

Guidelines for Wondering with Adults

By Michael Gibson, 2010

Most Friends are familiar with the use of queries and discussion questions in adult religious education settings but might not be accustomed to *wondering* with adults. All three tools are valuable, but sometimes one is more appropriate than the others for a given topic or setting. A mix of discussion questions, queries, and wonderings can add interest and depth to a session. Experience will help the facilitator know when to use which tool.

“Wonderings” (actually statements that begin with “I wonder”) are related to queries, but may involve significant differences. Both can go deep using different routes. What we call wonderings, or wondering questions, are not as much about *questioning of* as about *mutual wondering with* participants. At times, wonderings can be perceived as kinder, gentler and less guilt inducing than queries. Since there are no right or wrong responses to wonderings, participants are unlikely to feel put on the spot. With many queries, there is an implied correct answer that everyone is to aim for. When participants do not feel they can give the “correct” answer with integrity, they might remain silent or even shut down.

Here is an example of a typical query from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith & Practice* (page 208): Do I recognize and face disagreements and other situations that put me in conflict with others? A wondering route might go something like this: "From time to time we all find ourselves in conflict with family or friends. I wonder what helps you to be faithful when in conflict with those you love. [Pause for response, then continue with the next wondering.] I wonder what in your spiritual or relational toolbox helps you, or might help you, do your own internal work at these times." When using such a wondering route, in the spirit of genuine openness and trust, the facilitator is acknowledging that we are all in the same boat and that by sharing we might be of aid to one another on the journey.

Below is a set of guidelines to help explain wonderings as a facilitation tool. Some positive examples of wonderings will be offered along with negative ones. The negative examples are not really wonderings at all, even though some of them might be appropriate, with modifications, as discussion questions or queries.

1. An invitation to wonder must have integrity. In other words, when a facilitator says "I wonder . . .," that person must actually be wondering, not “fishing” for a particular answer, and not using a question to vent, to express an opinion or to veil further instruction.

Negative examples: I wonder why our meeting community continuously ignores or plays down differences for the sake of “keeping the peace.” I wonder how you live into the reality that difference can be a blessing and not just a challenge.

Positive example (true wondering): I wonder how genuine differences within our meeting community have either challenged or enriched you in recent months.

2. A wondering is open-ended and relevant to the purpose of the session and the participants’ experience (and this is true of many queries as well). It is not a test of knowledge, comprehension or

fact recall but something that moves all in the direction of entering the content and the participants' experience more deeply. The facilitator cannot anticipate the responses to wonderings. There is room for surprise and reflection.

Negative examples: I wonder if you are aware of how many one-time visitors we have had in the past year. I wonder what the yearly meeting recommends that meetings do to be more welcoming to visitors and newcomers.

Positive examples: I wonder what conditions help you to feel safe and welcome when in a new environment. [Pause for responses.] I wonder what helps, or would help, you to feel integrated and safe within our meeting community.

3. When using wonderings, each response is welcomed and accepted because it is seen as the fruit of reflection, imagination and/or personal experience. The facilitator assumes goodwill and sincerity unless given obvious indications otherwise. There are no right or wrong responses, only sincere or insincere ones. Although some responses may seem peculiar or off-task, each response is received with respect. Facilitators allow themselves the possibility of growing into greater understanding or appreciation of each response. Contemplative pacing, with adequate time allowed for reflection, tends to foster deeper wondering. Silence need not be feared; the lack of ready responses to each wondering is not necessarily an indication of boredom or lack of interest.

4. The facilitator avoids guiding participants to his or her own pre-conceived conclusions through the use of pseudo-wondering because any manipulation can create resistance and destroy the trust needed for open, honest sharing.

5. The order of wonderings is important. When a summarizing or particularly pointed wondering comes first, it can sound like the facilitator is testing to see whether participants got the point of a presentation. This can stifle wondering and shut down open sharing. This kind of wondering can, however, work quite well when it comes second or third in order. It is helpful for the first wondering to be expressly experiential and tied to the moment.

Negative example: We have heard three people this morning share their stories about journeying towards inclusion. I wonder what we can conclude from their testimony.

Positive examples: Today we have heard three meeting members share about their journeys toward full inclusion in our meeting community. [first wondering:] I wonder what you most appreciate about the sharing you have heard. [second wondering:] I wonder what you have heard that feels particularly important to you right now either in your journey or in our corporate one. [third wondering:] I wonder what speaks to you with particular power or grace as a member of this meeting community. [fourth wondering:] I wonder what we might do as a meeting community to be more welcoming and inclusive.

6. Participants often have important questions and wonderings of their own, and it's important to make space for them. Participants might know a lot about the topic of the session, but each hearing and experiencing is new, and the wondering serves to welcome this freshness and invite deeper reflection. Sometimes what participants raise might threaten to derail even the most careful preparations of the facilitator, but because we want to always be open to how the Spirit is working in the group and because we genuinely care about everyone's experience, it is important to not be too rigid in one's group facilitation or time management. An unexpected question or wondering arising from the group could well become the most important part of the session.

7. If the group does not have an answer to a participant’s “weighty” question or if it is clear the asker is seeking a kind of counsel that would be inappropriate for the setting, the facilitator may invite the group to silently hold the matter in the Light. There is power in simply joining others on the journey in the moment. And it is a mark of strength and maturity, not weakness, to acknowledge that one does not have all the answers. At some point after the session, the facilitator might offer ministry to the asker privately, if this feels rightly ordered.

Acknowledgement: These guidelines took inspiration from the children’s religious education work of Sonya Stewart and Jerome Berryman. See *Young Children and Worship* and *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 1*.

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