

The art of asking beautiful questions

By Joel van Dyke, D.Min.

For the past 20 years, I have been on a journey with some close friends in ministry to high-risk young people in very hard places. We have been trying to figure out what it means to be legitimate, sincere, compassionate and transformational about what we do.

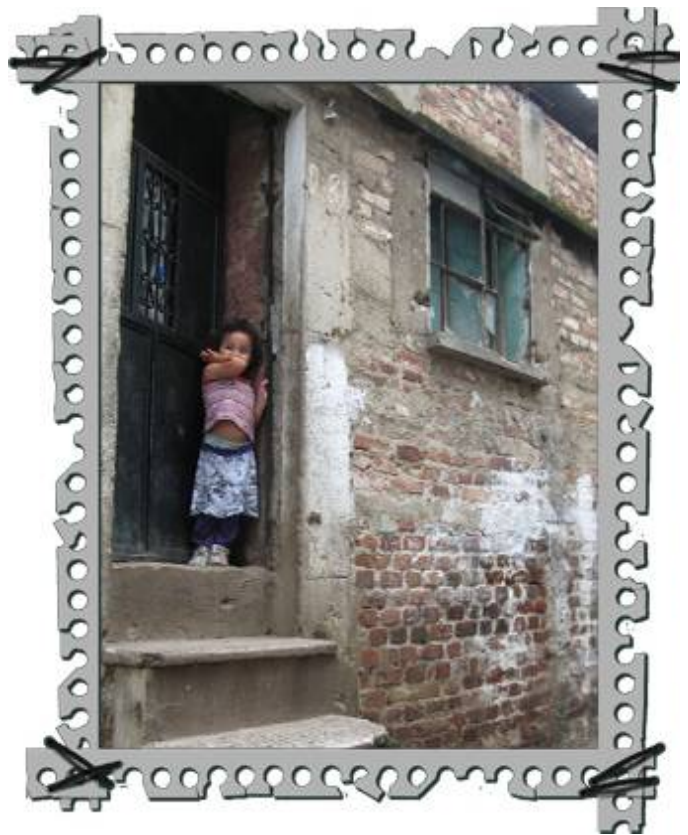
We decided to begin coming together regularly to think about and reflect on what we have learned and experienced with others on the journey. We began trying to ask questions that would unlock some answers for us in the pursuit of a theology that would effectively sustain our work with difficult kids in hard places. We asked our questions with fear and trembling because we were not sure what the answers would be. We had a hunch of what they should be and had been told what they ought to be but quite frankly we were not convinced that we really had a clear idea for ourselves even of what questions to ask.

The Psalmist asks a beautiful question in **Psalm 137:4**, "How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The context is Babylon where the Israelites were ripped out of their homeland and actually told to seek the peace and prosperity of their oppressors. How were they, in a dark and strange place, to sing God's songs of grace, mercy and love? This is the same question we have been faced in Latin America in the sometime dark and strange context of street gangs in prisons, homeless youth on the streets, teenage prostitutes and families caught in relentless poverty, etc. Learning how to ask beautiful questions has provided the needed melody in order to sing God's songs in strange lands.

The acclaimed English poet E.E. Cummings once wrote, "The beautiful answer is always preceded by the more beautiful question." Do you believe that? If we really believed as a community that the beautiful question was far more important than the well crafted answer, our ministries with young people would be far more effective. The belief

here is that beautiful questions actually reveal beautiful answers. If we really believed that, we as Christians would be the best question askers in the world. Are you a question answer by nature? I have come to believe with all of my heart that it is a profound and highly successive ministry that learns how to ask beautiful questions of high-risk kids in hard places? I believe this out of the conviction that beautiful answers spring forth from beautiful questions.

We are currently in the process of asking beautiful questions of active gang members in the prisons of Guatemala City but I first learned this principle while living in Philadelphia trying to work with active drug dealers in the streets of our neighborhood. Several local churches began "anti-drug marches" trying to take back the streets from the dealers. We too as a church were desperate to see change but we saw no fruit whatsoever occurring as a result of these "marches." One day a young man who



had recently left the dealing in an attempt to better his life invited me to go meet the guys on the street and hear some of their stories.

I accepted his invitation seeing this as a wonderful opportunity to try to ask some beautiful questions of these drug dealers in hopes that it would unlock the beautiful answers that we as a church were desperately in need of. The morning before heading out to meet the drug dealers, I stumbled upon the story of Jesus' interaction with blind Bartimaeus in **Mark 8**. There, he asks Bartimaeus a beautiful and shocking question, "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

I realized suddenly for the first time that we as a church were doing exactly the opposite of what Jesus was showing us here. We had been going to God asking him to show us what to do to reach these drug dealers while Jesus was trying to teach us to go directly to them armed with beautiful questions. I went out that night asking active drug dealers what it was that we as a church could do to bless them. I also asked, "*If you were a youth pastor at a church in this neighborhood, what would you do to reach yourself?*"

The drug dealers told me how they loved to play handball but had no decent place to play and it was through handball that they could be effectively reached and blessed. Armed with this information, I was able to find two other pastors in the community willing to take a collective risk in order to reach these guys. Together we acquired the facilities of a local recreation center and began organizing regular neighborhood handball tournaments for drug dealers. This began earning us trust and respect from the same guys whom we had earlier demonized and rejected. As a result we built solid relationships with many of these drug dealers and many began turning their lives over to Christ.

Traditionally in the mission of the church we go to God to try to find out **WHAT** to do and then the world to find out **HOW** to do it. The asking of beautiful questions reverses this order. The questions give us permission to go to the world asking WHAT to do and then in desperation we turn to God to find out HOW. At the essence of this shift is the transfer of power. God gave all the authority and power to Jesus and He in turn gave it all to the Holy Spirit who then gave it all to the church. Who does the church give up power to? The sad answer is that we give it to no-one. We have disrupted the flow of

power by in fact hoarding it for ourselves and giving it up to no-one else. It is in fact to the most powerless in its community that the church should be giving away its power.

If you want to see this in action, I challenge you to do a personal study of the questions Jesus asks in the Gospel of John. I have counted at least 70 beautiful questions asked by Jesus in John where power is transferred and beautiful answers are discovered as a result. Consistently before healing someone Jesus asks what the person wants him to do for them. This of course is very dangerous for your ministry because it means a transfer of power from you to the world and people who are not accustomed



to having power will abuse it when they do get it. Thus, like Jesus before us, we must be ready to bear the cross of their abuse.

The real transfer of power means you actually do what the community tells you and it is through beautiful questions that we find out what that is. To not ask the questions is to deny the implications of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In our mission as youth ministries we must learn to lead with beautiful questions letting those whom we are called to reach, teach us WHAT to do!! If we are faithful in that task, God will be faithful in telling us HOW. And as a result, we will learn to sing beautifully the Lord's songs in "foreign lands."

