



REFLECTION: QUESTIONING AS QUEST

When reflecting on *Cultivating Desire in Mississippi*, I have more questions than answers. However, I wonder if, for the church in the United States and especially Los Angeles (where I live), lingering questions are part of God's invitation for transformation. Questions are one of the most powerful ways we learn, grow, and go deeper into a subject. Too often we believe that powerful people provide answers when really '[questions] are the engine of knowledge creation'^[1] and therefore 'powerful' people ask powerful questions. Brookfield and Preskill state it like this:

Questioning is derived from the word *quest*. When we pose questions we initiate a quest, a journey into the unknown or the poorly understood. Through questions we search out the unknown and unfamiliar, but we also reexamine the familiar. Sharp, incisive, focused questioning has a way of pushing people forward to uncover more. So questioning is part of the quest to live more fully and adventurously. Not all questions, however, are created equal. We

are not interested in questions that invite simple, rote response, but the more complex *how* and *why* questions for which leaders themselves lack ready answers.^[2]

Stan writes, 'After much discussion they landed upon the idea of diffusing a single question throughout the congregation: "What is one small gospel ministry of healing and wholeness that Northside can offer our neighborhood?"' This question is good in its intent. Its desire is to bring healing and wholeness. But it also assumes that the people of Northside 'have' and 'know' the gospel which they can offer and the neighborhood will take.

Perhaps the deeper challenge here is to create questions that invite the people of Northside to be, themselves, questioned and converted by the gospel away from an imagination of 'project' and doing for people into some kind of mutual exchange. The instinct and desire is right - might the questions involve creating this space where the gospel disorients and converts us as the 'church'? This kind of shared imagination is more difficult to navigate because it requires dialogue, reciprocity, acknowledgment of neediness by all parties involved, and reliance on the mystery of God.

Missional living necessitates changing the conversation. Perhaps part of what it means to 'change the conversation' regarding mission is both to participate in the art of asking powerful questions (engaging in the quest) and to become comfortable asking questions that we do not readily have answers to (and may never have answers for). In the spirit of engaging the quest, I turn to other reflections regarding Northside.

Friendship

Northside tried to engage in spiritual disciplines and habits to nurture 'habits of engagement.' One of the courses I teach is entitled, *Practices of Christian Community* - friendship is one of those practices. At first, the idea of needing to teach the practice of friendship seemed strange. I saw that people in churches don't know how to engage in activities and disciplines that develop friendships with others outside their church circles or they don't think it important. Do Christians view community (relationship with the other in the neighborhood) as central to the Christian life? Do Christian leaders consistently encourage reliance on others, intentionally connecting with others, or the importance of shared life, accountability and mutual support for Christian formation? I wonder if the inability to create relationships with neighbors stems from a general lack of the practice of friendship among adults (both within and outside the church) and/or the inability of adults to nurture long-lasting friendships?

Churches are going to have to nurture habits that encourage Christians to engage in practices that help people to attend to one another in community, such as gratitude, listening, and forgiveness. If we do not depend on one another in our church communities or talk to others sitting in the row next to us, how can we expect to feel it is necessary to form friendships with our neighbors?

Youth ministry

In order to attempt to cultivate a shared imagination for God's mission in a particular context, there must be an emphasis on 'shared' (being with rather than doing for). As someone who has been involved in youth ministry for thirteen years, I am no stranger to the difficult work of connecting with teenagers. However, I have found that teenagers appreciate authenticity. I wonder what would have happened if a group of Northside congregants told the football team that they cared about young people in their neighborhood and wanted to learn from them and hear about their lives but didn't know the first thing about how to do this? What if they were blunt and shared their insecurity related to trying to connect with teens? That is, what if Northside congregants were invited to ask a different kind of question, one that involved the youth and Northside's need for conversion?

The teens may have had ideas about how it could work. This sort of honesty and openness may have empowered the teenagers to have a shared vision of the experiment and vulnerability on the part of the adults may have created space for genuine encounter. The beauty of working with teens is that they are naturally creative, usually (and bluntly) tell people what they think, and are quite responsive to people who want to invest in their lives, especially so with adults who are willing to learn from them. The invitation to shape the experiment would have involved the teenagers and made it a shared process, rather than the church's task.

Partnership

The story describes that there was a shift from Tuesday evening games and snacks at church to Northside's leadership deciding to have the teens and adults meet somewhere other than the church. The thinking that initiated this movement away from church grounds is significant given missional engagement for Christians usually means, 'come to my church' or 'come to where I am comfortable.' However, though Northside's leadership and several congregants ultimately sought to learn to 'enjoy the presence of their neighbors,' they were unable to move away from language such as 'project,' and felt it was necessary to try and form genuine friendships within a timeline. While the project was embedded in the liturgical life of the church and with the timeline they probably garnered more participation, I wonder what would have happened if Northside used language such as 'partnership,' and committed to something like four years of time instead of six months?

The most meaningful relationships I have with teenagers (where we both learn from one another) have occurred when I have committed to know them over a significant period of time. I wonder what would have happened if a few of the men at Northside committed to hanging out with a group of ninth grade football players every Tuesday for four years, until they graduated? Like many Americans, I am often in a hurry. I carry this over to ministry, to teaching, to my life as a congregant in church. Are we more concerned about the end, getting to some goal in a missional project than in *being* missional? I certainly can be guilty of this. I enjoy checklists,

meeting goals, more people joining the church, but missional living does not occur by the amount of targets we hit or goals we achieve, but rather is shaped by the way we exist in the world on a daily basis. We cannot create a plan for engaging in mission, because missional living is about shared imagination within a context and posture (which often requires vulnerability and honesty) all while embracing ambiguity (questions).

Reflection on 'Cultivating Desire in Mississippi' by Stan Wilson. *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue no. 6, 2015. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/cultivating-desire-in-mississippi/>

[1] Stephen Preskill and Stephen D. Brookefield, *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Justice* (San Francisco: CA, Jossey-Bass, 2009), 130.

[2] *Ibid.*, 127.



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