

An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) “Igniting Positive Change”

by

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*"...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, then think about these things."
Philippians 4:8*

Introduction and Background

The leaders of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer wondered what else could possibly go wrong. Their conversations revolved around the problems they were facing, whose fault they were, and what steps they could take to solve the seemingly hopeless situation. It was so easy and natural to see what was wrong and be critical of themselves and others.

Appreciative Inquiry invited them to consider a different way...

A powerful methodology, Appreciate Inquiry (AI) is a process that invites people to look deeply into what most “gives life” and what can create “abundant life” in their lives. It redefines the way organizations and individuals exist by focusing on core strengths and leveraging them to reshape the future. It is centered in the art and practice of asking life-centered questions that can strengthen an organization’s ability to reach its full potential. Rather than deficit-based approaches which outline only problems, resistance or obstacles, AI asks people to rediscover the best of “what is” in order to dream boldly about – and initiate – “what could be.” The result is a newfound desire to achieve both a shared vision of the future and sustainable change.¹

The heart of this Introduction and Background lies within AI’s role and potential use within Christian community, specifically congregations within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. When connected to our life in Christ, AI provides a framework for envisioning a congregation, ministry, or life-setting that is centered in seeing and telling the “Good News” of the Gospel message that has the power to transform the lives of its people. The source of power for AI to work in the church is *always* and *only* God’s Spirit at work connecting us to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This makes the AI process in the Christian community unique from its use in any other organization. We are not simply shoe-horning the church into a secular model to get “results,” we are bringing new meaning and pouring real power into the AI model for God to use for our good and the expansion of His reign in our lives.

¹ Organizations from all over the world are using this powerful approach to transform themselves for the future: Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Fairmount Minerals, U.S. Navy, Roadway Express, the American Red Cross, UN Global Compact (to name a few).

AI shifts the focus from deficit based thinking toward mutual valuation. Exposing weaknesses and focusing on a lack of resources, rather than God's abundant blessings, leads church leaders and members toward negative thinking. This mindset is in sharp contrast to the power of the Holy Spirit that points us to the words of St. Paul in Philippians 4:8 (above). Visions of a new and vibrant future thrive in an atmosphere fraught with enthusiasm, anticipation and hope.

The theory and process of AI was first developed by David L. Cooperrider, Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, in the early 1980s, and named in his doctoral dissertation as: *Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a Methodology for Understanding and Enhancing Organizational Innovation*.

To define terms, "appreciate" means to value, recognize or affirm the strengths, successes and potentials in people and communities. We appreciate things that give life, health, vitality and excellence. To "inquire" is to explore or discover. It is to ask questions with the hope of seeing new potentials and possibilities. "Appreciative Inquiry" is thus the process of asking questions and exploring things that most give life, health, vitality and excellence.

The moments of life and excellence in the churches within the Synod should never be taken for granted. They help us to see the grace of God at work in our lives and inspire people to live out the salvation that is theirs through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul Chaffee, in his article "Claiming the Light" writes, "It means attending more to the abundance of God's love than to the drama of human sinfulness." While always maintaining our Lutheran Law-Gospel tension it is the Gospel that predominates, wins the day, and brings new life. The law always condemns and kills. The Gospel brings life that allows the community of believers to identify and attend to what is most important about its life now and in the future.

4-D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny

AI is often described as the 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. The intent is to begin with positive questions that reveal the 'positive core' (a church's unique DNA) and then to build upon this core in generating change and transformation:

- **Discovery.** Appreciative interviews bring out the best in people and provide opportunities for people to speak and be heard. This type of inquiry into 'what gives life' reveals 'who we are when we are at our very best.' A sample question might be, "What first attracted you to this church?"

- **Dream.** A critical resource for creating positive change is our imagination and our capacity to free the dreams within people. Our imagination and dreams are often constrained by a preoccupation with negativity, criticism, and limited styles of thinking. Inspired by the positive images and life-giving insights from the Discovery phase, people are empowered to use their imagination and share their deep dreams for the future.
- **Design.** Once the shared dream or strategic focus is expressed, people work to co-construct the elements of the “ideal” organization. Inspiring images and stories of the past become the foundation for crafting the proposals for what is possible. This connects the best of “what is” with the collective aspiration of “what might be.”
- **Destiny.** The fruits of the Design phase give way to a framework for new levels of engagement and action teams. This newfound strategy for life together serves as both an inspiration and invitation. **Inspiration:** To motivate people to grow in faith toward Jesus Christ and in fervent love toward one another. **Invitation:** To actively engage in ministry initiatives that originated from an organization-wide process where all members had an opportunity to think and dream about a common vision for the future.

Why Does Appreciative Inquiry Work?

John 16:33b says, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Sometimes we stop with the first part of this verse and forget the second part. Trouble, suffering or problems are not the only things present in life or churches. There are successes, hopes and dreams buoyed by the profound peace, security and joy found only in Jesus’ final victory. Redirecting the focus of congregational analysis to these positive qualities allows people and organizations to be raised up, as on the wings of an eagle, beyond the conditions in which any problems originally existed.

According to Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, authors of *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, “Appreciative Inquiry works because it treats people like people and not like machines. As humans, we are social. We like to tell stories and listen to stories. We pass on our values, beliefs and wisdom in stories.” This truth is wholly reinforced in Jesus’ parables and words of Moses as he conveys the story of The Ten Commandments, “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deuteronomy 6:6) and “In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the

LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him: ...Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders.’” (Deuteronomy 6:20, 22). It is the story of God in the Bible that sustains us and gives us life. And, as we look at the stories of our congregations in light of the Story of God, the Spirit breathes life into us.

According to Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, AI works for six reasons:

1. *It builds relationships enabling people to be known in relationships rather than in role.* The interviews and resulting stories build relationships and provide a chance to connect. This tells people that they are important and that they belong.
2. *It creates an opportunity for people to be heard.* Recognition, mutual respect and morale all go up when people feel heard. People are recognized as contributors. They feel loved and cared for.
3. *It generates opportunities for people to dream, and to share their dreams.* People are glad to be asked to describe their dreams and get even more excited when they discover that their dreams are shared by others.
4. *It creates an environment in which people are able to choose how they contribute.* When people are free to engage in ministry based on their unique gifts, interests and passions, their capacity to contribute is significantly increased.
5. *It gives people both discretion and support to act.* People make resources available and pay attention to what others are doing. It becomes possible for people to follow through – and finally do – the things that they knew needed to be done.
6. *It encourages and enables people to be positive.* Positive attitudes are turned into assets instead of liabilities. It’s not always ‘popular’ to be positive.

Underlying Principles

Several key inter-related principles have been developed as foundational to AI. These principles are supported by studies in the fields of medicine, brain research, psychology, sociology and other areas. Do not “over read” these for theological meaning – they are what they are – observations about how human beings think and work and live together.

- **Constructionist Principle.** We see reality not as it is, but as we are. What we choose to see and talk about creates the world in which we live. Consequently, organizations are “heliotropic” in character in the sense that they have an observable and largely “automatic” tendency to move in the direction of the images that contain the most energy. Positive images are the brightest, boldest,

most illuminating and promising. (Revelation 21:1 – “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”)

- **Poetic Principle.** Organizations are like poems, open to infinite interpretation. Even in the Scripture there is always more to see and discover if we are open to do so. Pasts, presents and futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration, and application. (Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active.”)
- **Simultaneity Principle.** Change begins the moment you ask the first question. What we ask and seek we find. What we find, we talk about. What we talk about creates the images that shape the future we live. Jesus loved to ask questions. Perhaps the most formative was, “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15) Change begins when by the Spirit’s power we begin to answer that question.
- **Anticipatory Principle.** Deep change is centered in the power of our images of the future. These images guide our current behavior and the eventual future of a congregation. By anticipating the future in a hope-filled and creative manner, the Spirit can use us to create it that way. Kennon Callahan, in *The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, captures this point brilliantly:
 - “The watershed question for many people in many congregations is: Do you believe your best years are behind you, or do you believe that your best years are yet before you? Some churches believe that their best years are behind them. Some people believe that their best years have been. They behave and act as though the future will be less than that which is past. And it is precisely because they behave and act that way that the future for them turns out to be less than that which has been. Effective, successful churches live in the confidence of God’s promise that some of their best years are yet to come.” While we may cringe at the words “effective” and “successful” (for who besides God is ultimately the measure of effectiveness and success) there is a profound truth here – “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has called me heavenward.” (Philippians 3:13) The best is yet to come because God is always at work for our good.
- **Positive Principle.** Positive questions lead to positive images, which increase positive energy and positive relationships. Churches are largely affirmative and respond to positive thought and positive knowledge. The momentum for enhancing our congregational life requires large amounts of positive affect, social bonding and creative energy, supplied by the Holy Spirit. The old adage that nothing happens between strangers is true. Our life together, as dearly beloved, redeemed and forgiven children of God, is a bond that enhances collaboration. A positive attitude and environment lessens resistance to change. The more positive

questions used to guide congregational planning, the longer lasting and more effective the change will be.

Further Spiritual Foundations

While developed in a secular context, the life-centered focus of Appreciative Inquiry relates well to the words of Jesus found in the Gospel of John, "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10). AI is a resource that can help us connect to the life that is ours in Christ and experience it more fully. It provides a practical way to take seriously the Scriptural message "Harden not your hearts." (Hebrews 3:7) It places gratitude for God's blessings and creation, and hope in our God-given potential, at the center of our process.

In Philippians 4:8-9, Paul concludes with this exhortation: "Finally, my brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is loving, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you."

Paul is writing to a community in turmoil. Some in Philippi have turned against him, threatening all that the Spirit has accomplished in them. Instead of rebuking or problem solving, Paul advocates a change in focus towards things that give life and hope. He knows the fruit this will bear, "The God of peace," he says, "will be with you." A great gift of Paul to the early Church was his spirit of gratitude. He constantly called people to see the goodness and wonder of God at work in every setting.

We often fail to notice the abundance of God's gifts simply because we do not pay attention – we're distracted. AI fosters attentiveness and helps us listen to the stories of the goodness of God in our midst.

The AI model can guide us to rediscover and become what God has called us to be in Christ. Within the body of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, we are always growing together in new, appreciative, and creative ways.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." - Romans 12:2