

PRE-CONSULTATION REPORTS:

STORIES FROM GROUPS GATHERED TO DISCUSS QUESTIONS

ADULT GROUPS, PRIMARILY LAY

EFM Group

One group who wrestled with the pre-consultation questions was a gathering of EFM graduates who were having a reunion with members of the current classes. They had not been together for about a year. (*Education For Ministry is a 4 year in-depth program of theological studies, Biblical study, church history, liturgy, contemporary writings and ongoing theological reflections. Participants generally meet throughout the year in groups of about 10 – 12 people in weekly sessions of about three hours and include people in all four years of study, so that one class rotates in each year and another rotates out. There is no formal program of study following the four year program. Participants may be representative of several congregations, different denominations and even non-Church goers, or they may be primarily members of one congregation.*)

Before addressing the “Big Questions,” this group did some of their own catching up by sharing new thoughts on how they would add to their personal spiritual autobiography, reflecting on experiences of the past year. They also looked at some questions posed by Jesus and discussed these in triads. Prayer is a normal part of their gathering.

What was especially striking about the groups’ conversation was the depth of relationship and experience they had had in their earlier concentrated time together that heightened their comfort and ability to probe these questions. Over and again, they commented on how they had no other group with whom they could explore these questions so honestly and fully and how much they missed this regular time together. All wished they had more time to continue the conversation.

All of these participants seem to have a regular discipline of prayer, study and reflection, and all feel they are on a continuing journey of discovery and faith formation. They mentioned the value of having a small faith community to which they can relate and feel comfortable and safe raising and exploring really hard questions and their application to their daily lives and choices. All felt that as much as they value their church worship communities, they did not experience them as places where such in-depth sharing can take place and, in fact, such questions are often discouraged or even made fun of. They long for more opportunity to be fed spiritually.

Some of the basic questions raised by this group followed the themes of others: What is the purpose of life in this world and the next? What is my reason for being? Does God really exist and listen to each of us? Why are there evil, violence, personal suffering and worldwide discord? Why did you create such imperfect human beings? As noted earlier, while they are comfortable going to others for help and sharing many things with friends and family, and while they are sustained by prayer, study and reflection, they are longing for the kind of ongoing spiritual relationship and exploration that they have experienced in EFM. The church and clergy are not generally perceived to be their source of primary nourishment in this regard.

Group of Mostly Retired People, Midwestern Congregation

A group of about 25 mostly retired adults in their 70's and 80's with about 8 in their 40's- 60's met together for a Lenten Quiet Day Retreat and used these questions as the focus of discussion during about an hour of that time together. Most of the participants are members of two different Bible Study groups, one composed of former executives of major corporations and other institutions, who meet in their small group almost weekly. The theme of their Lenten study was "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased," so the biblical questions they had been considering related to this topic. The responses to the three questions, therefore, moved significantly to the areas of "Who am I?" and "Who is God?"

Some of these questions about life purpose included: Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing? Have I done what I was supposed to have done? To what is God calling me now? How do I know what's right? How do I know what I'm really supposed to believe and from there how to act, what to practice?

Questions about God and relationship with God included: Is God involved in my life? How? What about prayer? Does it do anything? Does God listen? Does God care - About me - About what I care about - About the world? Does God exist?

Not surprising, some of the questions concerned end of life on earth and what is to come. Examples include: Will I meet God? Is there an afterlife, and if there is, what's it really like? If God is endlessly loving and ready to forgive everybody, will I meet Osama bin Laden or Adolph Hitler in heaven? [aside: I don't want to and I don't want to think about the possibility from a couple of folks in the group]

Several participants were surprised and even disturbed that their colleagues were raising these questions, especially ones that questioned the will, nature and existence of God.

There was a realization that, while they share serious intellectual conversation and bible study regularly, they haven't been so quick to share their own doubts about themselves and their relationship with God. They are accustomed to being in control of their lives, and to finding answers. These questions are not so answerable.

While many of these may not consider the "church" the first place to go for help, they very much want and appreciate the opportunity to meet regularly to study the church's teachings in an environment that encourages stimulating dialogue, and a wonderful thing is their regular participation, despite their demanding and complex lives. A couple of these folks wouldn't think of missing their gathering with this group, even though they have withdrawn from the church in response to recent decisions they don't like! Whether they like it or not, the church does provide a home for them.

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

A group of 16 parents, male and female, of children under 10, five stay-at-home moms and dads, all members of the same congregation, meeting during a Sunday morning Sunday School class.

More than half of the questions raised by these parents had to do with discerning what God's plan was for them, were they doing the right thing, how do you know if you are doing the right thing, how can I serve God better, how to focus more on really important issues instead of getting bogged down with mundane issues, how not to be afraid.

Other questions focused on the existence of God, the reality of God, whether there is life in other places and what that is.

And finally, the continuing questions about sin, evil, suffering were raised.

In addition to spouses, parents, family and friends as sources of help, these parents mentioned factual information – largely from the internet, along with self reflection, faith in God and prayer as resources.

They described church as a resource, a context for exploring questions, a community that is nurturing and supporting. They seek moral guidance from faith and scripture but don't expect absolute answers to complex and probing questions. They seem comfortable knowing that the questions and the freedom to ask and explore them are important parts of their being.

Small Group of Parents and Children, Eastern Congregation

This group of parents and children gathered during a regular Sunday morning meeting of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, and the story of Jesus welcoming the children was the focus that day. When asked what they thought the children in the story would have asked Jesus, they were very shy and slow to respond. The parents held back as well. But, when asked what they would ask if they had been present with Jesus, the children focused on how they would tell Jesus that they loved him and ask where he lives. Because of so much attention on the recent disasters of hurricanes and earthquakes, parents were especially concerned about the hurt and missing persons and wondered why God lets people get sick and suffer.

Children and adults indicated they talk to God, their families (parents, spouses) when they need help with these questions. Both adults and children questioned who would they go to at church if they needed help. One adult indicated that the worship service helps her with her unspoken concerns.

When the parents left and the children continued processing the questions while they worked with the flannel board, they continued to focus on their love of God and their thankfulness for all that God does for us. Their prayers followed in this same vein. 1

CHILDREN'S GROUPS

Summer Camp, Eastern Diocese

During a week-long summer camp program for children ages 6-11, 50 children spent time each day considering questions they would ask God. They included children from various backgrounds and locations. Almost half were from low-income homes, and not all were Episcopalians. Most of the questions arose from the Bible stories they were exploring that focused on responding to the human needs of food, shelter, water, love, etc. and that concerned how God's presence can be recognized in people we don't like or consider sinful. To the surprise of some of the leaders, the children quickly identified with those in need in the story and transferred that concern to members of their own families and others they know who are ill or hurt or poor. The conversation at the close of their story time and the questions shared were very rich. Prayer and journaling were part of the daily cycle, and the children felt very comfortable with this and with sharing their questions and reflections.

Some of the questions dealt with outcasts and outsiders – would God still love me if others didn't, why am I treated like an outcast, why I am unappreciated and unnoticed, why do we have outcasts, why am I lonely.

Others focused on prayers for those who are sick, troubled, in need, and included concerns about why people get sick, why disasters happen.

Still other questions focused on sin and why people hurt each other, why people are bullies and mean, why we do wrong things and if God will forgive us.

There seemed to have been a real concern for the needs of others, especially family and friends, as well as a desire to do what God wants us to do

Second and Third Graders in a Midwestern Sunday School Class

This group of children engaged in meditation and created pictures to illustrate their questions. The wonder of God's creation was a primary focus and response. Questions were raised about why God allows the suffering of storms and earthquakes which have been so prominent in the news lately. These second and third graders wanted to ask God if their lives have been good enough so far and what would their lives be like in the future.

Children Gathered for a Children's Program offered during a National Church Conference

I don't have the notes from this group, but there seemed to be an enthusiastic exchange of questions, along with an array of art renderings that will be shared during the consultation I believe. One concern that was shared in an oral report was how often children asked if there is a heaven and what it is like.

ADULT EDUCATORS AND OTHER CHURCH PROFESSIONALS, PRIMARILY LAY, SOME CLERGY

Nine Women Christian Educators – age range from 30 to 60+, some diversity of denomination, in a southeastern diocese

This group of very busy people really appreciated the extended time for quiet reflection and journaling, and while they enjoyed group discussion, they did not share as much extended conversation as the leader expected. Their questions focused on issues of human suffering and life purpose. They found that their time together was something they yearn for, both for the sharing, but also for the stimulus for individual reflection.

For the most part they spoke of their faith as sustaining them and having a practice of regular prayer, worship, study, reflection. Many have good friends with whom to share. Most do not expect church to be a place that helps them struggle with the “Big Questions” but rather a place for community; although there was a feeling that it is hard to make churches feel like “safe” places to be oneself and feel comfortable raising difficult questions that really can’t be fully answered. They did mention that the church community was a source for Bible study and faith formation. Most don’t expect to get “answers.”

Several mentioned the comfort they get from seeing their own stories in people of the Bible who express their own questions, struggles, and strength found in God.

Group of 12 Christian Educators and Clergy from Two Northeastern Dioceses, all over 40, mixed genders

The response from the group was astonishment at how well the process helped them probe deep questions in a group that does not have ongoing close relationships. One participant, however, expressed the feeling that the church should be about answers and not questions.

Questions focused on [1] sin and violence and why God’s love can’t overpower human’s selfishness and greed -even when all major religions seem to have basic tenets of love and selflessness; on [2] our needing help with loving our enemies and being tolerant of others – especially when we need to overcome the violence seemingly encouraged by our “enemies,” and on [3] longing to discern what God wants for each of us – does God have a plan, hopes for each of us.

Sources of help with their own questions seem to come predominately from their own faith and from reading Scripture. Church is a source of strength for about half of the group. Other sources mentioned were close friends, especially like-minded clergy and church friends; prayer, worship and a bible study group.

While this group expressed the feeling that the institutional church is not very helpful to them, they do find support from clergy and some parishioners. At the same time, they reflected on a lot of lonely wrestling with questions, especially with Bible teachings that are difficult to discern.

Group of 16 Educators, primarily Anglo, 1 African American, of different ages, genders, lay and ordained, all from one diocese in the southeast.

Baptismal experiences and their relationship to daily life were the forming questions around the conversation and reflection emerged. Prayer and silence were important components of this gathering.

A significant area of focus in this groups' conversation was on discerning God's call and plan for each person, how can we be sure of what God wants for us, how do we grow in that call and in relationship with God, how do we reflect that call in our words and actions, who are models for "right living," how do we develop good character traits.

Other questions dealt with God's will for the church, for the larger community, nation, world.

Another group of ongoing questions dealt with how to cope with and overcome the sinfulness of the world – violence, greed, consumerism, and especially with the lack of tolerance and the fighting among people of the same religion (and even denominations and congregations) and those of differing religious beliefs. How do we forgive, especially when some sins are so terribly vicious?

Faith, family, spouse, priest, friends, scripture, prayer were common sources of help to these folks. Church as a source of support got mixed responses. What stood out in this group, though, was the suggestion that questioning is important, and the church can and should provide a safe space that encourages that continual asking and probing. Looking at a group of questions posed by Jesus was a reminder of how frequently that seemed to happen and how much it was a source of teaching and learning. "We shouldn't be afraid of questions or of not having all the answers" was a strong theme. The Episcopal Church has historically been a place where people could raise questions and be comfortable with ambiguity and differences. Why can't we be proud of this and invite others to share the ongoing journey of exploration and openness to God?

MIXED GROUP OF LAY PROFESSIONALS, CLERGY, LAY PARTICIPANTS, VARIED AGES WHO COMMUNICATED BY INTERNET AMONG SEVERAL MIDWESTERN DIOCESES

When Christian Educators in several Midwest dioceses were finding it difficult to organize pre-consultation groups, they decided to pursue the questioning by e-mail. Several diocesan educators did the same within their own dioceses and shared responses to question 1. Notable among the Christian Educators themselves was the time they took to consider where they go for help with their own questions and what the church is and is not currently providing that supports wrestling with questions about God, life, purpose, suffering, human needs, etc.

Like many others, they are struggling with questions of evil, suffering and human disabilities. They wonder about the purpose of their lives and what God is calling them to do. They hope to be able to demonstrate God's love in their own lives and to be more aware of the needs and yearnings of those both within and without the church. Reconciliation and grateful living are hopes they voice.

Like others these educators express support from family and friends when struggling with big questions. They too wish for a continuing group of people with whom they can dig deep and grapple with ongoing questions.

Many find great support from their own education, faith experience, prayer and teachings from the Bible and the church. At the same time, they wish the church would be more intentional in making opportunities for all to engage in dialogue and searching, supported by good solid teaching and a respect for diverse perspectives. More than once, people mentioned the hope that we would return to our Anglican roots of valuing seeking and searching, honoring and caring for one another as we struggle with these age old questions together rather than being fearful of differences and uncertainty.

The various groups that responded somewhat spontaneously over the internet represent a wide range of experiences and concerns. Most seem to have talked in at least a few small groups, and the questions raised often reflected the latest conversation or study being pursued. Nonetheless, the themes that seem to appear in most other conversations around these questions are reflected in these responses as well: human suffering, why God allows hurt and evil to exist, purpose in life, reconciliation, how to live out our baptismal covenant.

Some of the folks are very concrete and raised pretty specific questions about creation, predestination and sinfulness. Some are particularly focused at this time on different religious groups and the strife that exists among them rather than a focus on loving and serving a loving God. Many, particularly children, are very concerned about helping others, pets included, and making the world a safe place in which to live. While adults may be apt to ask about live after death, especially in relation to their own mortality, children ask what is heaven like and are those they love in a good place.

ON-THE-STREET INTERVIEWS WITH ADULTS

One very imaginative Christian educator decided to seek questions from a variety of strangers in hotel lobbies, bars and restaurants in an effort to see how their responses would compare with those voiced in more traditional church settings. For the most part, their religious affiliations are not known. Ages and genders were mixed. Interviews took place in two Midwestern cities where meetings were being held.

As might be expected, many of their questions are very similar to those asked in the groups that have gathered. Why there is so much suffering, disease, disaster in the world is certainly a big one. Why there is evil in the world and why people are so greedy and sinful are other significant questions. Why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people is almost a refrain. Concern about purpose in life and reason for being strike a chord with many people, and certainly everyone wants to be valued. Questions about why life exists and if there are civilized people in other parts of the universe are other prominent issues raised. What is clear is that everywhere people are searching and want a chance to share these questions. Also clear is that many are not finding help with their questions in a church setting. A couple of those stopped in public places indicated they are former church members who simply didn't find what they were seeking in a church and, especially in dogmatic churches, they felt not only the lack of safe space to wrestle with the questions but put down by even having questions.