

DOING CHANGE DIFFERENTLY — AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH

Change: it is always a challenge to lead a congregation through change. But there is more than one way to go about it. Imagine the following scenario...

Your congregation's worship service is rich with excellent preaching, well-led prayers and interesting visuals. The music, however, limps along, detracting from the overall experience. You are the congregation's leader and receive frequent complaints. Some less committed worshippers have left. You know this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Worship is always a tricky venue to address change. Complicating your situation, many people love the music director as a person and feel loyal to him. The choir is not bad, just not consistently good. There is not much budget for extra musicians. You are challenged to help your congregation address an issue that is both complex and emotionally charged. What shall you do? How shall you proceed?

Before the days of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) you might have gone about addressing the issue using a traditional model of change management. You would have:

- Seen the situation as a problem to be solved. "The music detracts from the overall worship experience, negatively impacting spirited worship and attendance. This must be fixed."
- Found a team of leaders willing to help you and together, analyzed the cause. "The music director has limited leadership capacity, is not especially creative, does not recruit well."
- Working with your team, uncovered possible solutions. "We need to fix or replace the music director."
- Finally, your team would have created an action plan to implement the possible solutions. "Let's arrange additional training for music director or let him go."



Does any of this sound like fun? What are the chances that this intervention will do harm along with good? Can you foresee defensiveness, resistance, other backlash? It is possible that the team's analysis was incorrect or incomplete. The team may not have found the real root cause of the problem. The fix may cause unnecessary pain and anxiety.

But what can you do? Worship demands good music.

AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH

Another way to manage change is through the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. AI goes at organizational change from an entirely different direction.

Appreciative Inquiry focuses on what is working (appreciating) and learning more about it (inquiry.) Two AI assumptions are:

1. "something in the target area is working or it would not exist," and
2. "whatever we focus on (inquire into) grows."

AI would begin a sophisticated process of inquiry into what is going well with worship music before moving into the next step of the change process.



“Wait!” you cry. “Aren’t you just ignoring the problem?” Absolutely not. The problem will be reframed and possibly even redefined in the course of the AI process. At this early stage, leaders will need to suspend the traditional change paradigm of efficient problem-solving in order to experience this new approach. AI requires patience, tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to trust that people in your congregation can and will contribute to creative solutions and positive outcomes. AI is a slower method of change.

Using the above scenario as an example, the beginning question would move from one with a negative assumption, i.e. “the music isn’t working; how do we fix it?”, to a beginning question with an underlying positive assumption, i.e. “something about our music is working, what is it and how can we get more of it?”

MOVING TOWARD THE POSITIVE

Simply by changing the focus of the inquiry, the organization’s energy moves away from negativity — a downward spiral that promotes blame and defensiveness. It moves toward positivity — an atmosphere more conducive to creative problem solving.

AI begins its focus on what is working through a process called appreciative interviews. In our case, worshipers inquire into times when they enjoyed a positive experience of music in worship. These interviews could be conducted one-on-one or in small groups. Care is taken to inquire about times that were positive, moments that can be appreciated. Typical questions might include:

1. Tell a story about the best musical moment you experienced in worship here. Describe the event in detail. What made it memorable? Who was involved?

2. Describe how you felt. What did you do as a result of the experience?
3. What matters most to you about the music in worship? If you could wave a magic wand to transform the music at our congregation, what would the music be like?



Appreciate interviews are a core element of any positive change process. They unleash positive emotions like hope and change the human atmosphere around any organizational issue. They surface strengths. The interviews remind participants that great music is within their reach — they’ve done it before! They provide

a place to express aspirations and dreams. These interviews are energizing and often fun. They build relationships and create a sense of belonging that can help motivate people to work together creatively over the long haul.

ENGAGING PEOPLE

Appreciate interviews engage the people who are the most impacted by both the need for change and the changes that will ensue.

Notice that nowhere in this change process has the music director been identified as the problem or scapegoat. Nor has the current music been disparaged. The atmosphere is positive. The hard work of thinking about and doing change can be carried forward by people who have spent time listening to each other’s sacred stories. Trust and connection are built among the people who will create and bring forth the change.

Notice also that the congregation’s focus is broad, inquiring into all aspects of music that have given life and joy over the years. While some of this may sound like nostalgia, the process of recalling and sharing positive memories



and experiences invites participants to consider information in a new light. The data surfaced can be surprisingly applicable to the present when considered with an open mind.

THE DREAM PHASE

Once the congregation has identified and focused on the positive core of the area needing change, the next step is to dream about what “what might be.” The work at this point is to identify and articulate a life-giving vision. In our case, “what is God calling us to become in regard to our musical experience in worship?”

Care is taken to ensure that the vision is widely-owned, clear and results-oriented. Usually this articulation of the vision is done by a small group of stakeholders, equipped with the stories and dreams gathered from the appreciative interviews. The vision is then presented to the larger group and “tested” for accuracy and opened for dialogue, renovation and review. In our case, a hypothetical vision statement might be: “We are called to offer a worship service where great music draws people of all ages and tastes into making a ‘joyful noise’ unto God.”

At this point in the process, the entire congregation has been invited to participate in the interviews and in the ensuing vision testing and crafting. The emerging direction of the music program is widely owned. Everyone has had the opportunity to express dreams and deeply felt aspirations in a collaborative process where all voices really matter. Respect, collaboration and a sense of possibility become new norms.

THE DESIGN PHASE

The next step is to create the ideal design to carry out the vision. This is done through the creation of “pro-vocative proposals” that describe the desired future as if it was already happening. A hypothetical example from our case might be: “we have appreciation for all different styles of music.” Or, “we are constantly learning new ways to improve our musicianship.” Or, “we consider each here a valuable member of the choir.” The action implications of these proposals are obvious: the congregation will have to learn about different styles of music, they will have to seek out and engage in musical

training, and finally, they will have to find ways to train and equip all people to participate in some way. Notice that these are doable, concrete action steps.

Change in the area of music begins to take place the moment the interviews begin. This change is organization-



al, systemic and cultural. It is a far cry from a quick fix change of retraining the choir director, letting him go or arguing about musical styles. It is more time-consuming and less predictable than other change processes. It is also more fun, creative and life-giving.

THE DESTINY PHASE

The final step in the AI process is called the Destiny Phase. During this phase the actions proposed in the Design Phase are carried out. Designs are tweaked, re-considered or widened. Teams share stories, learnings, outcomes and surprises with the whole congregation. Celebration is a part of the Destiny Phase.

Does this sound like a Pollyanna approach to change? It is, in the best possible sense. Appreciative Inquiry assumes that focusing on the positive builds the positive. Or, “what we focus on becomes our reality.” (Hammond, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, 3rd Edition, p. 14).

AI is both a philosophy and a practical approach to change management. To take the next step to learn more about it, you might read the following brief article which outlines the AI method with sample applications and questions:



<http://www.imaginechicago.org/docs/ai/Crafting%20Appreciative%20Questions.doc>.

CONSULTANTS AND FACILITATORS

What is a consultant? Consultants are persons who bring expertise to a situation. Consultants offer services in many areas, including strategic planning, fundraising campaigns, building issues, organizational development and more. Oftentimes, the consultant will not only bring his or her expertise to a situation, they will recommend solutions or advice on how to address a problem or challenge in the future. As such, consultants are diagnostic and prescriptive in nature. Consultants are in the business of telling others things that they often cannot see on their own or do not have the expertise to assess, such as building conditions, fundraising potential or architectural issues to name a few.



REFLECTION/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If reflecting on these questions on your own, it would be best to discuss this first one with a friend or colleague. If using this question with a group, pair off for this question. Tell a story about the best time you had as part of a change process in a congregation/organization (e.g. reorganizing the Sunday School program, starting a new ministry, finding new pastoral leadership). Describe the time in detail. What made it memorable? Who was involved? Describe how you felt. What did you do as a result of the experience? What matters most to you about the way your congregation makes changes?
2. Reflect on the process of change. What are the advantages/disadvantages of involving all possible stakeholders in the change process?
3. Change has both quantifiable and unquantifiable results. What unquantifiable results are most important to you? Why?
4. Problem-focused change strategies always imply that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. When is this label an advantage? What kinds of issues does it address best?
5. Positive change strategies like Appreciative Inquiry are community-wide and thus slower than top-down strategies. What are the advantages/disadvantages of a slower process of change?

The Congregational Resource Guide (CRG)

is a unique, online tool designed to help leaders of all congregations find the right resources to address their challenges and opportunities.

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