# Epiphany: A New Year, a New Vision

―by David Sparks

**

Deep Spirituality. Bold Discipleship. Daring Justice.

These six words are our call as a United Church. And they go with a vision:

Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.

## Hymn

*More Voices* 156, Dance with the Spirit (*sing twice*)

## Call to Worship. Called to a Spirit Journey

You call us to a journey of the Spirit, Loving God.  
**As we prepare, you speak, and we listen.**You call us to a journey of the Spirit, Loving God.  
**Our goal is clear; we seek the highest good.**You call us to a journey of the Spirit, Loving God.  
**We are not alone; our faith companions go with us.**  
You call us to a journey of the Spirit, Loving God.  
**You are our guide; we have nothing to fear. Amen**

## Hymn

Voices United 87, I Am the Light of the World

## Opening Prayer: A Prayer of Bold Discipleship

Loving God,  
In our discipleship we will be bold.  
**As bold disciples, we will listen carefully to those who  
experience life differently from us.**In our discipleship we will be bold.  
**As bold disciples, we will work out our own faith  
and explore that of other faith communities.**In our discipleship we will be bold.  
**As bold disciples, we will meet with the powerful ones  
but will not submit to them.**In our discipleship we will be bold.  
**As bold disciples, we will experience love in a little child with their carers  
and will humbly worship. Amen**

## Theme Conversation: Christmas Journeys

* Our family journeys over Christmas (a sharing dialogue with the congregation), the easy ones the testing ones.
* Journeys that could make our spiritual life deeper and more fun
* Journeys we might make as particular followers of Jesus
* Journeys we might make to right wrongs in our community

## A Prayer before the Reading

Touch us with your Word, Loving God,  
**stir up within us fresh ways of enlivening your Word for our day.**Hold us with your Word, Loving God,  
**challenge us as we search for your way in our faith community.**Shake us with your Word, Loving God,  
**set us ablaze with a determination to be bolder disciples.  
In the name of Jesus we pray,  
Amen**

## Readings

Isaiah 60:1‒6 The future glory of Jerusalem  
Matthew 2:1‒12 Visitors from the East

## A Prayer after the Reading

We thank you for your Word, Loving God,  
**gracious words that tell of your presence.**We thank you for your Word, Loving God,  
**enlivening words that enthuse and affirm.**We thank you for your Word, Loving God,  
**familiar words that faithfully inspire**We thank you for your Word, Loving God,  
**challenging words that are surprising and heartening.**Living God, we thank you for your Word.  
**Amen**

## An Epiphany Reflection in Light of the Call and Vision Statement of the United Church

**Leader**: The church, our church, The United Church of Canada, has deliberated, the church has wrestled with some different concepts,the church has come to a conclusion, and now we have a [Call and Vision](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-our-vision), endorsed by the 43rd General Council. Are we thankful to GC or what?!

Here it is: “Deep Spirituality. Bold Discipleship. Daring Justice.”

These six words are our call as a United Church. And they go with a vision:

Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.

**Questioner:** Sounds great, sounds challenging, but whatever has it to do with the season of Epiphany that we are in, and the often-told, often-sung story of the magi that we heard read earlier? (sing:) “We three Kings of Orient are,/Bearing gifts we traverse so far…”

**Leader:** A good question! It deserves a good answer, and I’ll do my best. You got a few minutes?

**Questioner:** Bring it on!

**Leader:** Let’s begin by looking at the season of the church year that we are beginning today, Epiphany. It’s the time of a great insight. One description of its importance made clear that Epiphany is like the insight that came when Newton experienced the apple falling and then formulated the concept of gravity.

**Questioner:** Wait a minute, “hugely important,” but was this a historical incident, were there historical magi on a quest, or has another story about how the Queen of Sheba pays homage to King Solomon been modified by the gospel writer Matthew?

**Leader:** Wrong question!

This is not just a story of some “wise guys” going off on a whim following a moving comet. The story makes clear that risk was involved, risk to life and limb in coming to see the baby Jesus. Herod was a powerful and nasty character, yet the magi made the journey anyways. It was of supreme importance to them.

**Questioner:** I get it. To go back to the new United Church Call and Vision, the story is gently reminding us that it isn’t the state of the economy that matters most, or holidays in exotic places, or our financial or workplace success, it is what we have going for us in the realm of spirituality, deep spirituality. The magi found their goal―the birthplace of the baby Jesus―and they gave the baby appropriate and valuable gifts.

You don’t give presents worth a whole lot to someone who isn’t vital. Jesus is central to their quest, and he is on the receiving end of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, valuable gifts.

**Leader:** And more than that, we are *united* in our spirituality. We find it, we are silent with it, we pray it from the bottom of our hearts, and we share it in the faith community. The spiritual is a hopeful faith-shared sphere of our existence, and it matters hugely.

The magi got it right.

**Questioner:** But wait a minute, we set out to see whether the Call and Vision approved by General Council had relevance to the Epiphany story. I get the point about spirituality, even deep spirituality, but there is nothing in the story about the magi becoming disciples. The second part of the Call and Vision relates to disciples, and bold ones at that.

**Leader:** Okay, remember you are not dealing with history. This is likely a very good story, and we only have to look a little further into the gospel account of Matthew to read the call of disciples Andrew and Simon Peter, and James and John, sons of Zebedee.

Throughout Matthew’s gospel the training and work of the disciples has a prominent place. Not far into the gospel of Matthew (Matt. 10:9‒15) there is an account of the training program for the disciples, and it even includes a section on what to do when rejection comes your way.

The Call and Vision talks about bold discipleship. Bold―not perfect!―and that is what is made clear in the gospel record. As the early church finds its feet, disciples emerge and grow, sometimes not very expertly in their committed following of Jesus.

**Questioner:** But what about now?

**Leader:** If ever there was a time for developing a bold program for a new local program for evangelization, using Facebook and other social media, it is today (or maybe yesterday!). If ever there was a time to go out in twos and knock on doors and tell people, “The church is alive; this is what the church is really about, not what the media often says it is about,” it is now! You could try it!

**Questioner:** Fair enough! But what about “Daring justice”?

**Leader:** Well, you have read the story. It’s about magi, sages―dedicated, recognized, but way down the power ladder―taking on King Herod, ruler and supreme leader of his time, and the underdogs coming out on top.

In the story we are all rooting for the magi to get their gifts to Jesus and get away from Herod, and for once the right people are on the winning side! Alleluia!

**Questioner:** Very well and good, but do you have some daring justice stories that tell what the church has been up to recently? Your local church or the national church with Mission and Service stories?

**Leader:** Actually, I have. Here are a couple from [Stories of Our Mission](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/get-involved/generosity-through-mission-and-service/stories-our-mission) on the United Church website, “Stories of Our Mission” about working with others toward justice. (You are encouraged to find local examples of Mission and Service and local “take actions.”)

**Questioner:** So to sum it all up, what emerges from the ancient story at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel as it relates to the Call and Vision statement?

**Leader:** What we have in this magi story in the Epiphany, what we as church people have in the birth of Jesus, is of huge fundamental importance.

It calls on us to take the Call and Vision statement seriously.

It calls us to deepen our spirituality.  
It calls us to be emboldened as disciples.  
It calls us to be daring as we strive for justice.

Are you up to the challenge? Am I? Amen

## Hymn

VU 95 Born in the Night, Mary’s Child

## Offering

## Offering Song

MV 145 Draw the Circle Wide

## Offering Prayer

We offer our gifts to nurture the faithful journey of this community.  
**We offer our money to sustain its teaching and worship.  
We offer our time for compassionate care.  
We offer our talents to support its work for justice.**As these gifts are used in this fellowship,  
and worldwide through Mission and Service,  
**Loving God, you will bless them,  
and you will bless us, the givers.  
In the name of Jesus, who could not have given more, we pray,  
Amen.**

## Pastoral Prayer: A Prayer of Daring

Loving God, there are opportunities for us to work and advocate for  
cleaner air and cleaner water. (Time of silent reflection)  
As those who believe the environment matters way beyond our lifetime,  
**we will dare to get involved.**Loving God, the never-ending procession of refugees fills us with horror (Time of silent reflection).  
As those who believe that every family has the right to a safe home,  
**we will dare to get involved.**Loving God, we are among those who are ignored and looked down on because of an addiction. (Time of silent reflection)  
As those who have a difficult story to tell,  
**we will dare to get involved.**Loving God, we know those who are going through hard times with sickness, in relationships, and because dreams will not become reality. (Time of silent reflection)  
As those who are ready to listen and act compassionately,  
**we will dare to get involved.**Loving God, we rejoice in this faith community, our work in this neighbourhood, and our outreach through the Mission and Service. (Time of silent reflection)  
As those who, in community, are ready to renew and commit time, talents, and gifts,  
**we will dare to get involved**Loving God, we give thanks for our Christian faith.  
Our faith has been a rock, is a source of strength, and will be a beacon of hope in all the years that lie ahead (Time of silent reflection)  
As individuals we acknowledge all that is ours in Jesus the Christ.  
**We dare to witness, “Yes, I am faithfully involved!” Amen.**

## The Jesus Prayer

(Use a version of the Lord’s Prayer that is familiar to the faith community, said together or sung, Voices United 959.)

## An Act of Faithful Commitment for a New Year

(Faith community members and friends)

Follow the star!  
**The light of Jesus Christ will be our light in the new year.  
We will study faithfully and listen patiently.  
We will proclaim Jesus joyfully and care compassionately.  
We will play our part in the faith community fully  
and pursue justice with daring.**You will go with God,  
**and God will go with us.**Thanks be to God!

## Hymn

VU 79 Arise, Your Light Is Come

## A Commissioning for the New Year

You go into a new year with us, Loving God,  
**with us as we explore new adventures of faith.**You go into the new year with us, Loving God,  
**with us as we test the depth of our spirituality.**You go into the new year with us, Loving God,  
**with us as we are emboldened as disciples of Jesus the Christ.**You go into the new year with us, Loving God,  
**with us as we dare to confront and overcome injustice,  
with us on our personal quest,  
with us as we draw strength and go forward as faith communities.**We will suffer setbacks, we will encounter challenges,  
we will feel like giving up, we will say, “What’s the use?”  
But you, Loving God, will forge us in hope; you will renew our strength.  
With us when life is good,  
**with us when life is tough,  
our Never-Failing God. Amen**

## Hymn

MV 212 Sent Out in Jesus’ Name

―David Sparks is a retired United Church of Canada minister living in Summerland, British Columbia. He is the author of the Prayers to Share, Pastoral Prayers to Share, and Responsive Prayers series of lectionary-based prayers (Wood Lake Publishing). He is also the author of Off to a Good Start and A Good Ending (United Church Publishing House).