



“Questions of Genuine Interest”

Let’s face it: most of us are not great question-askers, even on a good day. Maybe we’re afraid that we’ll offend folks who want to be private. Maybe we just don’t know what to say or how to say it. For whatever reason, we often shy away from asking questions that go beyond the surface of people who are outside of our usual circle (and -let’s tell the truth- sometimes those within it). This can be especially difficult when we’re in conversation with someone who has a background, experiences, values and religion that differ from our own. And yet the experience of being asked a good question of something we care deeply about is experienced as a sign that the asker has really paid attention to us; has really heard what we’ve said. More importantly, they’re interested in learning more about who we are and how we operate in the world. Questions are powerful things.

It’s pretty rare in everyday life to get the chance to hear someone talk about their deeply-held beliefs, values and experiences. It’s even more rare to be in a setting where that can be done with someone who is different from you. Church small group gatherings provide the opportunity to follow your curiosity and demonstrate your interest in one another by asking questions that help the sharer to “say more:” to go more widely and deeply into their life and the gift of their sharing. Certain kinds of questions can be harmful to community building because they put most people off and are not “questions of genuine interest.” I categorize them as “**Questions of Interrogation**”

- questions that convey judgement: “How could you think or believe that/vote that way/ do that, etc.”
- questions to instruct, advise or persuade: “Have you tried.... But don’t you think it would be better if..... ?”
- questions that are rhetorical/statements in disguise: “Wouldn’t it be better if everyone who thought that way were just sent to the moon?”

Take initiative to avoid those kinds of questions. They are guaranteed to leave the sharer feeling worse, less connected with the community and less likely to speak again or share more. Instead, **Pay attention to what people say and how they say it.** Listen for words that seem important or that convey feeling. Listen for values, perspectives, feelings, experiences, relationships that seem important to the sharer. Ask for more and if more is shared, humbly receive it as the gift that it is.

Instead, ask **“Questions of Invitation”**

- Invite the person to simply expand on what they’ve said:
 - You mentioned ____; that really interested me. Could you say a little more about it?
 - I heard you say ____; what else would you like to say about that?
 - You mentioned ____ and ____ but not ____; I’m curious to hear what you think of that as well.
 - You’ve said you believe ____:
 - When did you first start to believe?
 - Who was a teacher, mentor, or who influenced you in the beginning? Who else has been important along the way?
 - How if at all has your belief changed (developed, matured, expanded, narrowed) through the years until now?
 - What hopes are rooted in your belief? What hopes grow from it?
- You mentioned your belief and your experience (BTW could be any things you need clarity on), but I’m not clear on how they are related in your mind. Could you say a bit more about that?
- When I heard you say ____, I assumed you meant _____. But now I wonder if I got that right. Could you say more about what you meant?
- I was really struck when you used the word ____ to describe _____. It felt like a powerful word; a powerful experience. Am I getting that right? If so, would you say a little more about the ways it was powerful for you?
- Is there a question you were hoping you’d be asked that hasn’t been asked yet? If so, what is it? How would you answer it?

