

# Seven Questions Every Church Should Ask

By The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

"The church will need to learn to speak the language of culture while maintaining the language of faith." The Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan began his seminal work *Insight* with this statement: "When a dog has nothing to do, it goes to sleep. When a man has nothing to do, he may ask a question."

A good question unleashes imagination, provokes curiosity and expands our vision. Some questions are so full of complexity that no adequate answer is possible, but that does not prevent us from considering multiple perspectives, surface more possibilities and ask the "what ifs" that result in different scenarios, responses and outcomes. In the end, inquiry beats certainty every time.

With that in mind, I want to suggest seven questions every church should ask itself.

**1: What would be lost, and how would the world be worse off, if our church ceased to exist?**

Today, secular organizations are providing many of the services that the church used to fulfill. From social service agencies to seniors' gatherings to self-help groups to yoga classes, many of our physical, emotional and relational needs are being provided by a plethora of organizations, none of which are religious. What then, is the unique purpose of the church that no other organization can provide? Why does the church exist? What would be lost if the church ceased to exist?

**2: How does our church add value to people's lives that they cannot live without—whether they know it or not?**

Most secular businesses understand that the products they make need to add value to people's lives – otherwise their products would not sell. Think of people standing in line for an iPhone because of the perceived value of the product. When my family went to the Cheesecake Factory in Buffalo, New York for dinner recently, we waited 80 minutes for a table. The place was packed, and I thought, "Gee, would these people wait that long to attend church?" What value are successful businesses offering that the church is not? And just as important, what can we do about it?

### **3: What challenges in the fulfillment of mission does our church face and what can we do to bring about that new thing God wants our church to be?**

There is something subversive, disruptive, playful about this question, because it is asking us to consider what rules and regulations are presently setting boundaries in how we do church. Do these rules and regulations make sense in light of today's missional challenges? And if not, why do we continue to do them? What if we had the freedom and flexibility to move beyond these rules and regulations and reshape the way we do church? How would that enhance our ability to engage in mission? To put it another way, is our present way of doing church generating the results we want? If not, why not – and what can we do about it?

### **4: What are the barriers to seeing reality that our church needs to move beyond?**

Hindrances to effective ministry are often the result of our own restrictive thinking. They are more mental than actual, more inward than outward, and based on outdated assumptions rather than present reality. Every time a new way of doing church arises, someone inevitably insists, "We can't!" But why? What if we said, "We can!" What if we gave ourselves permission to imagine, innovate and create something different that has the potential to connect the church effectively with Canadian culture? Perhaps we ought to consider what our church would look like if it were a new church plant. What would be the ideal design for mission and ministry today? What would our church look like to most effectively reach people in our community?

### **5: What issues does our church need to face within the next year so that five years from now, we won't have to say, "We wish we had..."**

This question creates a sense of urgency. It is no secret that demographic trends are not favorable to the church and that many of our parishes are living on borrowed time. And yet, we believe in a God of resurrection. What if we began to act as communities of resurrection—faithful and fearless, willing to risk and try some new things, putting our emphasis on ministry and not maintenance, and seriously engaging a new generation that does not sing the Lord's song as we do? Could we reverse the decline? I don't know, but isn't it worth a try?

### **6: If money were not an issue, where would you like your church to be five years from now?**

Here is an invitation to envision a new kind of church for a new kind of world. Remember George Bernard Shaw's observation famously quoted by Robert Kennedy: "Some people see things as they are and ask 'Why?' Others see things as they could be and ask, 'Why not?'" Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, says, "Vision is a set of guiding principles and practices and shared pictures of the future that provide energy that draws us into the future." Any true vision will deal honestly with reality, no matter how brutal or unpleasant, but also give us hope that tomorrow can be better than today. Think of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech,

and you have a fine example of vision. In developing a vision for your church, it needs to inspire and motivate people to sacrifice, serve and give generously. The end result needs to be worth the present effort. Above all, people must sense the purpose and will of God for the future of the church.

### **7: In what ways can we affirm “Jesus is Lord” without appearing to be bigots?**

This is the evangelistic question for the church as it ministers in a secular, multicultural, multi-religious Canada where our neighbours are just as likely to be Hindus, Moslems, and Buddhists, agnostics or atheists as Christians. In this highly pluralized world of ours, how do we communicate the truth claims of historic Christianity without appearing narrow-minded, intolerant, or exclusivist? The church will need to learn a new kind of bilingualism: speaking the language of culture while maintaining the language of faith.

There you have it – seven questions that every church needs to ask itself. No one has all the answers to these questions. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that there are no “one size fits all” answers, but that each church will need to develop its own style of ministry in connecting with its own unique environment. This is a “bottom up” rather than a “top down” process that needs to be discerned at the local level rather than imposed by any hierarchy. Churches that can rethink their assumptions of ministry, reformulate their mission strategy and re-examine their way of doing church are more likely to revive and renew than the ones that do not. These “missional” churches will lead us into the future—confident and resilient, open and affirming, life-giving and liberating, with a compelling gospel message that centers on Jesus combined with flexible methods of ministry.

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