

## PLANNING THE FUTURE BY APPRECIATING THE PAST

First Church on the corner of Heritage and Main had been around long enough to have faced this moment before: a pastor departed, the need for a search committee to be formed, the sense of urgency rising, and discontent in the pews stoked by uncertainty. Now, as Ismelda prepared to start the governing board meeting, she looked around at the white heads of those gathered and thought, *Something must change*. Yet how to accomplish it?

### From Problem Solving to Appreciation

Pivotal moments require planning to chart the future. In First Church's case, this would suggest undertaking a whole-system planning process before drawing up a pastoral search committee. A number of methods have been tested in churches over the past fifty years, including the Search Conference, Asset Mapping, and Appreciative Inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

Of these, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can be especially effective when negativity holds sway. This negativity can look like leaders responding to change by second-guessing themselves, blaming others, lamenting the present state of affairs, or over-sharing their anxiety about the church's future. AI can help change the conversation from a focus on problem solving to the appreciation of shared strengths. This shift can open up space for leaders to look forward and dream big.

### The Heart of Appreciative Inquiry

Practical theologian Mark Lau Branson identifies five "core processes" of AI, written in imperative form: 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 future inquiry; 4) Create shared images for a preferred future; and 5) Find innovative ways to create that future.<sup>2</sup> These core processes are not intended to provide a structure for the planning process. Instead,

they make plain what features must be present for the planning to qualify as AI.

### One Possible Framework: The 4-I Model

Books on AI abound, and several different frameworks exist for structuring this type of inquiry. For example, the 4-I Model offers a four-part structure for moving from reflection to action with a letter "I" as an aid to memory.<sup>3</sup>

**Initiate.** At its heart, AI is an inquiry process into what is best and most life-giving about a particular congregation through interviews in which members tell stories about the past. Formulating questions gets the process going.

Sample questions:

1. As you think about your experience of the church, can you remember a time when you felt most engaged and alive? Who else was involved and what was happening?



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2. What are the most significant contributions the church has made to your life? When did this happen?
3. How did you yourself contribute to the life of your church? Offer stories or examples of this.
4. What makes this church unique? Are there traits or ways of life that make this church stand out from the rest?
5. Looking to the future, make three wishes for the church and paint a picture of what it would look like if these wishes were to come true.<sup>4</sup>

**Inquire.** Now it's time to select persons to interview. As with any planning process, the greater the diversity of the participants the better. In this case, this means diversity with regard to age, ethnic background, length of time as a member, proximity or distance from the leadership core, or any other variables deemed relevant to the study. In the interview itself, the aim is to gather data through stories. When taking notes, try to balance story specifics with broader generalizations about what worked well.

**Imagine.** The purpose of this step is to find meaning in the data from the recollected past and give it a future focus. Answers may be sorted into broad categories, such as categorizing descriptions into aspects of the church's life, time periods, age cohorts involved, or other themes that occurred throughout the interviews. The group then writes "provocative proposals," or brief paragraphs, that distill a positive, life-giving strength from the interviews. These constitute a vision statement of sorts that, though emerging from the data, may challenge entrenched assumptions. Getting it right may take extensive drafting, and this work, though at times difficult, has the benefit of building consensus for action in the process.

**Innovate.** Here is where leaders begin to put their findings into practice. This can be done through discussions held among small groups throughout the church, within the governing board, or with individuals who feel empowered to form a team and start a new project. These new projects can be considered small-scale experiments, not requiring a lot of time or money but helping to get the church moving along its new trajectory.

### An Active Church Asks "What's Next?"

By 2001, Akron Mennonite Church had completed a set of ten-year goals, called a new pastor, and witnessed

the formation of a new denomination, Mennonite Church, USA, in its own backyard. The town of Akron, in Lancaster County, was home to three Mennonite agencies: Mennonite Central Committee, Ten Thousand Villages, and Mennonite Disaster Service. Now it reached a pivotal moment: What next?

Leaders began the process of figuring this out by interviewing twenty of its founding members who had been active since the church began in 1959. The primary outgrowth of this project was a written historical narrative that was circulated to every member. Over the next few years, the congregational council (its chief governing board) and small-group leaders led Appreciative Inquiries into how people are able to connect with the church, given that many community members were not native to the region but had moved there to work in the Mennonite agencies. In 2008, another cycle was launched, open to anyone and taking place over four weekends in January, this time shaped around the question of intentional community engagement.

In the past, community service tended toward the model of "fix it and forget it." Now, drawing from Luke 10:1-20 (disciples as local missionaries) and Matthew 5:13-16 (disciples as "salt," "light," and "a city on a hill" for the world), leaders shaped their questions in order to evoke stories about community engagement as an act of faith. Based on the answers, leaders offered "provocative proposals" about deepening their connection to the church's neighbors through intentional listening.

Remembering our past with a congregation can provide a springboard to action, as long as it focuses on what is right with the system instead of what's wrong. This doesn't mean that mistakes are ignored and their lessons forgotten, but that a larger value is recognized: the experience of gratitude for that which gives life.

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1. Luther K. Snow, *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); Merrelyn Emery and Ronald Purser, *The Search Conference: A Powerful Method for Planning Organizational Change and Community Action* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996); Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change, Second Edition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

2. Branson, 25.

3. *Ibid.*, 27-28, 73-124.

4. *Ibid.*, 76.