

The questions we don't ask

By [Diane Roth](#)

February 17, 2015

The other day my husband was telling me about a conversation he'd had with a young colleague of his, recently married. They have been contemplating getting a dog, a big move for them. When he asked how the process was moving along, his colleague confessed that he was very nervous about the prospect, and thought it might be a mistake, although he also thought it might also be inevitable.

"Did you ask him why he was nervous about it?" I asked my husband.

"No," he replied. "Why?"

Long ago, when I took the training for church-based community organizing, we learned the art of the one-to-one conversation. We learned to have intentional conversations with parish members and neighbors, and one thing we really worked on was listening for the next question, learning to be curious about the person we were talking to and the stories they wanted to tell us, not just what we wanted to hear.

I'll tell you what: it's not as easy as it sounds.

I don't know why my husband didn't ask his friend the next question about the dog, something about which (I'll admit) I was quite curious. Possibly he didn't want to pry. Or perhaps he was already thinking about something he was more interested in than the story of the dog. Maybe he thought he already had a pretty good idea why getting a dog sounded stressful, and assumed that the reasons would be the same for his colleague.

I find that it is, more often than not, and despite my training, the same for me.

It's not the questions I ask that get me into trouble.

It's the questions I don't ask, because I am not curious, because I think I know the answer already, because I am making assumptions based on my own life and my own experiences.

A member of our congregation, a young single dad, started bringing his significant other and her children to church on occasion. I started getting to know them and having conversations with them. They even asked if I would officiate at their wedding, to which I said, gladly, "Yes."

And then one day, I saw pictures of them on Facebook. They had been visiting a relative's church. There was the opportunity to be baptized that day. There were pictures of them all, spontaneously, getting baptized.

"I have always wanted to get baptized with my children!" was the caption underneath the pictures.

Though I am a pastor, and I think that baptism is one of the best things we do (or, more precisely, that God does), I never thought to ask her the question, "Are you baptized? Would you like to be?" I made assumptions based on my own experiences—assumptions about what she needed and didn't need in her faith community, assumptions about her hopes and dreams for her family.

I can't help wondering what I might find out if I learn to listen, and be curious, and ask the next question, the question I'm not even thinking about, at least not now.

I think I know why people are here, or even why they aren't. I think people are here because of Sunday school, or because we play the hymns they like, or because our worship service is at a convenient time for them, or they have friends who go here. Maybe that's it. But how do I know?

Maybe they really want a transformed life.

It's the questions we don't ask that get us into trouble.

*Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)*