

The Relational Ask – 18 Questions for Listening Visits

Dr. Ed Kruse – HealthierChurch.org – July 30, 2016

Introduction. Is the term “relational ask” a familiar to you? It is a marvelous way for building relationships, and is the opposite of arguing! Our bias is it is especially applicable in religious or charitable organizations. Think about the relational ask occurring in a board of directors meeting, or church council, or a conflict management intervention, or in any marriage and family.

We define a relational ask as, ***“Refraining from asking others to do something until after we noticed and convinced them that we understood what they meant, to their satisfaction.”*** A relational ask does not permit any debate, and postpones our debating until later, in a healthier way.

These words present a way to start. Training is necessary, perhaps best through an outside set of eyes that facilitate the conversation. An “outside” consultant? Exactly. The problem with an outside consultant is that they don’t understand your situation. The good thing about an outside consultant is the same thing. The following paragraphs introduce the concept of the relational ask, and offer 18 questions for guided conversation.

A relational ask “notifies and nurtures a relationship before we make any request.” It is simple, and impossible (humanly speaking). The basic problem that make it impossible is the self-centeredness we all have. The problem needs God’s solution. We slip into self-centeredness every time we think about what we are going to say while the other person is still speaking! It is ingrained in our human nature. That’s why our current situations have not been resolved. What we have tried is not working for us.

Some of the relational ask has to do with teaching. Some of it has to do with counseling. Equally important, it has to do with consulting. It has to do with all the skills of coaching. We coach the relational ask in a way that creates hope, whether in the first meeting, or in the heat of the moment. It is not a conflict intervention, but postpones, and at times prevents, the need for conflict intervention. A relational ask focuses on skill-sets to develop, take the needed action for renewal as soon as possible.

The principle for congregations and all charitable agencies is, ***“Our relationship of understanding each other is more important than rushing head-long into assumptions or communication breakdowns.”*** Many things happened that contributed to our situation, some of them beyond our control. Most often neglected is that God is in this all the way and is willing to guide us, if we are willing.

For example, St. Paul writes about a congregation, that *“out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity”* (2 Cor. 8:2). That’s transformation! Please read this again. How did this happen? People in the congregation talked to each other. *“Entirely on their own they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service (offering) to the saints (other congregations)”* (2 Cor. 8:4). They said, “We care.” We will give beyond our usual ability to support God’s work in congregations.

We don’t know all the details about this congregation, but we know that they had extreme poverty. Perhaps their congregation had leadership struggles, or unresolved conflict, or failure to reach out into the community. Maybe there were hurt feelings and they did not know how to handle them. Maybe the congregation was stuck. Maybe some were even thinking about “quitting the church!”

Listen. A relational ask is necessary every time we want someone else to do something, especially in a congregation! A relational ask is necessary when we want someone to participate in any congregation ministry. A relational ask necessary when we want someone to give money. A relational ask is necessary when we want someone to “come to church.” A relational ask is necessary when we want someone to give their time in prayer, or Bible-reading, or special worship, or attend a meeting, or help in the church office, or serve on a team, or make phone calls. A relational ask is necessary anytime we want someone to fix something, or care for the lawn or parking lot or usher or lead a task force! This is a faith practice for following Jesus, “Do unto others as I have done unto you.”

Some congregations are very good at this. Some congregations do a terrible job, using non-relational reasons and ways of asking people for anything:

- “You should do this because you are a member”
- “We need to make budget.”
- “If we don’t do something soon, something bad is going to happen”
- “You should feel guilty if you don’t give”

Criticizing, condemning and complaining are not included in the list of spiritual gifts. These are not the way to carry out God’s mission of reconciling the world in Jesus Christ. If we do not realize the importance and urgency, there is no reason to read any further.

On the other hand, if we are committed to doing something about this epidemic in our culture through our congregation, read on. On each in-person visit (perhaps at a neutral site), we choose the first question that we feel will help us get to know them better. Sometimes it is even a different first question than one that is listed, such as, “How long have you lived in this area?” We show an interest in them (and that question might NOT help us to get to know someone better). We re-word the questions to make them natural, and we pace the conversation in a way that feels natural for THEM! (including when it seems good to close this visit and check out whether they would like to get together again). We close the conversation with a short prayer (see below).

Below are my personal set of “18 questions;” and we do not use them all, or even in order. We simply pick the ones we feel God leading us to ask, on what we call a Listening Visit. Every Listening Visit we make is different, so we avoid inventing a formula that everyone should use. Our only goal is to cover the questions God leads us to use and then ask, “Do you feel listened to?” until they say, “Yes, I really felt like you heard what we said.”

1. Tell me about your family (We share one sentence about our family)
2. How did you hear about our congregation?
3. Where have you worshipped in the past?
4. What did you like best about that congregation? (We share a positive experience)
5. What kind of things did you participate in in that congregation?
6. What are you looking for in your next congregation? (We ask, “Is there anything else?”)
7. May I share with you what I appreciate most in our congregation? (We share our reason, especially if we find something that is similar to something they said). “At this time, I’m learning... Believe me, I’m just learning.”
8. What do you need from a congregation?
9. What gift do you have that you might like to use for God’s work?
10. How would you describe where you are on your faith journey? (“Thank you so much for sharing so sincerely! That was beautiful.”).

11. This is one of my favorite questions. May I ask you to describe a time you received a gift that was special? (We share our memory of a special gift we received.)
12. How would you describe a time you did something or gave a gift that was meaningful to someone else? (We share something we did that was special to someone.)
13. Why would you say giving to God's mission through our congregation important to you? (We share, "That question made me think. What I came up with was...").
14. When have you experienced making a commitment to grow in giving your time, or a skill, or money to God, and was that a good experience or not? (We share, "When I first made a commitment it was difficult because I thought it was a gift to an organization, and when I discovered it was giving to God through a congregation, it was helpful").
15. How do you decide what you get involved in?
16. Are you accustomed to proportionate giving, in a percent of our income to God's mission? (We share our story, especially a struggle we had at certain times in our lives or family's life.)
17. Have you ever tithed 10% to God's mission through your congregation?
18. Have you ever thought about faith being a life-long faith practice? How do you think that helps? (We share how that helps us)

Close with this prayer, "***Dear God, thank you for being with us during this visit. Bless our conversation and our relationship with each other and with You. In Jesus' name. Amen.***"

For Further Discussion:

1. If you knew that someone was in danger of never knowing Jesus Christ unless you shared what Jesus means to you, what would you do?
2. If you knew that people somewhere else would not know Jesus Christ unless our congregation gave them financial support, or supported a missionary in another country, or if our congregation plans a mission trip, what would you do?
3. Which of your priorities stand out to you in this verse, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be" (Matthew 6:21). How do you think a person's heart changes?
4. If we plan to use these questions for generating growth in financial giving, we ask for further training in how to do so, and then expect to experience the joy of growing, with God providing. We pray after our visit for the Holy Spirit to bless the people we visited.