



Appreciative Inquiry: A Guide for Churches Navigating the Post-Pandemic Transition

Is your church struggling to imagine what your life together might look like after the pandemic? Have you lost members or had members who are uncertain if they will continue to participate in the life of the church? Is it unclear what activities of mission and care you will be able to sustain, or in what ways you will be able to engage your neighbors?

You are not alone. Many churches are feeling the anxiety of these uncertain times. How do we allow the good things that God was doing in our churches prior to the pandemic to continue, while at the same time recognizing that the world has fundamentally changed and we cannot simply return to our normal pre-COVID life?

It has been said great artists bring an appreciative eye to their work of finding and capturing beauty. If ever there was a time begging for appreciation and beauty, this is the time. More than a year of pandemic, social upheaval and political polarization has left the world around us with greater uncertainty than ever before. How do churches navigate such an uncertain future? Where will they find direction and the energy to pursue what likely will be a perilous path?

A new toolkit is not the answer; changing organizational structure is not the answer; more resources, while helpful, is not the answer. A better starting point for a renewed future is to bring an appreciative eye to the stories of our past and the realities of our present.

Appreciative Inquiry is a generative conversational process for developing the power of an appreciative eye. Appreciative Inquiry embodies that which is at the very heart of the way of Jesus, being thankful for all God's gifts and finding value in every person.

Developed at Case Western Reserve University, Appreciative Inquiry took shape in reaction to an overreliance on problem-solving, which has the tendency to obsess about problems and shortcomings instead of acknowledging the real signs of an organization's growth and progress. Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives

life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

Rather than intervening to fix problems, the Appreciative Inquiry approach is guided by inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, it challenges us to discover, dream, and design. Appreciative Inquiry involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that elicit stories of vitality, which strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. Through drawing out these stories of positive experiences from as many people as possible in the organization, hundreds and even thousands of people can be involved in co-creating their collective future.

VIDEO: [Brief Overview of the Appreciative Inquiry Approach](#)

Appreciative Inquiry is especially helpful for churches and groups in times like these when we need to establish a vision for how we will move forward into the future. Appreciative Inquiry can provide a structure for conversations to discern together the direction of God's leading in these changing times.

Although Appreciative Inquiry allows for some flexibility, it is composed of five basic processes:

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

These basic processes guide us in the direction of a plan for our shared future that is rooted in the best parts of our past. Specifically, we begin with our commitment to focus on the positive parts of our history. Although there are many failures and broken parts of our past, we **exercise gratitude** by focusing on the very best stories from our life together. This focus on the positive will be reinforced in the Appreciative Inquiry process by the facilitators who lead these conversations. This commitment to exercise gratitude and focus on the best stories sets the tone for the entire Appreciative Inquiry process.

After setting the tone, the group reflects together on stories in which the congregation in whole or in part was energized or **infused with life**. Facilitators may probe these stories by asking questions, working to flesh them out in as much detail as the memory of the group will allow: Who was involved? What exactly happened? What were the fruits of this action?

Encouraging diverse members to recount a particular story will help enrich the collective memory of what unfolded.

VIDEO: [How to Facilitate Appreciative Inquiry Interviews](#)

As the body of life-giving stories expands, the group should pay attention to **common themes** that emerge in many of these stories. Focusing on these themes may elicit more stories that follow in a similar vein. The group hears the stories that have been collected and listens to them with an ear for commonalities that weave their way through many or all of them. This search for themes among our stories is a means of interpreting what God has been up to in the midst of our congregation. “By locating these themes,” writes Mark Lau Branson in *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, his valuable book on Appreciative Inquiry, “this interpretative process, which may continue to encourage additional stories, forms basic directions for the church’s future.”

VIDEO: [Identifying Themes Emerging from Appreciative Inquiry Interviews](#)

In the next phase of the interpretative process, the congregation picks one or more of the most significant themes and imagines how these themes might continue to unfold in the future. This step requires **significant imagination**, painting a picture in our minds of what it might look like for a particular life-giving theme to be carried into the future.

The final step of the Appreciative Inquiry process involves developing an innovative strategy for how the key themes might be acted on as we move into the future. Prior to this final step of the process, we have developed a vision, and we conclude the process by talking about the specific structures and objectives we will need in order to live out the vision we have discerned. Branson notes that these plans for moving forward may be formal or informal. Informal plans could include personal practices to which church members commit themselves, or practices that are undertaken in pairs or in small groups (e.g., visiting the sick or studying Scripture). Formal plans would be ones that unfold within

the polity of a given congregation—the action of a committee or the formation of a new committee, for instance.

CASE STUDY:

Mark Lau Branson tells the story of how his California church, First Presbyterian Church Altadena, used Appreciative Inquiry to structure conversations about its future. Faced with the recent departure of a pastor and the reality of declining membership, the congregation decided to take on an Appreciative Inquiry conversation in order to begin forming a vision for their future. This conversation was led by the church's Mission Assessment Committee. This committee was intrigued by Appreciative Inquiry's positive emphasis. Although the church would eventually need to call a new pastor, it chose to focus more broadly on exploring its identity in its life and ministry together. With the Appreciative Inquiry process in mind, the committee assembled a list of questions about the church's past and present that it would ask members of the congregation:

1. Reflecting on your entire experience at First Presbyterian Church Altadena, remember a time when you felt the most engaged, alive, and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
 - 2a. What are the most important contributions the church has made to your life? Tell me when this happened. Who made a difference? How did it affect you?
 - 2b. Don't be humble; this is important information: What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our church—your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities, your character? Give some examples.
 - 2c. When have you known the most significant spiritual growth for yourself and the church? When were you growing as a disciple? Think about lessons regarding beliefs or steps of faith. Tell me how this has happened. What made a difference? Who was most helpful?
3. What are the essential characteristics or ways of life that make our church unique?
4. Make three wishes for the future of our church. Describe what the church would look like as these wishes come true.

After compiling these questions, the committee made a plan for the interviews. Time didn't allow for every member of the congregation to be interviewed. The committee had already been studying the demographics of the congregation and named seven distinct groups that made up the vast majority of the church community. Drawing from these groups, Branson notes that the committee "tried to balance our values for wide participation, variety of perspectives, and a special appreciation for the seniors who were the majority" as they set about selecting whom to interview. The committee then conducted these interviews, taking copious notes that would be used to discern common themes among the members' stories.

Although a larger number of themes emerged, the congregation condensed them into five key themes.

The committee took these themes and fleshed them out into specific proposals for moving forward. They took care to word the proposal as if it were already true. For example, this excerpt is from one proposal and responds to an identified theme (namely, the congregation's ethnicity—their distinctively Japanese heritage as well as their present desire to nourish diversity):

We have a special interest in how the stories of our Japanese American members shape our life and mission. We are also seeing how the encounter with the stories, values, and connections of other cultures enriches our life and mission. We celebrate this intercultural life—not as a way to diminish the richness of our cultures, but as a way to enjoy and benefit from what we believe to be both a gift and a task from God.

This proposal gave vision and direction to the church, and they began to engage the Japanese American seniors in their congregation. One specific step they took was to begin another Appreciative Inquiry conversation that identified three areas in which the congregation could deepen their care for the older Japanese American members of their church: (1) relationships; (2) faith, worship, and Scripture; and (3) matters of daily life, such as finances, housing, and transportation. With these areas in mind, the church began developing specific plans that would guide their work in these three directions. This work is ongoing, but the church's Appreciative Inquiry conversations set them on a course toward a richer life together, specifically a deeper identity as a community and a deeper connection with one another as members of that body.

Appreciative Inquiry excels at fostering a very specific kind of conversation that can be helpful for churches as we come out of the pandemic. It can help us reflect on our congregational history and the ways the Spirit has been at work— in spite of the pandemic— drawing us closer together and leading us deeper into the rich, interdependent life of Christ. It also can help us leverage this history in order to cultivate stories, convictions, and practices that will sustain us through these times of rapid change, and beyond.

Portions of this guide have been adapted from:
C. Christopher Smith. *How the Body of Christ Talks:
Recovering the Practice of Conversation in our Churches*
(Brazos Press, 2019).