

# Think Questions

## Devotional

### Romans 12:8c

#### Wesleyan Methodist National Board, Australia

02.05.13

My thoughts to you today reflect a journey I am traveling in my retirement years. The trail I am following is in pursuit of questions, good questions; critical questions that boards of Christian institutions need to ask as they seek to “govern diligently.” (Romans 12:8c). Board members of strong and effective boards ask the right questions. Thank you for inviting me to share my journey with the Australian National Board of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. I appreciate deeply the request to assist you as a Board in increasing your efficiency and effectiveness on behalf of those who elected you to this position.

My remarks build on the assumption that outstanding boards shape great leaders and outstanding leaders embrace strong boards. This assumption requires that both the designated leader and elected board members ask the big questions.

As you well know from your years of experience from working with various boards of different sizes, organizations, and local churches, for this assumption to work itself out in the leader/board relationship, Christian maturity and mutual respect is required and assumed in this context. Christian convictions about leading and being led will be evidenced in strong and effective boards as the policy shaping and decision making process of governing boards is experienced; convictions such as:

1. Speak Gracefully. *Watch the words you speak.*
2. Live Gratefully. *Don't whine, be grateful.*
3. Listen Intently. *Seek first to understand.*
4. Forgive Freely. *Be proactive in extending forgiveness.*
5. Lead Decisively. *Combine deep humility, with clear vision and intense resolve.*
6. Care Deeply. *Value people, not power.*
7. Pray Earnestly. *Pray for change in you even as you pray for change in others.*

Local churches of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australia rightly assume that the members of the National Board are mature and deeply committed Christians who can engage each other on the Board with penetrating questions about working together effectively as Christians and as a Board. Questions such as:

1. If "in Christ, all things are made new," then how does our relationship with Christ transform and convert the way we live and lead within this Board?
2. How can we work together as a Board so that relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?
3. In the midst of conflicting expectations and often seemingly irreconcilable differences, what does it mean for the NBA of the WMC in Australia to lead in these conflicting situations, really lead, with the mind of Christ?

It is possible that the very functions of this Board can nurture transformative, redemptive and reconciling relationships within and between board members. And, in the process, the National Board can model for pastors and lay leaders on boards of local churches throughout this great country a path towards increased efficiency and effectiveness even in the midst of honest and intense differences within the Board over mission, vision, values and traditions.

### **Good Questions. Honest Questions. First Questions.**

*What* do board members do? Why do they do what they do? *How* do board members do what they are supposed to do? Members of various boards will perhaps answer these questions differently dependent upon the nature of the organization. The National Board, your district boards and local church board members, for instance, respond to these questions differently than members of college boards or community not-for-profit boards, like the local YMCA board or a community service organization board. Knowing the responsibilities of board members is the first step in strengthening the governing boards on which the individuals serve.

In a cross-country airplane trip, a discussion ensued regarding not-for-profit governing boards. I was reading a book on board development. The person next to me was the chief training and development officer for a large insurance firm and an officer in the national governing board for training and development professionals. In the midst of our

discussion, I asked the training professional, “What is the *mission* of the professional governing board on which you serve? What is the *vision* for the organization? Is there a *strategic plan* for the national organization that has been approved by the governing board?”

A fascinating discussion pursued until the plane landed in a distant city. She could not state the mission or define the vision for the organization. There was no strategic plan. She wanted a copy of the book on board development!

Strong and effective board members know and communicate the mission, vision, and values of the organization. They ask good questions that lead to strong policies and decision-making with a laser beam commitment to the organization’s mission vision, and values.

### **What is the mission and vision of *this* Board?**

Dr. William C. Crouthers, president emeritus of Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York, USA, and current president of PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATES, a consulting organization for higher education presidents and boards, discusses below the differences between mission, vision, and values statements and documents. He believes, as perhaps you do that:

**A Mission Statement** is a statement about the basic purposes of the organization. It is a statement about the organization’s reasons for existing. A mission statement may grow out of discussions around the following six questions:

1. Who are we?
2. What are the basic social needs we exist to meet?
3. What do we do to respond to those needs?
4. How should we respond to our key stakeholders?
5. What is our philosophy and what are our core values?

6. What makes us distinctive or unique?

The mission statement clarifies an organization's primary intentions. An organization is a means to an end. It is not the end in itself. In other words, an organization serves a greater purpose that is more important than the organization itself. A mission statement will define the organization's *role, bring focus to activity, and eliminate ambiguity concerning its reason for being.*

**Vision**, on the other hand,

1. Is a "see" word. What might the organization "look like" ten years from now?
2. Suggests a future orientation – an image of the future, an end result.
3. Connotes a standard of excellence, an ideal that can be realized.
4. Has the quality of uniqueness. What in the future should make the organization singular and unequalled?

*Vision is a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization.*

**Vision evolves out of answers to these questions.**

1. If we could invent the future, what future would we invent for the organization?
2. About what do we have a burning passion that we would like to see expressed through our work?
3. What could be the distinctive role or contribution of the organization in the world?

4. What is our collective agenda? What do we want to prove?

5. What is our destiny?

**Values** tell us how we expect to travel to where we want to go. *It describes how we intend to operate as we pursue our vision.* Governing values would include the following:

1. The lines that we will not cross (law/ethics/ morals/fiscal maleficence/other).
2. How we expect to regard our constituents and stakeholders.
3. How we want to behave toward each other.

I remember working with the Mount Vernon Nazarene University campus community and governing board to craft the following vision statement for the institution.

“Mount Vernon Nazarene University:  
An academic community of faith,  
Shaping Christian leaders and disciples  
For lifelong service and global impact.”

Again, what is the mission and vision of *this* Board?

### **Questions about the Responsibilities of the Board**

Let’s drill down deeper. Strong and effective boards, as you know, think and work in the three modes of governance.

Responsibility #1: *Fiduciary*. This mode of governance deals with the stewardship of tangible and overall assets of the church or the organization. Fiduciary responsibility includes oversight of the church or institutional finances and the approval of an annual operating budget. These concerns compel boards to establish policies for the funds raised and money received for the organization. Is a realistic operating budget in place? Are resources used wisely? These are leadership questions.

Fiduciary responsibilities ensure that legal and financial integrity is maintained. Are the results monitored? Is due diligence pursued? College boards, for instance, exercise their fiduciary responsibility for the financial health, academic integrity of the college, and the spiritual well being of the students who study and the employees who work at the school. What are the fiduciary responsibilities of this Board?

Responsibility #2: *Strategic*. A governing board is responsible for a strategic plan for the church or organization. For the National Board, the strategic planning process may and perhaps does involve other key stakeholders in the denomination. It is the Board's responsibility, however, to insure that a strategic plan is in place. This requires a close working relationship between pastors, lay leaders, congregations, and the district boards of administration. How is the strategic plan for *this* Board designed, communicated, and modified? Are you proactive and intentional in strategic planning? Does the operating budget reflect the priorities of the strategic plan adopted by the Board?

Responsibility #3: *Representative*. This responsibility of a governing board is rooted in the values, traditions, and beliefs organization. Problems are framed in light of the heritage of the local churches, districts, and the denomination at a national level. I am sure that your programs at the national level reflect the values of the denomination. How do the expenditures facilitate the fulfilling of the Board's mission and vision? How is the ethos of the denomination communicated through the various programs? Does the way you process those decisions reflect the holiness testimony you profess?

Board members are representatives in two ways. They bring issues from the districts and churches to the National Board, and the Board reinforces the mission and vision of the denomination to the districts and local churches at the grass roots level.

You know when your Board members ask good questions. The process leads to strong fiduciary, strategic, and representative policies and decision making. Keep asking these questions with a resolute commitment to the Board's mission, vision, and values.

### **'Sense Making' and 'Problem Framing' Questions**

Strong and effective board members focus on value defining, forward looking questions that address the legal, planning, and representative or restorative concerns of the faith community for which the Board is responsible. In the same way, 'sense making' and 'problem framing' questions help the Board make sense of the issues before them and frame the problems in ways that bring focus and intentionality to the discussions.

Visional questions that help you address “identity” issues and clarify the missional purpose of the National Board are similar to a journalist’s foundational questions for any report: who, what, where, when and how. Asked another way, you probe these questions:

1. Who are we?
2. Where are we...now?
3. Where are we going?
4. What is our end goal?
5. How will we get there?
6. Why is it important to get there?
7. How will we know when we get there?

Board members vigorously, and sometimes vehemently, discuss these and other questions. Policy options decisions are then made within the Board meetings. Whatever differences exist within the Board meeting are placed aside when a majority vote is taken. Communication of Board action **outside** the Board meetings is made with a **unified** voice. The Board has spoken. Everyone gets behind the decision made. No minority reports. You move ahead united.

Shape the Board agenda as appropriate with time to thoroughly discuss these questions. Often, these ‘sense making’ and problem framing’ questions are included in the report of the national leader/chair. For sure, key reports are received. However, the Board agenda should be developed intentionally by planning significant time during the Board meetings for regular, purposeful discussion of key questions. Some boards structure their meetings around three broad categories: (1) Items for Dissemination; (2) Items for Discussion; (3) (3) Items for Decision.

With this model, the items for discussion are each stated in the form of a question. This discipline helps focus the discussion on the real questions being considered.

Good ‘sense making’ and ‘problem framing’ questions can lead to a strong synergistic partnership between the National Board, district leaders and the local church pastors.

Questions like:

How would we define the “ethos” of this Board?

What are we thinking or dreaming about regarding the Board?

What did we learn that was of greatest value this year?

What are we hearing from the districts and local churches that we need to hear?

What are our concerns as a National Board?

What outcomes do we desire?

What questions do we need to ask to better understand the overarching problem/s we are facing?

When members engage these questions or topics, the Board is freed from non-substantive issues. The important questions are asked and thoughtfully, prayerfully, and honestly discussed. A stronger bond emerges between local church/district leaders and the National Board.

The National Board, and perhaps district board, meetings may be more substantive and focused on the strategies needed for the mission and vision implementation as opposed to being dragged down often by the drudgery of detail in just managing the organization.

It is critically important to determine what this National Board *can* and *should* do that no other entity in the denomination nationally can do. For instance,

“How can we collaborate more effectively on a national level with sister denominations or educational institutions to more effectively accomplish our mission, train our pastors and resource our laity?”

New direction for the future is often forged together when these ‘sense making’ and ‘problem framing’ questions are asked as opposed to returning to or dwelling on the past. Solutions to the significant problems are honestly addressed; decisions are made and then implemented. Resources are aligned. Action plans are created. Pastors, district leaders, and the National Board, and perhaps sister denominations can move in the same



direction. All can be energized.

### **Strategic Questions in “Crisis Situations”**

Pragmatist, philosopher and educator John Dewey proposed that, “A problem well defined is a problem half solved.” In other words, work to clarify the real problem or issue that is creating the crisis or misunderstanding. Crises sometimes arise within the life of faith communities. Asking good questions is essential for these crisis situations to be addressed properly, for the relationships within the boards to mature, and the work of the board to be effective.

A strong National Board chair is not afraid of “tough” questions from the Board and to the Board during these times of crisis. Nor should he/she be afraid of questions that look back, evaluate the present, and anticipate the future. Together, you determine,

What is the real issue? (Too often we deal only with the symptoms)

What *is* the question?

What are the facts?

What are the possible solutions to this crisis we are facing?

What are we doing **right** that is essential for the long-term strength of the National Board?

What are we *not* doing that is fundamental to the future of our denomination?

What needs to change?

### **Relational Questions (that need to be asked)**

Let's probe even more deeply. As you think of the people with whom you work on this and other boards, what kinds of people are hardest for you to accept?

1. Why do you think this is so?
2. How do you think this makes God feel?
3. How do you think God sees that person—or those persons?
4. How does your response affect your own relationship to God?

Pastors, district leaders, and the National Board chair often work with their governing boards, I suspect, in the creative and growth-producing tension of holding to your vision for the future while holding just as firmly to the realities of the present, including board members who differ, and often collide, with the leader. In the process of working through this tension, the leader and the board can experience the transforming, redemptive, and reconciling work of God in their relationships. What a powerful witness to believers and non-Christians alike!

Reflect on these practical lessons as you work together on the Board to “accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Romans 15:7 NIV.

1. Good and godly people often see things differently.
2. Many issues over which we experience conflict are culturally, ethnically, local community, even family based, and not a violation of scripture.
3. Differences that divide us have the potential to alienate members of the body of Christ and to impact negatively the work of God in our communities.
4. Acceptance of our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ with us is to love, respect and honor them, as God loves them.
5. Acceptance of others implies that we can learn from them.

The overarching question is this: How can we mature in Christlikeness and increasingly reflect an acceptance of others (Romans 15:7) within the community of faith we serve as we function as a National Board with integrity and grace?

## Summary

This chapter began with some Christian convictions resolute in strong and effective boards. These convictions about the leader and the led are evidenced in governing boards, like the National Board, as the policy-shaping and decision-making processes are experienced; convictions such as:

1. Speak Gracefully. *Watch the words you speak.*
2. Live Gratefully. *Don't whine, be grateful.*
3. Listen Intently. *Seek first to understand.*
4. Forgive Freely. *Be proactive in extending forgiveness.*
5. Lead Decisively. *Combine deep humility with clear vision and fierce resolve.*
6. Care Deeply. *Value people, not power.*
7. Pray Earnestly. *Pray for change in you even as you pray for change in others.*

Think questions. Not just any questions, strong and effective board members ask the *right* questions. The questions I have asked you today are only examples or models. Each board will shape the specific questions needed for a particular time and setting.

Asking the right questions is a means to an end. These 'sense making' and 'problem framing' questions do enable us to more clearly visualize the strategic direction or identify the 'real' crisis. Good questions clear the way for a united embrace of the Board's mission and vision so that every issue before the Board is approached with a laser beam commitment to this mission and vision.

Strategic questions lead to answers that shape the direction toward which key goals are pointed, and a comprehensive implementation plan is framed. These questions help identify clearly the parameters within which you work and the outcomes desired for your Board responsibilities.

Answers to "Good Questions, Honest Questions, and First Questions" enable boards to lead decisively even if some good and godly people with whom you work continue to differ over the policy decisions. With the above mentioned convictions motivating board members, and with answers to the right questions answered and addressed, the National Board and other boards on which members serve can move ahead in deep humility, clear vision, and intense resolve.

The National Board may not have immediate answers to the all of the fiduciary, strategic, or representative challenges before you as a governing board for the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australia. You must, however, ask the *right* questions as you seek to increase your efficiency and effectiveness, and “govern diligently” (Romans 12:8c NIV).

Amen.

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