



vision study

Overcoming Barriers to Vision

the river church community
week 3

Introduction & Opening Prayer

This small group meeting will help us grow in honesty and mutual ministry as we engage with where we really are with living a life of Gospel vision. We will look at Scripture that inspires and challenges us to take God at his word. We will also look at an inspiring and challenging example of a group of people who took God at his word, risked their reputations, finances, and lives for the sake of a beautiful, once in a lifetime, God-breathed vision. For most of us, the problem is not, "what is God's vision for my life?" but, "am I willing to open my heart to risk what I treasure on earth, for a life with God and partners in mission?" Our problem is not one primarily of clarity, but of faith – the kind spelled "R-I-S-K"; worship – ascribing to Jesus' promises more value than to our earthly programs for happiness; and healing – will I allow Jesus to open up the broken places that keep me bound and stuck?

Let's begin with prayer that we might be fully present and share honestly and courageously with one another, that we might receive the Spirit's ministry and be enabled to take the next steps, wherever we are in the vision process.

Scripture & Example of Visionary Risk & Sacrifice (35-60 min.)

Read the following Scripture and excerpt from *Visioneering*, chapter 10 and as you do, pay attention to your own emotions and thoughts – those that **repel you** from and also **attract you** to taking a risk on Jesus' words like Karen and her team, not necessarily with inner city kids, but something that fits your life situation, partners, gifts, and passions.

Luke 12:22, 29-34, Matthew 28:16-20

And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on . . . 29 And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. 30 For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, seek his kingdom, and all these things will be added to you. 32 Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. (*The Message* has v. 17 beautifully, "Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.") 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."



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Karen Bennett, her Team, and Metro Assembly

On February 3, 1990, Karen Bennett and five of her friends left the suburbs and moved into an old abandoned nightclub in one of the most dangerous areas of Atlanta. For the previous six months they had conducted services on the streets for inner-city children. During those encounters God brought greater clarity to the vision he had birthed in Karen during her college days. In time it became clear that she was to establish a unique ministry to the inner-city children of Atlanta.

Karen is a single, white female. At that time she was 23 years old. Not unlike other Atlanta singles, Karen was saving for her first Gucci and driving a Honda. But the emptiness she saw in the eyes of those children was something she could not ignore. As her vision began to take shape, she became convinced that there should be a safe place for children in the middle of what continues to be a drug-infested war zone. So Karen and her friends decided to plant a children's church in the inner city. After allowing the idea to incubate for several months they began looking for a site.

Month after month we kept going down there until we felt like it was time to have a building for those kids. We started looking at old warehouses and old buildings in downtown Atlanta. Finally we found this one old nightclub that sits right in the middle of 25 major inner-city projects. I called the owner up and I said, "Well, how much do you want for this place?" He said he needed \$2,000/month rent.

Well, he could've told me it was two million – I didn't have that type of money. I was on a church salary living in an apartment in the suburbs. But on the way home we each stopped by our banks and cleared out our checking and savings accounts. We looked for every nickel and dime we could find. That night we dumped it all into one pot, and between all six of us, we had \$52.00.

Karen contacted a couple of churches for support. They were sympathetic but unwilling to partner with her financially. Nobody was interested in supporting a stand-alone, inner-city children's church. Whereas most single young ladies would have taken this as a sign to channel her energies elsewhere, Karen saw it as a test of her commitment to the vision. So she called a meeting.

So it ended up that my staff and I got together that night and we just talked about it. It was one of those nights that we just had to be honest with ourselves. Is this what we were going to do? OR was this one of those things that we were just going to talk about until we were forty or fifty years old?

So we decided that we were going to take a chance, because every once in a while you've got to do that. The next day we went to our landlords and we handed in our notices on our leases on our apartments. We couldn't afford to have our nice apartments and have a church for those kids at the same time.

Two weeks later, Karen and her unpaid staff moved into the nightclub.

I remember that when we moved in, it was twenty or thirty degrees outside and it was about twenty or thirty degrees inside. We forgot to check if the building had heat before we moved in. It didn't have heat and it didn't have air. It didn't have a toilet, a sink or a shower. It didn't have anything. We had to drive down to Hardees to use the bathroom.

Our new home came complete with cement floors and seventeen-inch sewer rats. We call them "gophers" up our way cause they "go for" you. We kept on trying to get the building upgraded,



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but nobody believed in us. Our parents thought we'd lost our minds. Sometimes you wonder if you've really heard from God or not.

Karen and her staff continued working at their various places of work. On payday they would deposit their paychecks into their ministry account. Then they would each take \$20 a week for living expenses. On weekdays they began going door-to-door in the projects inviting children to their Saturday services. They made 4000 personal visits each week. Over time they won the respect and trust of the parents in those communities. That is how the Metro Assembly got its start.

Today Karen and her sixteen-member staff minister to over 3000 children every week in multiple weekend services. They sponsor a youth service that draws over 200 teenagers. In 1994 they established a private school in the community. Tuition is \$20/month. They have 125 students enrolled and over 500 on the waiting list.

But Karen and her staff have paid a price for the success they are experiencing. Metro Assembly has been broken into over 70 times. Several years ago Karen was mugged. Three of their staff were beaten up by teenagers who attended one of their services. Most of the windows on their buses have been shot out. Ten of the children who attended their first church service have been murdered. The first funeral Karen performed was for one of her own staff members. Karen's response to all of this? "If you decide that what God is asking you to do with your life is just too much on you and is just a little too inconvenient, then you will never see the miracles he has for you." . . .

For reasons known only to him, God has chosen to work through men and women who are willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the "thing" he has placed in their hearts to do. His choicest vehicles are those men and women (or kids or youth – MPH) who courageously lay the things that represent safety and security at his feet for the sake of what could be and should be. . . Search the Scriptures. Search the pages of church history. You won't find an example of anyone God used in even a small way who did not make some kind of sacrifice in order to pursue a vision. Sacrifice and risk are always part of the equation. . .

When a man or woman (or a community – MPH) is willing to give up something valuable for a God-ordained vision, God looks upon it as worship. To worship is to ascribe worth to something. Theologically speaking, worship is recognizing and responding appropriately to the greatness of God. When we sacrifice in order to do the thing God has put in our hearts to do, we are recognizing and responding to his greatness.

Discussion questions:

1. What were your thoughts and feelings that attracted you to Jesus' words and Karen's example? What do you think is going on in your heart and mind to draw you towards a faith risk life of vision?
2. What thoughts and feelings repelled you from trusting Jesus' words and living a life like Karen and her team? (Again, not aping her example, but the faith and risk and sacrifice for a vision that fits you and yours.) What do you think is going on in your heart and mind that repels you?
3. What are your most valuable possessions? E.g. Things/money, a picture of your future, your time, your career or retirement, your reputation (that you aren't a religious fanatic), the security of a relationship with a person who doesn't value/follow Jesus wholeheartedly?
4. What promise(s) does Jesus give that grabs you, that you need to hold onto?



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Sharing & Prayer Groups (15-40 min.)

Many of us need a little help in identifying our particular barriers to a life of Gospel vision, of full faith, hope and love. Here is a rather exhaustive list of potential barriers that exist among God's people, that God wants to come and minister to. As we confess where we are, God is able to bring his healing touch and lift us out of the snare. After sharing briefly (4 min. each) pray for the one or two the Spirit seems to direct your group towards using the prayer ministry model if time permits –

1. Overwhelmed by issues of "survival" – finances, small kids, etcetera – unclear on how God's vision might engage me in this difficult time.
2. Overwork – stuck between world's railroad track or ambition and space for a God vision.
3. Numbed by routine or numbed by overstimulation of entertainment/other pursuits that seem more real/exciting.
4. A life w/poor boundaries, always meeting other's needs, following their agenda vs. making space to follow God's call in your life.
5. Blowing out the pilot light of vision every time God lights it because of fear of being out of control.
6. Burned by a past vision commitment (hurtful leader, failure of members or yourself, seeming failure of God's promises, etc.) leaving you wary of re-engaging.
7. Called but afraid of what it might cost → avoiding, stalling, running away.
8. Not a visionary person, struggling to hear God, waiting for a leader or friends to bring a vision you might like to join up with.
9. Don't trust Jesus' words fully. You are still investigating following him.
10. Pregnant with a vision, but waiting for partners, timing, circumstances to open a way forward.
11. I am living the vision in faith! Here's where my faith is challenged right now.

For Next Week:

1. Read *Visioneering* chapter 9, "The Power of Vision" – This chapter will be an encouraging follow up for anyone who is struggling with barriers to vision. But, if you are single or if you are not flowing in the vision process, the exercises at the end of the chapter might not resonate with you.
2. Bring your journal next week if you are a journaling person. We will take some time during our last vision study to reflect on how God has been leading us, what next steps we should take, what help we need from God and others.



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Leader's Guide

The Goals of this study –

1. Be inspired to overcome our barriers and fears by looking at Jesus' unbelievable promises and an inspiring example of a life of vision.
2. Deal honestly with our barriers to vision, confess to one another our need for God's touch of healing, forgiveness, courage, etc.
3. Provide an opportunity for your group to grow in honesty and "one another" ministry as we confess where we really are and what needs to change in our hearts.
4. By dealing honestly with where we are in our lives, we should leave with a sense of what the next step or the remedy might be for our lives.

Reminder: you probably need to remind folks to read chapter 10. If they don't have a copy of the book, then email the selection from this guide following week 2 and re-send it to a couple days before you meet so that they have some familiarity when they come to the group and the reading time together will be shorter as people re-read it in the group.

Introduction & Opening Prayer:

It is important to establish a sober, prayerful tone before the group engages with the Scriptures and the Karen Bennett example. You may want to ask a couple of people to be prepared to pray at the beginning of the small group who you know are prayerful and single-hearted for God. If you happen to have a worship leader, singing a song or two would be great to draw near to God as a group.

Scripture & Karen Bennett Example

1. **Try to set up the reading by asking people to pay attention to their attraction and repulsion as they read the story. See the intro paragraph in the session handout above.**
2. You'll need to gauge folks' reading speed. If someone is having trouble finishing it in 10 minutes or so, you should just begin the discussion when the bulk of the group has gotten through it.
3. You should feel free to discuss the questions in any order or add your own. But, questions 1 & 2 provide the greatest opportunity for people to really share their hearts if they can pay attention to their emotions/thoughts as they read the Scripture/story. If the discussion stalls in a larger group, then send people with the questions into prayer groups where it might be safer to bear one's soul.

For Next Week:

1. Draw attention to the reading assignment on the last page of the group guide for the next meeting before you send folks off into prayer groups:
"Read *Visioneering* chapter 9, "The Power of Vision" – This chapter will be an encouraging follow up for anyone who is struggling with barriers to vision. But, if you are single or if you are not flowing in the vision process, the exercises at the end of the chapter might not resonate with you."
2. Let people know that they should bring their journals next week if they are a journaling soul. The reason is we will take some time during our last vision study to reflect on how God has been leading us, what next steps we should take, what help we need from God and others.



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Prayer groups:

1. If you don't have "permanently" assigned prayer groups yet, try to break people up so that there is a trusty facilitator in each group.
2. This can be the spiritual friendship group topics for the meeting ahead if your group runs out of time during the discussion of the Scriptures and the example. Everyone will not be able to receive equal attention in the prayer group unless they are just pairs.
3. Have a printout of the "5 step prayer model" that is appended to the end of this leader guide for each prayer group facilitator.



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A Pattern for Prayer

Initiating the Prayer Session

1. The group leader(s) invite someone in the group to ask for prayer. If the group has more than one leader and is bigger than 7-8, split into two groups, e.g. men and women.
2. It is good for someone to take notes of the things shared and prayed so that they can be remembered and processed later.
3. The person presents the need for prayer in a short summary, 2-3 minutes.
4. The praying friends listen to the presentation with one ear and to God with the other ear. (It can help to not close our eyes or not keep eye contact with the person requesting prayer.)
5. The prayer team leader invites the Holy Spirit to come and minister to our friend, praising God for his acceptance and love for us, Jesus who gives us access to the Father, God's past answers to prayer, etc. It is important for the group to gather in a circle around the person and for one or two members to lay their hands gently on the shoulders or back of the person if they are comfortable with that.

Listening Step

The group then waits in silence 2-3 minutes, waiting to hear from the Spirit in a posture of openness. We don't need to strain ourselves, but make ourselves available as if waiting for a phone call from a friend, keeping a Bible near us. We try not to "think" about the problem or figure out what God might be saying. We give Him room to speak in the Spirit. If "good ideas" come to mind – advice or problem solving, you may want to write them down or just let them pass. If they are important, they will come back to you during conversation with the person another time.

The Prayer Experience

1. As members receive impressions, words, pictures, Scriptures, etc. they can begin sharing those things as tentatively from God, e.g. "I think God is saying . . ." and praying into them for the person.
2. The person being prayed for very often has an encounter with the Spirit on their own, sometimes feeling a need to confess their sins, sometimes sharing a full blown vision God is showing them.

Check-In

1. After things die down a bit, the leader "interviews" the person being prayed for saying, e.g. "let's check in . . ." or "how is it going?" The person can share about his/her own experience with the Lord and how the various words, pictures, Scriptures resonated with them.
2. If it feels like one or more of the gifts shared "hit home", or has traction, pray again, as a group, into that word, picture, Scripture, etc.

Follow-Up/De-brief

The leader asks the person how the prayer experience encouraged them and how they feel God is directing them. The members are then free to share how the experience was for them, being sensitive to the vulnerable position of the one being prayed for. Give the person the notes and make sure to have a member of the team follow up with the person on any outcomes or follow up steps that were indicated in the prayer experience, etc.