in their trials and become a new humanity in Christ, their Redeemer. In *Reflecting on the Texts*, the writer names four aspects of the role of the “go’el” or the redeemer.

1. Care for and give freedom to the slave.
2. Care for the weak and vulnerable (See the video listed in Media Suggestions for a description of the Kinsman-Redeemer in the story of Ruth as an illustration of this aspect of redemption).
3. Care for children, marriage and family heritage.
4. Avenging wrongs and restoring rights.

Have volunteers read Exodus 6:6-8 and Colossians 1:13-14 while keeping in mind these characteristics of the “go’el.”

Exploring God’s Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts with these questions.

- Name where in the texts you see language pointing to any of the four characteristics. What similarities in language are there between the two passages?
- With Jesus as our Redeemer, what is our role as disciples through the authority given in the great commission (Matt 28:16-20)?
- What does a church look like and what does a church do when it is committed to restoring justice and caring for the weak and vulnerable?
- Colossians speaks of a new humanity that embodies mercy, generosity, forgiveness and love. What might this new humanity look like to you?
- What about Jesus’ characteristics as Redeemer can be labeled as innovative, adaptable and fearless?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

There are many in need of redemption in our neighborhoods, communities, and countries. One example throughout history is that of the refugee seeking asylum from violence, politics, or extreme poverty. Following the instructions below, read the excerpt from the poem "Home," written by Kenyan born, Somali-British poet Warsan Shire in 2018 from page 36.

1. Read it aloud once and then sit in silence for a moment.
2. Reread the poem (in a group or individually), imagine, and name what redemption would look like for this author and the people she describes.
3. What other scenarios come to mind that require Jesus as Redeemer of the slave, of the weak and vulnerable, of children, marriage and the family, of wrongs and restoring justice?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Reflect on the similarities and differences between the Church of Colossae and the Church of the Brethren. Keep in mind the four aspects of the redeemer that Jesus embodied. How can the church act as the hands and feet of Christ to the next generation, and what things should we focus on as a denomination that worships Jesus Christ, our Redeemer?
- *Option 2*—Invite a volunteer to read the Compelling Vision Statement aloud. Set up four posters around the room or if virtual, set up four breakout rooms. Each poster (group) should name one of the four aspects of redemption listed above in *Discovering God's Story and Vision*. Draw a line down the middle of each poster, and on one side, name how the church addresses or has addressed that aspect. On the other side, write descriptions of what the church can do to address the aspect of redemption in the future.

If you are meeting in person, participants can walk around writing their ideas on the posters or, if meeting virtually, groups can take turns discussing each of the four aspects of redemption. Allow time for sharing the visions for the church from the posters or group discussions. How do the visions shared from the activity align with the Compelling Vision statement, and how do they affirm one another?

Sending

Close your time by listening or singing one of the songs listed in Media Suggestions. Share the following commission from Colossians 3:1-2.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Amen.

The Author's Testimony

For as long as I can remember, I have heard the old story of the sacred redemption I have been gifted and given through the risen Savior, Jesus. Since I first started attending the Brooklyn First congregation at the age of three years old, I remember the hymns, scriptures, and testimonies shared about this redemption. I also remember growing up in a congregation dedicated to serving one another and the community around us in a way that I knew was radical because it was so different from the world around me. It is this very dedication to radical service that eventually led me into a personal relationship with Christ, studying the word of God and the calling to ministry on my life.

After studying Education and Chemistry in college, I felt led to Bethany Theological Seminary where I was able to dive into the word of God, the history of my faith tradition, and the rich theology of my denomination. I love being part of the denomination because I believe we, as humans, are stronger together when united in our work for Christ's mission. I know there are often many differences among God's people—backgrounds, cultures, and experiences that lead to different opinions and thoughts but I have seen a group of people put those things aside over and over again to do the work of Jesus—peacefully, simply, together. I also believe there is vast beauty and strength in these differences. Scripture tells us we are one body with many parts and often one part cannot understand another but all are equally needed and important (1 Corinthians 12).

More than ever as I navigate the world as a Christian Minister, High School Teacher, Mother, Daughter, Sister, and Wife, I see the need for the redemptive love of Jesus Christ and the message of unity in a body of believers. I have faith that as that body we will continue to find unity in the idea that Jesus is our Redeemer and it is our job to continue this work until he comes again.

Home—a poem by Warsan Shire

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well.

Your neighbors running faster than you, the boy you went to school with is holding a gun bigger than his body.

You only leave home when home won't let you stay.

No one would leave home unless home chased you, fire under feet, hot blood in your belly.

It's not something you ever thought about doing, and so when you did – you carried the anthem under your breath, waiting until the airport toilet to tear up the passport and swallow, each mouthful of paper making it clear that you would not be going back.

You have to understand, no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.

Who would choose to spend days and nights in the stomach of a truck unless the miles travelled meant something more than journey.

No one would choose to crawl under fences, be beaten until your shadow leaves you, raped, then drowned, forced to the bottom of the boat because you are darker, be sold, starved, shot at the border like a sick animal, be pitied, lose your name, lose your family, make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten, stripped and searched, find prison everywhere.

I want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark...home is the barrel of the gun and no one would leave home unless home chased you to the shore—unless home tells you to leave what you could not behind, even if it was human. No one leaves home until home is a damp voice in your ear saying leave, run now, I don't know what I've become but I know that anywhere is safer than here.

Session 8 *Jesus Christ, Our Teacher*

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of **Jesus Christ** through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How do we understand Jesus as Teacher?

Scripture Texts

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 13:13-16

Focus Statement

Jesus was the fulfillment of the new covenant Jeremiah envisioned long ago. Teaching by example, using everyday objects, and sharing stories about ordinary people, Jesus wrote the love of God on the hearts of those who followed him. In his final meal with his disciples, Jesus used bread and wine to symbolize this new covenant between God and people. He washed their feet in an act of unexpected servanthood and told them to do likewise. Jesus taught with authority and authenticity rooted in his identity as God incarnate. As Teacher, Jesus challenges our thinking and sets us on a path of discipleship that leads us to new neighborhoods where we can share the love and grace of God.

Supplies

- Newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- Thank You notes
- Pens, pencils
- Internet-connected device

Media Suggestions

- **Book:** *The Jesus You May Not Know* by David Jeremiah
- **Poem:** [“Count Well the Cost”](#) by Alexander Mack, translated by Ora Garber
- **Song:** “Obey My Voice” by Sheilagh Nowacki; “Lord, Speak To Me that I May Speak” by Frances R. Havergal
- **Art:** [“Christ the Servant”](#) painting by Yongsung Kim

Reflecting on the Texts

Who was your favorite teacher? Maybe it was a teacher who stretched you and expected the best from you, one who encouraged you and made you feel important, or one that you highly respected and that made you want to do your best.

Countless lives have been impacted by teachers. David Jeremiah writes, “Those who teach share an honorable profession, because they are following in the footsteps of Jesus, the Master Teacher. Did you know that he was most often addressed not as Jesus or Christ or Lord, but by his title of Teacher? This was the word the multitudes used. This was how the disciples referred to him. Jesus himself used the term when he said, ‘You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am’ (John 13:13)” (73).

Jesus taught truth because he is truth (John 14:6). His teachings amazed people. “When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying—quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard” (Matthew 7:28-29 The Message).

Through his words and actions, Jesus taught us about loving God, each other, the church, and our enemies. He taught us about rejoicing, grace, generosity, forgiveness, and praying. He taught us about counting well the cost of discipleship, letting our lights shine, going to the ends of the earth in his name, and servanthood.

When he knew that his hour had come to depart from this world, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. Peter objected, not understanding why the one he knew to be the Christ, the one he believed would soon establish his everlasting kingdom on earth, would take on the form of the lowest slave and wash feet. No doubt, all of the disciples were surprised.

The disciples’ surprise must have continued when, after supper, Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it and give it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 22:19-20).

The disciples were expecting a new era. They were expecting Jesus to begin his rule and reign as Messiah. They were not expecting to hear him talk about the blood of the new covenant. But, in that act, Jesus established the long-awaited new covenant that marked the beginning of a new age (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:10). With the new covenant came the promise of an internal power. “. . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). In the new covenant, everyone could truly know the Lord through a personal relationship rather than one that was mediated through priests and prophets.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the new covenant Jeremiah envisioned long ago. Teaching by example, using everyday objects, and sharing stories about ordinary people, Jesus wrote the love of God on the hearts of those who followed him. That ministry continues as teachers, parents, preachers, and mentors bring Jesus’ teachings to life with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Understanding Jesus as Teacher is essential to a vision of the church as disciples who passionately share the transforming love and grace of God.

Gathering

Choose one of these activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Invite participants to think about one of their favorite teachers. How has that person impacted your life? Why? Using newsprint or a whiteboard and markers, make a list of the qualities of a good teacher.
- *Option 2*—Divide your group into pairs or triads. Have each group make a list of five Old Testament and five New Testament stories that they feel are most important to passing on the faith. Have groups share their lists. What stories are on everyone's list? What's missing? What makes these stories are so important to your faith journey?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Read today's texts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 13:13-16) aloud or share the reader's theater on pages 41-42. You will need five volunteers for the reader's theater.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's texts using these questions.

- In John 13:13-16, how does Jesus challenge the disciples' ideas of what it means to be a follower of the Messiah? In this instance, what is his primary method of teaching? What makes it so effective?
- What other teaching methods did Jesus use throughout his ministry? How did Jesus connect with his followers? What about his stories and teachings inspired people to follow him?
- Reread Jeremiah 31:31-34. The prophet speaks of a new covenant written in people's hearts. What was wrong with the old covenant? Why was it obsolete? In what ways is Jesus the fulfillment of this new covenant?
- In verse 34, the Lord says that "all the people will know me, from the least to the greatest." What does it mean to you to "know the Lord?" Is this something you can learn in a classroom?
- How is this "knowing" different than knowing facts or information? In what ways does Jesus teach us to *know* God instead of *knowing about* God?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on the meaning of the texts with these questions.

- On newsprint or markers, draw a large heart. From your study today and your own journey of discipleship, what are the marks of the new covenant that are to be written on the hearts of people? Write responses inside the heart. Jesus is the fulfillment of this covenant, and the Holy Spirit continues it today. Where do you see the work of Jesus as Teacher and the Holy Spirit working in your life or that of your congregation?
- Everyone is a teacher in some form. You may be a teacher, youth leader, parent, or mentor to someone in the faith. How does your understanding of Jesus as Teacher inform and shape the way you teach, lead, or guide others in the faith?
- How does understanding Jesus as Teacher shape your congregation's ministry? How does your congregation write God's law and love on the hearts of persons who enter your fellowship?
- Why is understanding this facet of Jesus' ministry, as Teacher, important for a vision for the Church of the Brethren?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*— How does your understanding of Jesus as Teacher permeate the ministries of your congregation? Spend a few moments evaluating the faith formation ministry of your congregation. How intentional is your church's educational ministry with children and youth? With adults? How do you support those who take on the ministry of teaching in your congregation?
- *Option 2*— Author Philip Wyle has said, "One good teacher in a lifetime may sometimes change a delinquent into a solid citizen." Write a thank you note to a teacher who has made a lasting impact on your life. Take time to thank Jesus, too, for his teachings and promises, including the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Sending

Close your time together with one of the songs listed in Media Suggestions and this prayer.

Jesus, you are our Lord and Teacher. Thank you for your earthly ministry. Thank you for teaching us, through your words and example, how you want us to live. Thank you for the Holy Spirit living in us, guiding us, and reminding us of everything you have taught us. May we be faithful learners and followers, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Readers Theater

Readers: Narrator, Lord, Reader 1, Reader 2, Peter

Narrator: But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD:

Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Reader 1: The people of God failed to keep the law of God in their natural strength.

Reader 2: So God made a promise to eventually write the law on their hearts. Many years came and went, and then, one day....

Narrator: Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Reader 1: The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Reader 2: Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him:

Peter: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Lord: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Peter: "You will never wash my feet."

Lord: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Peter: "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Lord: "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

Narrator: For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

Jesus: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Narrator: In the Upper Room, Jesus did the unexpected. He took on the form of the lowest servant and washed his disciples’ feet. He also took bread, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying,

Lord: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Narrator: And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying,

Lord: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Narrator: Soon after, he said:

Lord: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

Narrator: And, not many days later, just as Jesus had promised, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, arrived!

Lord: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”
“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

Reader 1: It was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God’s deep secrets.

Reader 2: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lord: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus Christ, Our Lord

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of **Jesus Christ** through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How do we understand Jesus Christ as Lord?

Scripture Texts

Exodus 20:1-6, Matthew 16:21-24

Focus Statement

To declare Jesus Christ as Lord is to set Jesus as the highest priority, the singular greatest focus of our life. It is a paradigm shift; Jesus is not part of many, but rather the highest one, the one by whom all other aspects of our living should be ordered. Jesus wants no competition in our hearts. Lordship requires personal sacrifice, discipline, and a commitment as a community to place the character and teachings of Jesus at the central point of everything that we are and do. Any obstacle, hindrance, or competitor should be removed.

Supplies

- Pens or pencils
- Scorecard Activity worksheet from page 47

Media Suggestions

- **Books:** *Simply Jesus* by NT Wright; *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* by Lois Tverberg; *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* by James Pritchard
- **Movie Clip:** [The Ten Commandments - Parting the Red Sea, 1956](#) (YouTube)
- **Songs:** [“Teresa’s Prayer”](#) by Joseph Helfrich (Vimeo); [“St. Theresa’s Prayer”](#) by John Michael Talbot (YouTube); [“Take My Life, and Let it Be”](#) by Frances Ridley Havergal

Reflecting on the Texts

When the Ten Commandments were dictated to the nation of Israel, they were grounded in response to Israel's unique relationship with God compared to the nations that surrounded them. While other cultures and religions worshipped many gods and goddesses, Judaism worshiped only one deity. This one they declared as Lord freed Israel from the slavery and bondage of Egypt. Each one of the ten plagues demonstrated superiority over a deity that Egypt worshipped (i.e., plague of darkness = Ra, deity of light; plague of firstborn = Osiris, deity of death). The nation's freedom culminated with the parting of the sea and safe passage on dry ground. For the nation, it was unmistakably clear that God was to be respected, honored, and revered. Israel was set free by God's mighty hand; God is superior to all other deities!

The first two commandments focus on the place of God as Lord. God is the one who led Israel from the land of Egypt. Therefore, there should be no other gods before God, or literally, before the face of God. Moses even confirmed this when he sang: "Who is like you, O Lord, among all the gods? (Exodus 15:11)" The second commandment prohibits the creation and worship of an idol, for "the LORD is a jealous God." The phrase here is *El Qanah* or *El, the Jealous One*. Why is this significant? Ancient texts suggest that *El Qanah*, linked here with YHWH and other texts in Exodus, was exiled and replaced by Ba'al in the land of Canaan (Prichard, 1978, pp. 145-158). In the historical context, these first two commandments then truly become a declaration of loyalty and a pledge for faithfulness above all others.

With this revelation comes a deep truth—the nation of Israel should not bring any other deity before the face of God! The nation delivered by YHWH should remain wholly faithful and not split their loyalty with other gods as they interact with the surrounding cultures. The allegiance of the people of God should be centered in God and God alone. Anything else that competed with the place of God, whether an object, a deity of another culture, material possessions, etc., is evidence of divided loyalty. That is why many historical Brethren believed in simple living and the refusal to swear an oath—to have many possessions or swear an oath, our loyalty must be to someone other than God!

Jesus himself affirms this understanding in the Matthew text. Shortly after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, he tried to stop Jesus from going to the cross. Jesus rebuked Peter and then challenged all of his disciples to pick up their own cross and follow. For whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for God will find it. To take up a cross is the ultimate declaration of surrender; one must completely surrender identity, objectives, goals, and agendas and take up the agenda of the kingdom of God solely! But we do not aimlessly take up the cross; we willingly do so and follow Jesus. If Jesus is truly Lord, then every priority should be about faithful discipleship. Anything else that we pursue is a rival. Jesus is jealous for our time and wholehearted devotion. Will we follow?

Gathering

Choose one of the following activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1:* What would you say is the most difficult thing you have had to let go and surrender? Or what is the most difficult choice you have ever had to make? Why was it so difficult? What does this say about your values and priorities?
- *Option 2:* Distribute copies of the scorecard activity from page 47. Invite participants to rank common tasks they might complete in an average week in order of importance. After a few minutes, invite participants to share which tasks they ranked as the most important and why. How does your ranking reflect your values and priorities?

Often, when we are faced with a major choice, what is most called into question is what we truly value. When we say Jesus is our Lord, it is a statement of value and priority. What does it mean when we truly say Jesus is our Lord?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Taking on different personas can provide new perspectives as we read and hear the biblical story. Begin with a meditative reading of both texts by asking participants to close their eyes, breathe deeply, and listen carefully. Read Exodus 20:1-6 and Matthew 16:21-24. Following the reading, ask: "What word or phrase stands out to you in the hearing of the Word? Why?"

Tip: If time allows, play the clip from the movie *The Ten Commandments* of the scene of deliverance at the Red Sea (see link in Media Suggestions). As you read the Exodus text, ask participants to imagine living through the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea.

Invite participants to hear the Exodus text again through the lens of a recently freed Hebrew slave from Egypt. Imagine being at the foot of Mt. Sinai waiting for Moses to come down the mountain. Read Exodus 20:1-6. Discuss the following: What was different in this reading? What word or phrase stood out this time? Why? How did this text make you feel?

For a final reading, ask participants to envision being one of Jesus' disciples. You have just witnessed Peter declaring Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus responds by prophesying about his death. Read Matthew 16:21-24 and pose the following questions. What is different with this reading? Why? What do you believe is the true message Jesus was trying to teach the disciples?

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- The literal Hebrew behind the phrase "before me" is "in front of my face." What are some ways we can have something else "in front of the face" of God?
- What role does our relationships (with God, others, creation) and personal history play in our surrender to the Lordship of God?
- Read Exodus 20:4-6. Why do you think the Lord is jealous? What is God jealous for?
- In Matthew 16, when Jesus challenged the disciples to take up their cross, what was going on in the larger context?
- Read Matthew 16:25-28. What are some of the ways a believer can show God is Lord?
- What does it mean to you to carry one's cross?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

God wants our full devotion. We show our devotion by ordering our lives with God as our highest priority. God should inform the way we live, the way we do business, the way we handle finances, the way we interact with our neighbors, etc. Jesus echoed this same sentiment: if we truly are to follow Jesus, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and walk in his way. It is a total surrendering of our will, desires, and wants, and an embracing of God's vision as the central point around which we order our entire lives--both individually and corporately.

Today, misplaced priorities are also a temptation that we face, especially in a society saturated with faith such as in the United States. We can fall into the trap of following traditions and new initiatives without seeking God first. But if we are to set Christ as Lord, we need to reorient ourselves and follow faithfully, even if it is unpopular or goes against our traditions or culture.

Discuss the following questions: Where does your loyalty lie? Where does our loyalty lie as the Church of the Brethren? What gets in front of the face of God—for you personally and for us as a denomination? What prevents total surrender to Christ—for you personally and for us as a denomination?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of the following anchor activities:

- *Option 1*—In what ways can we practically show Jesus is our Lord? If Jesus is our Lord, how should we engage with culture? What types of things should we as the Church of the Brethren be committed to, and why? What about for your congregation? Are there things we need to repent of for failing to place Jesus as Lord of our congregation? Our denomination?
- *Option 2*—On the same sheet as the first scorecard activity, have each participant rank the second list of activities. This time, the list focuses on priorities we all may face. After everyone has finished, ask the following: Where was your relationship with God on your list? Are there other priorities that compete with your relationship with God? How can we work together toward making Jesus our Lord? How do we align our Brethren values, priorities, and vision under the banner of Jesus as Lord?

Sending

Close your time with one of the songs listed in Media Suggestions and this prayer by missionary Elizabeth Elliot.

Loving Lord and heavenly Father, I offer up today all that I am, all that I have, all that I do, and all that I suffer, to be Yours today and Yours forever. Give me grace, Lord, to do all that I know of Your holy will. Purify my heart, sanctify my thinking, correct my desires. Teach me, in all of today's work and trouble and joy, to respond with honest praise, simple trust, and instant obedience, that my life may be in truth a living sacrifice, by the power of Your Holy Spirit and in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, my Master and my all. Amen.

Scorecard Activity—Gathering

Below is a list of twenty common tasks that you might complete in a week's time. Rank these tasks in order of importance to you, with the number one as the most important, and twenty as the least important.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brush your teeth | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat breakfast |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comb your hair | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat lunch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wash your face | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat dinner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Turn off the lights as you leave the house | <input type="checkbox"/> Enjoy some downtime |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commute to work | <input type="checkbox"/> Take a shower/bath |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fill up the gas tank | <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Put on clothes | <input type="checkbox"/> Wash your dishes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Take out the trash | <input type="checkbox"/> Wash your clothes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buy groceries | <input type="checkbox"/> Open a door |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Turn on lights | <input type="checkbox"/> Drink water |

Scorecard Activity—Empowered by God's Story and Vision

Again, rank these priorities and values in order of importance to you.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pay your bills | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/Sports |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Education/continuing education |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Popularity | <input type="checkbox"/> Friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultivating a relationship with God | <input type="checkbox"/> Rights & Freedoms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships with a significant other | <input type="checkbox"/> Family |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building for future | <input type="checkbox"/> Living in the now |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vacation | <input type="checkbox"/> Peace & Justice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hobbies | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Success | <input type="checkbox"/> Legacy |

Session 10 *Life-Changing Relationships*

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ **through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.**

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How does the example of Jesus Christ challenge us to build life-changing relationships with our neighbors?

Scripture Texts

Jeremiah 29:4-7, John 1:14, Luke 19:1-9

Focus Statement

Jeremiah sends a message from God to the exiled community in Babylon: build houses, plant gardens, have children. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. . . for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). Years later, John tells us that God has seen fit to put on flesh and dwell among us. In Jesus, we see Jeremiah’s words come to life as Jesus seeks the welfare of the people he meets. Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus shows us how to extend faith, hope, and love with our neighbors. Jeremiah and John’s words and the actions of Jesus motivate us to engage more deeply with our neighbors and become communities eager to be “full of grace and truth.”

Supplies

- Large poster paper
- Sticky notes
- Pencils or pens

Media Suggestions

- **Article:** [“The Quiet Liturgy of Fred Rogers”](#) by Ryan Pemberton, *Christianity Today*
- **Video:** [Waco’s Church Under the Bridge](#) (YouTube)
- **Songs:** “Brothers and Sisters of Mine” by Kenneth Morse and Wilbur Brumbaugh; “Strangers No More” by Kenneth Morse and Dianne Gingrich
- **Art:** JESUS MAFA. [Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus](#) from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

Reflecting on the Texts

I am sure you have watched TV shows about home renovations where you see the before and after pictures. It is impressive to me that contractors and designers can see the potential of an old house and then transform it into a homeowner's dream. You have most likely seen social media pictures of folks who change their image with new hair color, diet, or exercise. I believe we have an intrinsic need to become better in many areas of our lives. Most of us desire better health, a better attitude, a better life, a better ministry, a better heart, a better faith, a better relationship with God, a better relationship with our kids, or a better relationship with people in our community.

A man named Zacchaeus had one of those quick "before and after" experiences in his life. He was a chief tax collector and wealthy. As such, Zacchaeus had access to a lot of money with very little accountability. From my Sunday School teaching, I recall that he was a sinner who became rich by stealing as he collected taxes from his neighbors. Much hate existed towards these "traitors" or "tax collectors."

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus has much to teach us about how we reach out to our community. In my experience as a Hispanic pastor at Principe de Paz Church of the Brethren, I know that Hispanic families have a deep sense of spirituality. Faith, hope, and love is what I have in me and is what I believe our communities need. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, whose name in Hebrew means "pure" or "innocent," as someone needing *faith* to believe in God, *hope* to become the person God wanted him to be, and *love* to belong and be accepted by his community.

As John writes, Jesus became a man and lived among us (John 1:14). He was just like us, hungry, sleepy, tired, upset, yet full of faith and prayer. Luke's writer does not say what type of meal or conversation Zacchaeus had with Jesus. I am sure the conversation was uplifting and filled with grace because I have seen what grace produces in our community, and it is similar to the action Zacchaeus took with his community. Once grace is received, it produces beautiful actions. Jesus himself said, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9).

The prophet Jeremiah tells the Israelites exiled in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city where they are—build homes, plant gardens, and have children for "if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7 NIV). In our congregation, we have a ministry called "Blessed to be Blessed," where our neighbors and our community receive food, clothing, and financial assistance, all donated by our congregation. This creates an environment of engagement where everyone can serve, get involved and share faith, hope, and love with our community.

Even though Jeremiah and Jesus lived years apart, their message is the same—build relationships and engage one another in conversation so that faith, hope, and love might flourish. What do you think Jesus wants to talk about in your community and with the Church of the Brethren in general? At Principe de Paz, we feel that our community loves to hear Jesus speaking about faith, hope and love. One thing is certain, Jesus wants to talk to many of us, no matter who we are or where we are. His grace declares us "innocent" and his loving words lead us to a better way of life.

Gathering

Choose one of these options to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Read Jeremiah 29:4-7. If possible, use The Message version of scripture. Imagine being an exile in Babylon. What would have been your reaction to Jeremiah's message? How easy is it for you to "make yourself at home" in a new situation, with new people?
- *Option 2*—Place a large sheet of paper in the front of the room with Jeremiah 29:7 written on the top and John 1:14 written on the bottom. Give each person a sticky note and ask them to write on that note a concern they have for their community. When everyone has written their concern, have them stick the notes on the large sheet of paper.

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves as a long-time resident of the small town of Jericho. Guide them in this imaginative exercise with the following narrative.

You are excited today because you've heard a rumor that Jesus, the Teacher, is coming through town. Everyone wants to see Jesus, and everyone hopes that he will stop so you can hear him teach. Along with other town residents, you find a good place along the road to sit down. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. It looks like he's climbing a tree! You could care less—he's a cheat—you just want to see Jesus. Off in the distance, you see a crowd of people coming down the road. Could Jesus be coming?

Read Luke 9:1-19.

Reflect silently as you return to the present. What did you see and hear along the road? What did you smell as you walked by Zacchaeus' house later in the evening? Did you overhear his conversation with Jesus?

Pause and ask participants to share their reflections if they wish.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the texts using these questions.

- Read John 1:14 using The Message version, if possible. Where might you find Jesus in your neighborhood? What would he be doing?
- How does Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus reflect the idea of renovation or renewal? What was Zacchaeus' life like before he met Jesus? What was it like after he met Jesus?
- What do you understand about faith, hope, and love and their part in Jesus' relationship with Zacchaeus?
- Where else in scripture do you see Jesus building relationships with people? What does he do that enables him to connect with people so easily?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Divide the group into pairs or triads. Give each group one of the following passages where Jesus models relationship-based neighborhood engagement or teaches about it. Allow about 10 minutes for each group to discuss how Jesus builds relationships and engages people in conversation in their assigned passage. Gather as a large group and discuss the following questions.

- What do we learn from Jesus about building personal relationships as we live out the gospel message?
- Give one example of how you might take this lesson about the importance of relationships and apply it in your life or the life of your congregation.

Luke 10:38-42 [Mary and Martha]

John 6:1-14 [Feeding the Multitude]

John 2:1-11 [Wedding at Cana]

Matthew 28:16-20 [Great Commission]

Matthew 25:31-45 [Sheep and Goats]

John 4:7-26 [The Samaritan Woman]

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—If you used the sheet with the sticky notes at the beginning of the lesson, go back to that sheet and review the observations written on the sticky notes. Discuss ways you can apply what you have learned from Jesus about building relationships to these situations.
- *Option 2*—Watch the video “Waco’s Church Under the Bridge.” How is this church meeting the needs of people in their neighborhood? Who needs faith, hope, and love in your community? What would it look like for your congregation to go where Jesus is in your neighborhood?

Sending

Sing one of the hymns listed in Media Suggestions. Close your time together with a prayer for the welfare of your neighborhood and a challenge to engage with those who are waiting for a message of faith, hope, and love.

Reshaping Life Together

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, **we will develop a culture** of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

How is God calling us to reshape the underlying culture of our life together?

Scripture Text

2 Corinthians 5:16-6:10

Focus Statement

Regardless of the challenges facing us, we must be aligned with God through Jesus Christ. God has commissioned us as ambassadors of reconciliation for the world empowered by the Holy Spirit. Look, a new culture, a new way of seeing and living. This is only possible through God's grace, who has not counted our sin against us. Through this scripture, God calls us to turn around and embrace this ministry, enduring its cost with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. These are the identifying markers of this new creation.

Supplies

- Newsprint or whiteboard
- Markers
- Internet-connected device

The culture of a group, organization, or society is defined as its shared practices, attitudes, values, and goals. Browse the full [entry](#) in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary to learn more.

Media Suggestions

- **Art:** ["The Kingdom of God"](#) painting by Cody F. Miller; ["Psalm 85"](#) serigraph by John August Swanson
- **Book:** *2 Corinthians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary by V. George Shillington
- **Song:** [Us for Them](#), Gungor (YouTube)
- **Video:** ["Justice and the Gospel"](#) VergeNetwork (YouTube)

Reflecting on the Texts

Conflict creates crisis in a community that can leave scars lasting decades, even centuries. The trauma of such conflict often affects the perception of those involved or close to the crisis to such an extent as to become overwhelmed and lost. Even as we find ourselves in a context like this, both in the church and the wider society, it can be easy to lose our way. Fortunately, God has not abandoned us but provided a navigational app to find our way, and the default voice is that of Paul.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, he addressed a church that was fractured and struggling to recover. Opponents had questioned Paul's credibility and challenged his authority. This created division within the community. Paul wrote to them to address these issues. In 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:10, Paul did so in three parts. First, he reminded them what God had done through the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul instructed them that this new creation involves looking at humanity differently to proclaim the message of reconciliation (5:16-19). Then he challenged them with urgency to return to the way of salvation (5:20-6: 2). And finally, he used himself as an example, demonstrating the virtues that distinctly mark this new culture.

To be clear, God has accomplished the work of reconciliation. And the Holy Spirit empowers the church in her ministry. All of this speaks to the new creation in which God is working—past, present, and future. There is a shape to this new creation with distinctive markers. Interestingly, these virtues are remarkably similar and overlap with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. Also of note is that where the NRSV translates "spirit of holiness," it could also be rendered "Holy Spirit." While the former may be preferred, it does not preclude connotations the latter may infer (Shillington, 145-146). Taken this way, Paul's emphasis on God's power underlies everything.

In a nutshell, Paul reminds the church that it is to see the world through new eyes. Not in the form of selfish judgmentalism that seeks power, privilege, and prestige. God has transformed everything. In Jesus' death, God accomplished the work of reconciling humanity to God's self. In his resurrection, God brought about a new creation. Even now, those who believe and respond to God's work of reconciliation receive new life. Just as God transformed Paul's life on the Damascus road, all humanity is given the opportunity to enter this new creation. The result is a changed perspective.

Only due to conflict in the church did people begin living and relating to each other in ways inconsistent with the reconciled new creation. So, Paul called them to repent and "be reconciled to God." The urgency in his writing is palpable, "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2b). Finally, Paul drew upon his own experience living amidst conflict to provide an example with clear markers for life in the new creation.

Today, Paul's words confront our reality, which leads to probing questions. He asks us to reflect upon our own brokenness. In his words, we hear the call to turn and return to God, to be reconciled. This call is the reminder of the promise of the new creation. It is more than a future. It is the promise of the present shaped and empowered by the love of Christ.

Gathering

Choose one of the following activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—Share a personal travel experience where something happened that changed the way you looked at the people around you. What was it that changed your perception?
- *Option 2*—Culture can be defined as the traditions, institutions, customs, and norms of a nation, society, or group of people. Using newsprint or a whiteboard and markers, make a list of your congregation's traditions, customs, and norms. From this list, how would you describe the culture of your congregation?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to share in the reading of today's text using the Scripture Jam on page 56. You will need six readers. If you have a small group, have one or more readers double up.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the text using these questions.

- What does it mean to perceive from a "human point of view?" And what is the alternative?
- Paul speaks of a new creation. How would you describe it? How would you imagine its culture?
- What is the role of an ambassador? What does it mean to be ambassadors for Christ?
- In verses 6 and 7, Paul lists a series of virtues that are markers of the new creation. Reflect upon each of them and share what you think is significant (and any other responses you may have).
- What is the cost of being a part of this new creation?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Reflect on today's text as you discuss the following.

- What wisdom does this passage provide for creating a culture that is aligned with Christ?
- How do you imagine the culture that God is leading us to develop?
- Using a cellphone or tablet, look up the art by Cody F. Miller and John August Swanson listed in Media Suggestions. How do these inform your envisioning? What can they contribute to your interpretation?
- Listen to the song and watch the video listed in Media Suggestions. What are your initial responses? Why did you respond in these ways?
- How do these inform a vision of culture moving forward?
- What would it require us to do to live in such a way? What would you have to give up or do differently to take this seriously?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Revisit the list you created in Gathering and evaluate your congregation's culture in light of your study of today's passage. What three things could you do as a group of believers to move you toward a culture marked by reconciliation and an openness to new perspectives.
- *Option 2*—Divide your group into pairs or triads. Have each small group develop a short skit or message that illustrates what a new culture might look like in your congregation.

Sending

Read 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 and remind participants of the urgency in Paul's voice as he calls for a response. "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" How will you respond? Will you commit to these things moving forward?

Read the poem on page 57 in unison as a closing prayer.

Scripture Jam (2nd Cor. 5:16-6:10)

Reader 1	We regard no one . . .	Reader 1	So we're ambassadors.
Reader 2	No one?	Reader 2	We are?
Reader 3	No one.	Reader 3	No. We are.
Reader 4	From a human point of view.	Reader 4	Then what are we?
Reader 5	So, if anyone is in Christ . . .	Reader 5	The reconciled.
Reader 6	Anyone?	Reader 6	So be reconciled!
Reader 1	In Christ?	Reader 1	Don't wait.
Reader 2	Yes. If anyone is in Christ:	Reader 2	Do it now!
Reader 3	There is a New Creation!	Reader 3	What's the rush?
Reader 4	Look!	Reader 4	Now is the right time.
Reader 5	Everything is new?	Reader 5	The day of salvation is here.
Reader 6	What's new?	Reader 6	But?
Reader 1	Everything.	Reader 1	But what?
Reader 2	All of this is from God.	Reader 2	It's tough and it might hurt.
Reader 3	Christ . . .	Reader 3	And we're tired and hungry.
Reader 4	In him . . .	Reader 4	Just do it!
Reader 5	God was reconciling . . .	Reader 5	How?
Reader 6	Who?	Reader 6	Purity, knowledge.
Reader 1	The world.	Reader 1	Patience, kindness.
Reader 2	To whom?	Reader 2	Holiness of spirit, genuine love.
Reader 3	To God.	Reader 3	Truthful speech.
Reader 4	Entrusting us with the message of reconciliation.	Reader 4	And?
Reader 5	Who?	Reader 5	How.
Reader 6	Us.	Reader 6	The power of God.
		Reader 1	Regardless of the cost.

Go with Me in a New Exodus

O God of fire and freedom,
deliver me from my bondage
to what can be counted
and go with me in a new exodus
toward what counts,
but can only be measured
in bread shared
and swords become plowshares;
in bodies healed
and minds liberated;
in songs sung
and justice done;
in laughter in the night
and joy in the morning;
in love through all seasons
and great gladness of heart;
in all people coming together
and a kingdom coming in glory;
in your name being praised
and my becoming an alleluia,
through Jesus the Christ.

—Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*

Session 12 *Calling and Equipping Disciples*

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop **a culture of calling and equipping** disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Focus Question

What does it mean to call and equip disciples for the strengthening of the body of Christ?

Scripture Text

Ephesians 4:1-16

Focus Statement

Calling and equipping disciples for the strengthening of the body of Christ is the work of the community. Ephesians 4:1-16 characterizes the Christian community as egalitarian sharing of diverse gifts to bind us together in unity in Christ. Within call stories throughout scripture, as well as Brethren history and our own stories and histories, we discover that faith communities must: listen deeply for what makes each person come alive with deep gladness, expect surprises regarding who might be called and to what work, and provide support in the form of encouragement, mentoring, opportunities to grow, and prayer.

Supplies

- Blank, unlined paper
- Colored pencils, crayons, or markers

Media Suggestions

- Poems: “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver; “Famous” by Naomi Shihab Nye
- Song: [“Gotta Serve Somebody”](#) by Bob Dylan (YouTube)
- Art: The [“Hundred Guilder Print”](#) etching by Rembrandt

Reflecting on the Texts

Let's begin with three stories. Sarah Righter Major, not yet twenty, felt an intense call to preach. Supported by her father in following this call and finding mentors, Sarah received invitations to preach at several congregations in her region. Annual Conference delegates were sent out to ask Sarah to cease and desist, following denominational polity and the scripture "I do not permit a woman to teach" (1 Timothy 2:12). These men listened to Sarah preach before imparting their message and found that "I could not silence the voice of one who could outreach me."

My grandmother had ten younger siblings. When she finished the eighth grade, her parents insisted she end her schooling, stay home, and help with the babies. Many years later, she confessed what I had long suspected, that she had always felt called to set-apart ministry, but her community was unwilling to support women in such a call. Grandma ministered all the same, as a prayer warrior, Bible study leader, and so on, but was never able to live out her calling fully.

I met a young woman at National Youth Conference in 2018, a rising junior in high school and somewhat shy and retiring. Over the meal we shared, I asked what extracurricular activities she enjoyed. She said, with great enthusiasm, that she loved drumming. I responded, "You need to keep doing that. Because you light up when you talk about it—and the world needs people who are lit up."

Looking at Ephesians 4:1-16, it is clear that calling and equipping disciples is the work of the Christian community. The letter as a whole sets forth what it means to be "in Christ," and describes the overarching dynamic of the Christian community as egalitarian unity, in which the gifts of each member are recognized, called forth, supported, and celebrated.

In the many call stories found in scripture, one commonality exists: the person called does not feel equipped to do the work. Moses objected that he had a stutter; Gideon, that he was the least man of the least clan of his tribe; Jeremiah, that he was too young; and Isaiah, that he was a man of unclean lips. Mary wondered how her call was even possible given her unmarried, virgin status. It's as though God seeks out the very folks who feel least qualified, thinking, "I see some humility there—I can work with that!"

What do the call stories in scripture and those of Sarah Righter Major, and my grandmother, have to teach us about what it means to call and equip disciples?

First, faith communities need to *listen deeply* for signs of what might be a calling. What activities within or outside the church make each person light up like my young friend? What burning desires are present, perhaps needing an invitation to be spoken?

Second, we need to *expect to be surprised*—both by our own callings and the callings of others. The very person who seems least qualified might have the humility God needs to equip her for the task. Who have we overlooked because they did not fit our preconceived notions of who or what a called person looks like, is, or does?

Finally, our congregations need to *provide support* for each person as they respond to and live out their calling. The difference between Sarah Righter Major and my grandmother is that Sarah had support.

Let us listen deeply for the deep gladness that makes each member of our communities come alive, expecting to be surprised and ready to provide support so that none of God's abundantly given gifts and talents are wasted.

Gathering

Choose one of the following activities to introduce the theme of today's session.

- *Option 1*—What are some of the roles, tasks, or jobs that need doing, both within your congregation and in the wider community, to build up the body of Christ? Who fills these roles or cares for these tasks? Are there roles or tasks going unfulfilled? Are there people whose gifts aren't being utilized?
- *Option 2*—Provide each participant with a few sheets of blank unlined paper and colored pencils, crayons, or markers. Invite them to draw a picture or pictures of what makes them come alive or fills them with deep gladness. Abstract drawings or doodles are fine.

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Rather than having a single person read the entire Ephesians passage aloud, ask the group to go around the circle with each person reading one verse so that the theme of unity in diversity is reflected in hearing all voices. Allow those who may prefer to listen to pass.

Alternatively, ask volunteers to read the passage from different translations such as The Message, New International Readers Version, or Common English Bible, along with the one your group normally uses.

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into the text using these questions.

- The writer of the letter to the Ephesians refers to themselves as a “prisoner in the Lord” (Ephesians 4:1) and to Christ making “captivity itself a captive” (4:8). In what ways, literal and or metaphorical, are those called to Christian discipleship called to a paradox of freedom borne out of imprisonment or captivity?
- A church community is comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds, perspectives, ages, and life experiences. What does it mean to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3)? What other scriptures might support us in this?
- Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are specific callings named in Ephesians 4:11. What might a job description for each of these roles look like in the 21st-century church?
- Ephesians 4:11-16 speaks to how the gifted community works together to build up the body of Christ. What is the culture of the community of which the writer speaks? Consider your own congregation's culture of calling and equipping disciples. How does it measure up?
- The letter to the Ephesians was written to a multicultural church comprised of people of both Jewish and Hellenistic (Gentile) identity. How does that context inform our application of this text to our call to build and support multicultural churches today?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Invite participants to close their eyes (if comfortable doing so) and envision a world where every person's calling is fully realized. Ask them to jot down some notes or draw what that might look like, feel like, and sound like. Invite participants to share their visions as they feel called and time permits.

Alternatively, ask participants to consider the author's statement that many persons called by God in scripture felt ill-equipped to do the work. Invite them to reflect on their own sense of inadequacy. Ask, how has your own humility and the support of your faith community helped you to overcome your insecurities and respond to God's call with faithfulness? What does your experience suggest about how you can support others in pursuing their call?

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—Make a list of concrete actions your congregation can take to broaden and deepen your efforts to listen for and support calls to discipleship.
- *Option 2*—Share one or more of the media suggestions. Invite participants to reflect on what stood out most for them. Ask them to share how that element of the poem, song, or artwork speaks to calling and equipping disciples.

Sending

Close your time together with prayer.

God who calls us into the work and blessing of community, strengthen our hearing so that we might listen ever more deeply for our own callings and those of our church family. Stretch our imaginations that we might better expect surprises regarding who you are calling and what you would have us do. Open our hearts that we might surround with loving support each calling as it is lived into and lived out. Amen.

Tip to expand the session: Invite participants, as they feel called and comfortable, to share their drawings or notes with the congregation by posting them on a wall or bulletin board, perhaps in the social hall or gathering space. Invite others in your congregation into a deeper conversation about calling and equipping disciples in your context. Ask the children and youth groups or classes to contribute their drawings, ideas, and visions. Along with the notes and sketches, post these two quotes:

“Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because the world needs people who have come alive.”

—Howard Thurman

“Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.”

—Frederick Buechner

Are you meeting online? If your church has a private FaceBook group, have participants share their drawings and ideas there for others to see.

Session 13

Innovative, Adaptable, and Fearless Discipleship

Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping **disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.**

Focus Question

How does God call us to be innovative, adaptable, and fearless?

Scripture Texts

1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Romans 8:31-39

Focus Statement

Paul's ministry and writing are full of examples of how he encouraged churches to faithfully live the gospel message authentically. He urges the believers to be adaptable and innovative as they build relationships within their communities. Paul also encourages them to live and share the gospel with confidence. This is a way to show others how powerful and compelling the Jesus way can be for everyone. These are powerful adjectives to embody! Paul had a gift for relating to people. In his letter to the church in Corinth, we see the lengths Paul would go to share the hopeful message of Jesus with anyone.

Supplies

- Newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- Note cards, pens or pencils
- *Hymnal: A Worship Book*

Media Suggestions

- **Video:** "[New Testament Letters: Historical Context](#)" The Bible Project (YouTube)
- **Blog:** "[Cross-cultural Discipleship](#)" by Fr. Richard Rohr
- **Video:** "[Growing More Than Veggies](#)" TEDxSalisbury talk with Martin Hutchison

Reflecting on the Texts

Jesus has set for us a timeless example of what it means to exist as a human. Throughout his ministry, he spells out what it sounds like and looks like to be images of God in creation. He shows us behaviors that lead to blessing, healing, and reconciliation. He gives us compelling adjectives to embody and live out in our neighborhoods and communities. Adjectives such as merciful, forgiving, encouraging, just, and kind are the driving forces behind being God's representatives in the world. This way of living is transformational and radically different. This way of existing is also counter-cultural to the adjectives the world might offer in return: vengeful, discouraging, dominant, and oppressive.

To live out our heavenly job descriptions, we need to consider a few more adjectives that help us get the job done: innovative, adaptable, and fearless. These are three adjectives laid out by the Church of the Brethren Compelling Vision process. This vision gives us a unique north star in living out our beliefs and practices as a historic peace church.

If we need to know what it looks like to be innovative, adaptable, and fearless, Paul provides some great examples. Paul was an accessible teacher and a prolific writer who encouraged and motivated communities of disciples to live out the Jesus way. He was also a faithful architect of community engagement and church mission. He did all of this in a wide variety of environments while walking alongside diverse and eclectic people. Paul had to think on his feet and continually discover new ways of authentically linking the message of Jesus with the Gentiles.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul encourages the community to meet people where they are so that they might see the gospel message thrive and flourish. He calls them to be adaptive by being relatable. It sounds simple, but it works. He says, "to the weak, I became weak so that I might win over the weak" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Paul is sharing the unifying message from Jesus in a way that is real, honest, and relatable to a diverse community of people.

Didn't Jesus do the same thing? Throughout his ministry, we see Jesus interact with citizens from all walks of life. He relates to others through personal human connection by meeting them on their level. This is a real blessing to people that are already vulnerable. He talked fish with fishermen, gardening with farmers, heady theology with the theologians. Jesus is God meeting us where we are and calling each one of us to something new.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul, too, is using improvisational adaptability for the gospel's sake as he shares its blessing. Churches would do well to be adaptable for the sake of the gospel. Adaptability means change and sometimes on the fly. This requires discernment and should be led with trust and compassion. It is important to note that change is hard. Adaptability and innovation can be hard work for just about anyone.

We may not write letters like Paul, but we have adapted and innovated our means of conveying the eternal message of Christ. Our work helps others uncover the God-given adjectives in their lives and use them to transform the neighborhoods they inhabit. Disciples that trust the message they proclaim do so in a fearless and God-honoring way. Paul used many adjectives to describe God, Jesus, and even love. How are we living into those advantageous adjectives today? Jesus encourages diversity in the Kin-dom of God—so let's be on our toes, ready to embody whatever adjective is called for in the moment!

Gathering

Choose one of these options to introduce today's theme.

- *Option 1*—What is an adjective, and why are they important? What is one adjective you would use to describe yourself? What is an adjective others might use to describe you? What adjectives would you use to describe God? What adjectives would you use to describe Jesus? What adjectives would you use to describe the ideal disciple?
- *Option 2*—Open today's session watching "Growing More Than Veggies," the TEDxSalisbury talk listed in Media Suggestions. What need did Martin Hutchison see in his community? What adjectives would you use to describe what Martin and the collective of churches did in this community?

Discovering God's Story and Vision

Paul's life was spent growing and nurturing disciples. He took Jesus' instruction to deliver his message to a broad and expansive audience seriously. As a result, he had to think on his feet in innovative, adaptive, and fearless ways. Paul became many things for the sake of the message. We hear Paul reflect on that important work as we read today's texts from 1 Corinthians and Romans.

Invite two volunteers to read these passages. Ask them to read it as though it is the first time anyone has ever heard these words before. Read in a fearless way! Ask the rest of the group to listen as though these words have never been heard or uttered before. It is exciting to open a new letter from Paul!

Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's texts with these questions.

- Invite participants to turn to 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 in their Bibles. What does it mean for Paul to describe himself using the adjective "free"? How does he use his freedom in Christ for the sake of others?
- What are the benefits to adapting and innovating like Paul is describing here? Any pitfalls to watch for?
- How do churches, like Paul, "become all things to all people" as a means of saving others while remaining loyal to the gospel?
- In Romans 8:31-36, Paul answers five questions. What was his purpose in raising these questions? What sustains him and us in the face of questions and opposition?
- Of the forces listed in verses 38-39, which are most real to you? How can you and your faith community be innovative, adaptable, and fearless in the face of these forces? What does Paul's assurance that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" mean to you personally and as a community of faith?

Responding to God's Story and Vision

Paul's invitation to be adaptable and innovative for the sake of introducing people to the gospel is important work. Invite participants to respond to the texts using these activities.

- Using newsprint or whiteboard, have someone write a list of ways you see your faith community or the Church of the Brethren being adaptable or innovative in reaching people in your community or in the larger world. Use creative and vivid adjectives! It will be good to name a few ways that have been done in the past but designate more time to naming how adaptability and innovation are working in the present.
- Spend time naming other historical figures who have modeled a faith that is adaptable, innovative, and fearless and how they did so. Examples include: Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or more recent examples such as Shane Claiborne. Distribute note cards and allow participants a few moments to name and connect how they are personally being adaptable, innovative, and fearless in their own faith journey.

Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—If you watched the TEDxSalisbury talk with Martin Hutchison in Gathering, discuss the following questions. In what ways were the planners of Camden Community Garden innovative, adaptable, and fearless? How was the community transformed as a result? Brainstorm needs that you see in your community. What one thing could you do today that would bring your church closer to meeting one or more of those needs?
- *Option 2*—Develop an action plan to incorporate the Church of the Brethren's Compelling Vision into your faith community's life. How can you empower others to embrace a life of adjectives that bless others? Consider setting a timeline on your goals. Remember, adaptability does not always mean conformity, but it may mean relatability and accessibility. Your goals for adaptability and innovation should not cost you the core message of faith that Jesus is offering. Perhaps a sermon series, in-depth bible study, trainings, and leadership development seminars would do the trick.

Sending

Close your time together by singing "Help us to help each other" in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #362.

If the group is not up for singing the hymn, ask a few volunteers to joyfully read the verses.