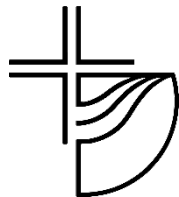


# Compelling Vision

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

Session 12  
Bobbi Dykema



## 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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.