

Appreciative Inquiry: An Overview

Appreciative Inquiry is a very effective approach to changing organizational culture. It offers an effective and exciting way to re-think the way organizations make sense of the world and the basic interactions between individuals.

Appreciative Inquiry (often known as AI) was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s. The approach is based on the premise that 'organizations change in the direction in which they inquire.' So an organization which inquires into problems will keep finding problems but an organization which attempts to appreciate what is best in itself will discover more and more that is good. It can then use these discoveries to build a new future where the best becomes more common.

AI Assumptions¹

- 1) In every organization, some things work well.
- 2) What we focus on becomes our reality.
- 3) Asking questions influences the group.
- 4) People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- 5) If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.
- 6) It is important to value differences.
- 7) The language we use creates our reality.
- 8) Organizations are heliotropic, i.e. they grow toward the light.
- 9) Outcomes should be useful.
- 10) All steps are collaborative.

AI Processes and Steps²

- 1) Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.
- 2) Inquire into stories of life-giving forces.
- 3) Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry.
- 4) Create shared images of a preferred future.
- 5) Find innovative ways to create that future.

There are different models for how to conduct a full blown Appreciative Inquiry in an organization. Some refer to the 5-D model of Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Others speak of the 4-I approach of Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, and Innovate. All of them incorporate the five processes and steps listed above.

Self Study work during an interim time typically focuses on the first four processes and steps listed above. The innovation/delivery phase may begin during an interim period but often this is the work of the next phase of ministry once a new minister is installed.

¹ From the book Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change by Mark Lau Branson

² From the book Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change by Mark Lau Branson

Appreciative Inquiry and Theology³

Appreciative Inquiry can be considered an incarnational and resurrection oriented philosophy and process. AI is incarnational in that it relies on a participative process in which the change agent becomes part of that which is being changed. Jesus the Redeemer did not stand as an expert to the side or above humanity rather he embraced humanity and became one of us. Likewise in AI we do not seek to apply some external wisdom to a system but to work from within the system to discover the system's wisdom and life giving properties.

Appreciative inquiry can also be considered resurrection oriented in that it seeks that which is life-giving even in the midst of death. The Judeo-Christian experience is one of redemption; of God bringing freedom out of slavery, of life out of death. From the social construction perspective that human experience is arbitrarily punctuated, appreciative inquiry can be used to place a comma rather than a period at the end of tragedy so that those involved can experience new life. It is interesting to note that crucifixion does not bring people together; rather it ultimately causes people to scatter and hide. Resurrection and its accompanying hope, on the other hand, brings people together and gives them a life giving purpose.

The scriptures are full of the exhortation to "behold", for example "Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us." Appreciative inquiry makes use of this type of beholding, or "right seeing" as the contemplative traditions teach. We are encouraged in scriptures to not only behold the goodness of God in its current expressions but also to behold a future, in which there will be no more death, or mourning, wailing or pain for the old order will pass away. It is from the vantage point of this future that we perceive our world and the world in which we live. And it is from the image of this future that we are inspired to freely follow Christ. Likewise in the life of congregations positive images of the things God has done in their life inspire positive images of what God can do in their future and how congregants can share in the unfolding of God's grace.

Similarly St. Paul tells us: "Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard. Then the God of peace will be with you."

Philippians 4:8-9

³ From the Clergy Leadership web site: <http://www.clergyleadership.com/clergy/ai-theol.html>

Congregational Visioning Meetings

I. Background for the Congregational Visioning Meetings

- A. The model outlined here for congregational visioning meetings is based on the insights of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a model for conducting organizational self-studies and creating organizational change.
- B. Congregation members will be asked to come to a visioning meeting in which they will conduct paired interviews. The self-study team will design questions for these interviews based on what it is they would like to learn from the congregation.
- C. The following are an example of interview questions:
 1. Values: Why do you think belonging to a church community is important to you? What first attracted you to our church? Describe what was happening at our church at the time you joined that made this a place you wanted to be?
 2. Inspiration: What is the most positive thing happening at our church right now from your perspective? Describe an experience or a time when you felt most proud to be associated with our church. What was happening? What made it such a meaningful experience for you?
 3. Responsibilities: When you think about your relationship with the church, what do you feel are your responsibilities to the congregation? What do you feel the congregation's responsibility is to you?
 4. Outreach: How do you think people in the community view our congregation? How could we be more relevant to people in the community?
 5. Hopes and Wishes: If you could create any future for our congregation, what three wishes would you have for our ministry that would increase our vitality? What priorities would you set for the next 5-10 years?
 6. Pastoral Leadership: What are the most important characteristics, traits, or skills you believe our next pastor must have to lead us where we want to go? What type of leader would be ideal?
- D. Set a date for two congregational visioning meetings. Encourage congregation members to come to BOTH meetings since different questions will be asked at each meeting. Plan to use three interview questions per meeting. Invite people to come for an hour and a half long meeting.
- E. After congregants interview each other, they will go into small groups to report back on the major themes that came out of their interviews. The self-study team needs to designate small group leaders to facilitate those discussions. Make sure that each small group is not larger than 8-10 people or it will take too long to go through this process. You will need to estimate how many people will come and plan accordingly for small group leaders. Plan where each group will meet and be sure that newsprint is available for the small group leader to list the themes that come out of each interview question. Use one sheet per interview question to list all the themes that came out of the interviews (many themes will repeat among the interviews – just list each unique theme as it is shared).
- F. The final process of the meeting will be an opportunity for everyone to see what came out of each small group discussion. After the small group discussions, the leader will bring the newsprint sheets into the large meeting room and hang them

on the wall. Group them by interview question. Every small group sheet for question 1 will be hung together. On a different wall, hang all the sheets for question 2 and similarly for question 3 on a different wall.

- G. The goal of this final process is to help zero in on the common themes that resonate for the majority of members around each interview question. At the end of the small group discussion, the leader will hand out three red dots for each interview question (if you did three questions then give nine dots to each person.) You can get these in any office supply store. When the people return to the large group meeting room they are invited to mill around and read the newsprint from all the small groups. They are supposed to place their three dots next to the themes for each question that resonate the most strongly with them in that moment. They can either distribute the three dots to three different themes or place all three next to one. They should do this for all of the interview questions.
- H. When the self-study team meets to distill this information, they will look over the newsprint for each question and be able to see where the congregational “pulse” is at by seeing the cluster of dots by particular themes. They can use this information as they work on their mission statement, their congregational vision, and the leadership requirements for the next pastor.

II. Outline for Congregational Visioning Meeting

- A. As people arrive, give them names tags that have a number for the small group they will go to after they have conducted their paired interviews.
- B. Opening Instructions: Once everyone has arrived, give an overview for how the meeting will work. Distribute the interview questions on a piece of paper that provides space to take notes on what their partner is sharing with them. Ask people to find someone in the room that they do not know well to be their partner for the paired interview. (This allows people to get to know each other better as a side benefit of the interview.) Give them 20 minutes to conduct their interview if they are asking three questions or 40 minutes if you choose to ask all six questions in one meeting. Invite people to move around the building to find a place to conduct their interviews. Encourage them to let one person answer all questions and then switch. Their job as the interviewer is to listen carefully to what is being said and record the major themes of their partner’s story telling. They do not want to recreate the narrative but only list out the themes. They should not put the name of their partner on their interview sheet.
- C. Paired Interview: Send people off to conduct their interviews. At the end of the time, invite people to take their interview sheet with the notes about their partner’s responses into their small group. (It is intentional that people report on their partner’s responses...this creates some anonymity in the process.)
- D. Small Group Discussion: Give the small groups 20-30 minutes for discussion. (If you are handling all six questions you will need closer to 40 minutes for this section). The small group leader will ask people to report the themes that came out of each interview question. They will list these themes on newsprint – one sheet per question. At the end of the discussion, the leader will distribute the sticker dots to each person and invite them to return to the main meeting room. The leader will

hang the newsprint on the designated wall space.

- E. Closing Process: Once everyone is in the room, give instructions for this final process. Tell each person to read the themes listed by each small group for each interview question. Have each person place their dots next to the themes that resonate most strongly for them in the moment. They have three dots to distribute per question. Have the closing prayer before setting people loose so that they can take their time and leave when they have finished rather than trying to bring everyone back together for closing prayer after this final process.

III. Interpreting the Visioning Meeting Results

- A. The self- study team will want to plan a meeting that will center on organizing the feedback from the visioning meetings. The following are some suggestions on how to do that.
- B. Break into groups of two or three people and take the newsprint for one interview question. Look through the sheets for repetitive themes and identify the unique themes that come out of all the small groups (you may find 15 unique themes of the 50 that are listed on the sheets.) List these on a sheet of paper and then count how many dots were placed next to these themes. You will want to create a document that lists each interview question, followed by the main themes that emerged from these meetings with a sense of how many times this theme was highlighted by congregant's dots. Here is an example of the reporting from one congregation on the interview question about inspiration. Keep in mind that the numbers do not represent how many *people* gave a particular response but how many dots were placed next to that theme.

Inspiration: What is the most positive thing happening at our church right now from your perspective? Describe an experience or time here when you felt most proud to be associated with this church. What was happening? What made it such a meaningful experience for you?

Ministry of Mercy & Justice – 50

- Commitment to justice
- Mission outreach
- Interfaith involvement

Adult Ministries – 15

- Adult Education (Kerygma)
- Women's Association
- Prayer Group

Openness – 27

- Resiliency to change
- Optimism
- Diversity (agree to disagree)
- Self-study process

Music – 13

Children's Christian Education - 9

- C. Once you have a report that lists each question and all the weighted themes under it, you have a great resource to use as you write some of the critical sections of the Self-Study Document. We highly recommend including this summary of the congregational visioning meeting as an appendix to your Self-Study document.

Additional Examples of Visioning Meeting Questions

First Presbyterian Church, Whippany, NJ

- 1) Peak Experience: Take a moment to reflect and think about the time that you have been affiliated with our church and all the experiences you've had here. Try to remember a time or times when you felt that we as a church community were at our best, when you felt most proud and most satisfied to be part of this church family. Tell me about that time. What was happening and who was involved? Why is this particular time so memorable for you?
- 2) Values: All of us join and then stay with various organizations for our own personal reasons, and many times the reasons for joining are different than the reasons we stay. Whether you are a member of this church or just a regular attendee, there was something about this church that drew you to us in the beginning, whenever that was. And there is something about this church that keeps you here. What was it about our church that attracted you initially? What inspired you to join? What keeps you here? What do you value most about our church today?
- 3) Inspiration: Think back on all the church services you have ever attended, both here and at other churches, both as an adult and as a child. Recall for me a particular experience in a worship service that was inspirational, where you felt most moved and touched - or perhaps a service in which you laughed and truly enjoyed yourself. What was it about that service that was so inspirational? Imagine that you are riding home from church one day in the future, and as you reflect on the service you feel deeply moved and inspired by the experience. What happened during the service that left you feeling this way?
- 4) Fellowship: We describe ourselves as a church family and many of our members have described our congregation as friendly. Picture in your mind this family, the faces of people you see at church, those you know and those you don't. Tell me of an experience you've had with someone else in our church that left you feeling very connected on an emotional level with that person. How did this emotional connection happen? How did it feel for you?
- 5) Outreach & Evangelism: Despite the relative affluence of the geographic area in which our church is located, no doubt there are more opportunities for us to be of service to those in need and to bring to them the love of Christ. If we were to be a model for other churches in outreach and evangelism, what would you see us doing to earn that reputation?
- 6) Leadership: Reflecting back on this whole conversation we've had, and the private thoughts you've had about the future of our church, please describe for me the most important characteristics, traits or skills that you believe our next pastor must have to lead us where we want to go. What type of leader would be ideal?
- 7) Hopes & Wishes: Imagine that you could wave a magic wand and have any three wishes come true that you feel would increase the vitality of our church. Anything you wanted to see in place would magically appear. What three things would you wish for?

Freehold Reformed Church, Freehold, NJ

- 1) How do you view our church? What first attracted you to it? What keeps you here? What makes you proud to be here?
- 2) How do you think people in the community view us?
- 3) If you could create any future for our congregation, what would it be in terms of ministry, worship, service, education, fellowship? What additional opportunities would you like to see for: education, spirituality, fellowship, community, special needs? How do you think the church should serve you? How should you serve the church?
- 4) What kind of pastoral leadership do you feel is needed if we were to live into this new future?

Germonds Presbyterian Church, New City, NY

- 1) Identity & Values: What's been the single most positive experience you've had at Germonds? What first attracted you to this place? Why have you stayed?
- 2) Worship & Inspiration: Describe the most inspiring worship experience you have had (either here at Germonds or elsewhere). What made it so inspiring? How did it make you feel connected to God?
- 3) Spirituality: How satisfied are you with your spiritual life? How, when, and where do you find spiritual connection with God? Do you feel, over the last five years, that your commitment to Jesus has grown stronger, diminished somewhat, or remained about the same? Do you have any suggestions for how Germonds can support/help you grow in your relationship with God?
- 4) Stewardship: Why do you contribute your time, talents, and treasure (three Ts) to Germonds? How do you decide how much of each to give? Are you able to give a proportionate amount of your three Ts? When it comes to giving your time, your talents, or your treasure, which is easiest for you to give? Hardest? Which do you think is most important for you to give? What might motivate you to give more of yourself?
- 5) Evangelism: Churches with an effective program for evangelism begin by identifying the questions and needs of people in the community who are not actively engaged in a life of faith within a church community. Through appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can reach out to help others in need and guide them into the family of God. Think about the community around Germonds. What questions or needs do you see that the church could be addressing in order to develop a more effective ministry of evangelism?
- 6) Vision: If you could create the future you would wish for Germonds, what two or three priorities would you set for the ministry of Germonds Church in the next 10-20 years?

Visioning Retreat

9:30am	Welcome and Opening Worship
10:00am	Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry & Nine Key Concepts of "Everyday Creativity"
10:20am	Paired Interviews
11:10am	Report back from interviews
11:30pm	Small group work on themes and vision
12:15pm	Worship
12:30pm	Lunch
1:15pm	Continue small group work on themes & vision
1:45pm	Presentations from small groups
2:15pm	Silent meditation and prayerful reflection
2:30pm	Crafting a vision statement
3:30pm	Departure

Paired Interviews

In pairs, use the questions below to interview each other. This is not a dialogue. You will take turns being the interviewer. When you are in that role, listen carefully the stories of your partner. Capture the main themes of what they are telling you for each topic. Ask all the questions and then switch roles.

1. Best Experience: What's been the single most positive experience you've had at Queens Reformed Church? What first attracted you to this place? Why have you stayed? Has there been a time when you felt the church was clear about its purpose and passionate about its ministry? What was happening at that time to make this possible?

2. Values: What are the things you value most as a person of faith.
 - a. Yourself: Without being humble, what is something that you value most about yourself?

 - b. You Church: What do you value about Queens Reformed Church? What is the single most important thing Queens Reformed Church has added to your life?

3. Core Value: What do you think is the core value of Queens Reformed Church? What is the one thing that if it did not exist it would make Queens Reformed Church a very different place?

4. Vision: If you could create the future you would wish for Queens Reformed Church, what two or three priorities would you set for the ministry in the next 5-10 years?

Small Group Work on Themes and Vision

Looking back to the newsprint of themes created after the paired interviews, begin to summarize and synthesize what you are hearing and learning about Queens Reformed Church. Please use three pieces of newsprint for your small group work today.

1. Positive and Life-Giving Core of Queens Reformed Church: Summarize the positive things that give life and energy to your congregation. This includes the gifts individuals bring to the church as well as the resources of the congregation as a whole. (Put your answers to this up on newsprint #1)
2. Are there one or two stories that capture the spirit or essence of the positive core described above? (You do not need to write these stories on the newsprint...just share them with each other.)
3. Vision for the future: Summarize the hopes and dreams for the future vision of Queens Reformed Church. Pay particular attention to how these ministry priorities are already operating in experiences you have had together. (Put your answers to this question on newsprint #2)
4. Create a presentation: On your newsprint #3, create a presentation of your sense of the core value of Queens Reformed Church and your sense of vision for her future. Your presentation can be artistic using images. You can use words to describe your vision. You can prepare a poem, a hymn, or skit to show the group what you see as the heart of this congregation.