

**Borgman, D. (2004). "Four basic questions for youth ministry." S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies**

The Four Basic Questions are part of our philosophy of youth ministry. Because the primary task of adolescence is working through the identity crisis, we need to help them in that process. Because society has rushed youth to pseudo-maturity resulting in extreme compartmentalization or what Elkind calls the "patchwork self," a major goal of youth work must be the integration of beliefs, values, goals decisions, and life-style. And because religious truth can easily slip into a religious compartment of a teenager, separated from other parts of their lives, we need always to keep their whole life process in mind.

To answer those who say the primary goal of youth ministry is asking young people about their faith commitment, we respond: Jesus Christ did not go around asking people if they were ready to accept the Gospel or to be born again. He asked them where they were hurting and if they wanted to be made whole. This was his Gospel of the Kingdom, his Kingdom work. (See Luke 4: 18ff and Christ's answer to John the Baptist, Luke 7: 18-23) In that process Christ made sure people heard about the Father and their need for repentance and faith. The Four Basic Questions are an attitude, a style of conversation and guide in our relationships with young people.

Those new to youth work want help in meeting and relating to young people. What should drive our conversations with youth? Where should we be headed in these conversations? How should we get started? How should we train our volunteers? The principle in answering these questions is growth. Youth are growing through a dynamic transition. Experienced youth workers also look for creative curricular ideas, ways to stimulate the growth of young people on retreats or in regular group meetings.

These four basic questions evolved from my work with gangs and kids on the streets of the Lower East of Manhattan, NYC. Heroin had decimated the gangs in the early 1960s. I would often hear the first three questions from young addicts with whom contact was made day after day. The fourth question is the key question of youth work.

These questions are, of course, not meant to be asked in any formal interview nor intended to be used verbatim. They have been translated in the slang of Spanish, Swahili and other languages.

- What's happening? (I'm really interested in your world and in your life.)
- Where are you coming from? (I'm willing to tell you my story and care about yours.)
- Where are you going/headed? (We all need hopes and dreams!)
- How can we help you help yourself to get there? (Life/youth work is all about goals!)

These questions, or their paraphrases, may be answered on many different levels. You may get the same nod or grunt that answers the question, "How ya doin'?" or "How is it going?" You may get a more polite but still superficial, "O.K." or "Pretty good." Pressing the questions a bit, you may get whatever a young person decides is safe to say. The progression of the questions depends on the depth and sincerity of response. With adequate trust and at the right time, you may find a young person who really wants to share his or her life with you.

The first question expresses the intention of an adult to give up what is perceived as adult detachment and judgmentalism to enter the world of youth and a particular individual's life situation. It says, over and over, "I really care about you and what's going on in with you. Conversations with many young people may never go beyond this point. And obviously, conversations begin and return to this first questions many times.

The second question, taken seriously, moves to a deeper level—to sharing and storytelling. Individuals and groups bond as they share their own histories. Malcolm X once said, "A man without a knowledge of his past is like a tree without roots!" People need a sense of their personal past for stability, for working out one's their identity, and for guidance for the future.

Today's society with its media blitz robs young people of their past and strips them of their dreams. In place of real dreams it offers them illusions. Consider how advertisements and the exploitation of celebrities makes youth feel inferior... with a boring past and a crazy future. We are called to be dynamic antidotes in a toxic society. We can allow young people to sense their real worth, rediscover their personal history and look forward to desirable and realistic dreams.

The third question, then, builds on the second; only seeing our positive past can we have confidence in building a bright future. Few teenagers have healthy, realistic dreams these days, and yet adolescents are properly future-oriented persons. The third question keeps them focused.

The fourth question, we have said, is "the stuff of youth ministry." It encourages translating a future dream into long-term, then, mid-range, and finally short-range or immediate goals. Never ask someone, especially an addicted or dysfunctional person, "How can I help you?" That can be disastrous for both persons. It encourages dependency and can lead to the youth worker's victimization.

Remember, it is the spirit of these questions and not the words that are important. As a serious workshop, they are much more readily taken by young adults than by teenagers, But the principles and intentions of these questions can guide our conversations and curricula with teenagers.

Finally, you will find these questions helpful in your own self-knowledge. Note how they are used for the exegesis (or study) of self in the last section of Chapter Three (in When Kumbaya Is Not Enough). Consider also how these questions can help you in recruiting, training and supervising volunteer leaders.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. With what friends would you most enjoy sitting around a fire sharing your lives in terms of these questions What might emerge from such a discussion?
2. If you were asked to drive a teenager you did not know some 45 miles, what kind of conversation might you have around these four questions?
3. If you could not get past the first question with this teenager, might it still be a good conversation?
4. Do you see how you might use these questions on a weekend retreat? What might you celebrate at the conclusion of this weekend?

5. What questions or issues do you have with this article or these four basic questions?

### **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Youth ministry must be greatly concerned with growth, and these questions are growth-evoking.
2. Adolescents today have been described by experts as patchwork selves or partible persons who are highly compartmentalized. These questions are meant to foster integration. Asking them may for many teenagers be only preparing them for future growth and integration. Still, this is our job.
3. Teenagers only learn and grow as they discover things for themselves with their friends. These questions need to find their way into such settings.

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