

## 2008 Moderators' Conference Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

### The Art of Powerful Questions

*(adapted from "The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action" by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs- 2003. Adapted for educational purposes only.)*

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes." -- Albert Einstein

#### **Questions – open the door to dialogue and discovery**

- an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking
- can lead to movement and action on key issues
- can generate creative insights and ignite change

#### **What makes a compelling question?**

- it has to catch people where they are, to meet them where there is the most energy and relevance for them and then use the energy to go deeper...
- the question needs to be simple and clear and penetrating – like a laser beam, it will invite you to reflect on a deeper level.
- must involve people's values, hopes, and ideals – that relate to something larger than they are where they can connect and contribute.
- shift away from a problem focus or fix-it focus to a possibility focus.
- An interview of one question: what's the question we should be asking you?

#### **Thus, a powerful question:**

- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions
- has the capacity to 'travel well' – to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change.

#### **How Can I Frame Better Questions? (Sally Ann Roth, Public Conversations Project - 1998)**

- Is the question relevant to the real life and work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question – a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What "work" do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognizable and relevant – and different enough to be cal forward a new response?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?

- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

**Leaders need capabilities to:**

- create a climate of discovery
- suspend premature judgment
- explore underlying assumptions and beliefs
- listen for connections between ideas
- encourage diverse perspectives
- honor everyone's contributions
- articulate shared understanding
- harvest and share collective discoveries

**Questioning:**

- stimulates creativity
- motivates fresh thinking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- focuses intention, attention, and energy
- opens the door the change
- leads us into the future

**How can you as Moderator engage your governing body in discovering the “big questions” that lie at the heart of your governing body’s future?**

**For Questions for All Seasons, please see page 173 of The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter by Juanita Brown with David Isaacs and the World Café Community. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005.**