

## Practicing Curiosity

**Barbara Blodgett**

**I**n the interview that follows the introduction, the author is in conversation with the following:

**Willard Ashley**, vice president for strategic institutional initiatives and associate professor of practical theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

**Richard Coble**, associate pastor for congregational care and adult education at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), Asheville, North Carolina, and teaches on the faculty at Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky.

**Matthew Floding**, director of ministerial formation at Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina.

**Kathleen Russell**, professor emerita of pastoral theology at Seminary of the Southwest, Austin, Texas.

**Kammy Young**, who works with the Direct Action and Research Training Center's board of directors for congregation-based community organizing and is former director of contextual education at the School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee.

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Barbara Blodgett is assistant professor of pastoral leadership, Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky. Email: [bbloodgett@lextheo.edu](mailto:bbloodgett@lextheo.edu).

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“It’s important to learn how to listen to other people.” “Ask open-ended questions.” “Conversations are the heart of ministry.”

In seminar rooms across theological education and clinical pastoral education, students learn these lessons from their supervisors and professors. It is good news that teachers from many different disciplines strive to impart the skills of listening and question-asking. Might we unwittingly be causing confusion, however, by emphasizing the importance of conversational skills without clarifying that in ministry not all conversations are the same? Don’t ministers ask people different sorts of questions at different times, with different purposes in mind?

I currently teach leadership courses in a small Protestant seminary where most students are preparing to be pastors or are already serving congregations. I am aware that while some students don’t have a strong desire to be genuine leaders, others do but simply haven’t learned how. In teaching them the skills of leadership, I often say that learning to be a leader boils down to learning how to be *curious*. I define leadership as mobilizing others into action for change. According to this definition, leadership requires many conversations in which the leader asks questions of those she hopes to mobilize. Curiosity involves asking the right sorts of questions at the right time with the right purpose in mind while creating the right context for the conversation.

Few of my students would initially name curiosity as a key quality or practice of leadership. But that is not really the hard part about teaching it. Teaching students how to practice curiosity is hard in the following two ways. First, while they rightly associate curiosity with asking questions, they then often associate questions with questionnaires. Their exposure to any practices of curiosity within congregational leadership is in the form of those anonymous surveys that purport to assess congregational vitality and identify priorities for the future. Second, and more directly to the point of this article, when I tell them that a leader’s curiosity is best practiced in one-to-one conversations and that we’re going to learn to have those conversations, the lessons to be learned sound to them misleadingly familiar. I can tell that they think they already know how to have one-to-one conversations. I can practically see them making a mental shift back into their comfortable, familiar, empathetic, stereotypically ‘pastoral’ mode. That is, they anticipate asking questions that will draw out the other’s concerns and will point them toward the best way to offer help. I can already feel my attempt

being doomed to cast a conversation as a means of mobilizing change. Students miss the elements of provocation and risk that characterize a good leader’s questions. I have come to understand that I must do much more to distinguish what *I* mean by curiosity from the other meanings they already know if I am going to successfully link curiosity to leadership.

At the same time, I am aware that across the hall or across town my colleagues in pastoral care are probably also trying to get my students to shed stereotypical notions of what it means to be ‘pastoral’ and to learn that caregiving, too, can involve asking risky questions.

In order to tease out the distinctions between the different types of questions pastors need to learn to ask, I spoke to several theological educators whose training and background draw from multiple wells, including those of clinical pastoral education, community organizing, congregational and public leadership, and pastoral care. My opening questions were these: *What kind of questions does a spiritual caregiver primarily ask and what kind of questions does a community leader ask, and how are the two different? If they are different, how do we help students of congregational ministry learn how to ask both kinds?* I created and shared with them a grid I drafted (see table 1). What followed was a fascinating set of conversations that I have reduced and reproduced here in the form of a single interview by the author (BB) with a composite theological educator (TE).

**Table 1. Questions Pastors Ask Based on Their Role**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Purpose of the questions asked when in this role</b>	<b>Qualities of the questions</b>	<b>Conditions needed for the conversation</b>	<b>Dispositions the inquirer needs to possess</b>	<b>Ground rules for the conversation</b>
Spiritual Caregiver	Healing, liberation, empowerment	Open-ended, personal	Safe/sacred space	Curiosity, empathy	Private
Leader	Building power, giving the work back	Open-ended, personal, provocative, invitational	Mutual interests	Curiosity, courage	Public

**BB:** I have a hunch that students in theological education sometimes have difficulty learning how to carry out different sorts of conversations with people because they confuse one kind of conversation with another. Indeed, students often seem to treat every conversation as an occasion for *spiritual caregiving* when caregiver may not always be the role they occupy. Have you noticed this as well?

**TE:** Yes. Despite the fact that many denominations today are increasingly looking for leaders as much as—if not more than—caregivers, we still get a lot of students who come to seminary because they want to help people. Their natural inclination may be toward caregiving, but they are told they must learn to be missional, innovative, a program manager, a leader, etc. Then they hit seminary and hear that they will still also learn to be theologians and biblical scholars and so forth! The typical seminary curriculum has become overloaded these days with things to teach students. It's addition, addition, addition. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that students become overwhelmed by all that they need to know how to be and to do and cannot immediately grasp the nuances between different fields of study. Besides, many of them haven't yet developed a sense of authority or the conviction that they occupy *any* role in ministry. The result is role confusion or even ambivalence. We need to help students understand the different roles they'll adopt.

**BB:** You're saying that to be a question-asker of any kind, rather than simply an information-gatherer, requires a sense of authority in addition to curiosity. It can feel presumptuous at first to ask somebody else a hard question.

**TE:** Right, and beyond that, seeing what a leader sees is different than seeing what a pastor sees. In any given situation, a novice pastor is likely to wonder, "How can I pastor and be helpful and healing in this situation?" while a leader wonders, "How does this fit into the larger picture of who this congregation is and where it's going?" A pastor who also wants to be a leader needs to employ several different sets of 'eyes,' not just one.

**BB:** On a side note, your use of vision metaphors makes me think back to Craig Dykstra's concept of 'pastoral imagination,'<sup>1</sup> and I wonder whether that concept may have become outdated today. Whether he meant it or not, 'pastoral imagination' implies a singular imaginative sense rather the multiple imaginations that pastors must develop today.

**TE:** I agree with the need to cultivate multiple pastoral imaginations. But the various disciplines we teach *do* bleed into one another when it comes to teaching conversational skills. In fact, I see the tension you're naming—between conversations that aim toward individual healing and those aiming toward collective change—nicely mirroring an evolution within the field of pastoral care. Until about the late 1980s or early '90s, the field was still quite deeply influenced by an individualistic therapeutic paradigm. Carl Rogers's and other humanistic psychological models dominated. The resultant approach in pastoral care, then, was to guide parishioners toward self-actualization so that they might listen to themselves and perhaps come to accept unacceptable parts of themselves.

Once feminists and persons of color became more active in the guild, there was a shift to what is called the communal-contextual paradigm. Pastoral care became, both in practice and theory, conscious of race, sexuality, and gender and attentive to issues of power and difference. Pastors learned to help parishioners attend to the social-cultural contexts in which they found themselves. Today, pastoral care goes beyond an individualistic counseling model; it envisions the congregation as a community of care. Pastors under today's model work to foster a culture within their community whereby it's not just the pastor who is caregiver to everyone else but rather the community itself caring for its members.

**BB:** Is the congregation itself ever seen as a recipient of care? I ask for the following reason: If a leader's job is always to keep in mind the larger picture of where the congregation is going, then it would seem to help to view the caregiving relationship both as a community caring for its members *and* as members caring for their community.

**TE:** Caregiving does still focus primarily on individuals as recipients. But in practice it becomes a false distinction because, of course, congregations are made up of individuals! For example, if a congregation is looking at ways of confessing or addressing white privilege in its communal life, that necessitates looking at both individual *and* collective experiences of race and power. Two types of conversations, communal and personal, are happening in tandem with each other. There might be a team within the congregation leading the project on white privilege, and team members might have one-to-one conversations with each other. Such conversations would serve to build relationships, to bring important issues to the surface, and, ultimately, to strengthen the team's ability to lead cultural change in the con-

gregation. At the same time, the pastor might go to parishioner John Doe, who is disgruntled by how race is being talked about in the congregation. In that conversation, the pastor has two hopes: to change the culture of the congregation one parishioner at a time but also to facilitate John Doe's own growth and healing, regardless. Are these two goals contradictory? Yes and no. It's still about what John Doe needs, but ultimately the congregation is made up of a whole bunch of John Does!

**BB:** Fair enough—and thank you for sharing that history. I still wonder whether there is a difference, say, between conversations with individuals who are struggling to understand the impact of race and power on their own lives and conversations with those same individuals about they might join their own struggle with others' in community.

**TE:** This is where your idea comes in that leadership conversations presume mutual interests. I don't think pastors would necessarily presume such a condition to be present in *all* their conversations. I also think you're onto something in your grid with regard to purpose. A leader's questions serve to give the work back—a term I recognize, by the way, as a legacy of Ron Heifetz. When I was a community organizer, to ask questions was to shake up people's world. I'd ask: "What if you came to this meeting?" "What if you challenged your boss?" "What if you took on the state house?" These questions made people weigh their risks but also made them realize they wouldn't *die* if they did those things. Questions had the purpose, first, of enlarging their world and, second, of getting them to accept accountability for what goes on in their world.

What I'm saying is that the ultimate context of the conversation matters to the questions you ask. When you're sitting with a suffering individual, their suffering is the context. In contrast, when you're in a leadership conversation with someone, your context is more about the larger whole, something bigger than yourselves.

At times the ultimate context can be both, depending on how you look at it. A great example is the story that urban pastor and community organizer Robert Linthicum used to tell. When his parishioners would come to him with concerns about what was going on in the world and in their lives, he knew there were two ways he could respond: "How can I help?" or "What you are going to do about it?" He always asked the latter. Even when a group of little old ladies came to him saying they were afraid to leave their houses at night to attend Bible study, he put the work back on them. He helped them

reorganize their neighborhood block watch program to make it safer to go out after dark. For Linthicum, asking the second question was the biggest shift he said pastors must make in order to become leaders.

**BB:** Did he publish that story somewhere?

**TE:** I believe he did in his book *Transforming Power*. Incidentally, the book's final chapter is on the spirituality of relational power.<sup>2</sup>

**BB:** Thus reinforcing the idea that classic leadership questions can and often do ultimately empower individuals on a personal, spiritual level as well.

**TE:** Yes. Moreover, it's important to point out that in some cultural contexts, there is no stark difference between the personal and the political, so it would be unfair to suggest that there's always a hard line between a spiritual caregiving conversation and a leadership development one. In black church traditions, pastoral care has always been about empowering people in the face of systemic racism. Helping people learn how to survive in the world *is* spiritual caregiving.

**BB:** Is there nevertheless any sort of distinction to be drawn between questions that actively provoke people in ways they had not anticipated being provoked and might even resist and questions that may be hard to hear but nevertheless aim at healing?

**TE:** One way to put it might be that when you are a leader, your questions often *create* crises as often as *respond* to them. Sometimes life has already put the pain upon us, but at other times, we need someone to show us how hot the stove is so that we'll be moved to take our hand away. It's in *this* sense that a leader's questions are proactive rather than reactive. Leaders challenge us where we aren't necessarily already challenged and don't want to be. But leaders know that we will only act when the pain of not acting becomes great enough. Or think of the metaphor of a washing machine; it works by *agitation*. To get something clean, you have to agitate it.

**BB:** So when you're in a leadership role, your conversations are often sensitive. Should you promise confidentiality when asking these sorts of questions?

**TE:** No. An important thing to teach students is when their conversations should be private versus public. We should stress that leaders' conversations are *not* the type that are confidential; they aren't wearing their hat as confidants when occupying that role. In fact, confidentiality would betray the purpose of these conversations! A leader's role is to take what

she learned through asking her questions and to share her insights publicly with others who have the same interest so that power can be built in the community.

In contrast, confidentiality is appropriate to spiritual caregiving conversations because it serves the very purpose for which *those* conversations are held. Confidentiality carves out a safe space where work can be done between people in a relationship of trust.

**BB:** So we can conclude that privacy and publicity serve the conversational ends that spiritual caregivers and leaders, respectively, have in mind. This is a clear lesson that we can teach students as we help them learn to practice various conversations with their people. Is there anything else we should bear in mind as teachers?

**TE:** Our discussion has largely been premised on the assumption that students in theological education are less familiar and comfortable with being leaders than being caregivers. But that does not characterize all of our students. There are also those who come eager to exercise leadership, both within their congregations and also in public life. Our programs *do* draw people who want to be out front as activists in social justice work. What these students often need in terms of listening skills is to learn why one-to-one conversations are still necessary. You can't just do social justice from the pulpit. You have to maintain one-to-one relationships. When movements like Black Lives Matter draw pastors out into the streets for weeks and months on end, they often start to hear their parishioners back home pleading, "Can I have my pastor back?" and complaining, "I don't know if I want to keep turning to the front page of the newspaper and seeing my pastor getting arrested, even if they are symbolic arrests." In turn, pastors often react with incredulity because they feel it's their calling to be out there doing the very thing for which seminary prepared them. The way to meet such potential challenges to your leadership is through conversation. Leaders need to have one-to-ones in order to build still more leaders for the movement, to grow more energy for it, to find out from people where the movement needs to go next, and also simply to learn how their own actions on the front lines of the movement affect those back home. In other words, students can learn to use questions as barometers of people's mood and level of support for them and for social justice. To return one more time to your grid, it takes a courageous disposition to ask such questions.

**BB:** This has been such a rich conversation about conversation! You have not only helped me test my hunches but you have also opened up still other aspects of teaching the art of asking questions. Now, when I go back into the classroom, I will be better prepared to help my students practice curiosity. Curiosity may be a quality all good pastors share, but it is also a practice, and it takes different forms depending on the context. As a teacher of leadership, I may still need to cover basic conversational skills common to several fields, but I also need to teach how the ground rules, dispositions, conditions, qualities of questions, and ultimate purposes of leadership conversations distinguish them from other sorts of conversations.

As we have been talking, it has occurred to me that I could expand the grid even further. After all, pastors occupy yet other roles besides leader and caregiver. Teacher and mentor come to mind. I know from my own experience that the questions I ask in teaching, and the way I ask them, make all the difference to my students' learning, and questions that aim ultimately toward learning are different still from those aiming at spiritual caregiving or leadership development. It would be fun to open this conversation up to teachers from across the entire spectrum of theological education.

#### NOTES

- 1 Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," in Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008), 41–61.
- 2 Robert Linthicum, *Transforming Power: Biblical Strategies for Making a Difference in Your Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).



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