

RE•FORMATION

THEN • NOW • ALWAYS

A Model of Appreciative Inquiry for Engaging Our Story

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), as described below by two of its major architects, can provide a wonderful way for congregations and conferences to envision and live toward their desired future starting from the foundation of the best of Lutheran heritage. At a gathering of your congregation or conference, consider spending some time in Appreciative inquiry. What follows are theoretical underpinnings and practical suggestions.

Appreciative Inquiry is a narrative-based process of positive change. It is a cycle of activity that starts by engaging all members of an organization or community in a broad set of interviews and deep dialogue about strengths, resources, and capabilities. It then moves people through a series of activities focused on envisioning bold possibilities and lifting up the most lifecentric dreams for the future. From there, it asks people to discuss and craft propositions that will guide their future together. And finally, it involves the formation of teams to carry out the work needed to realize the new dream and designs for the future. This process is called the 4-D cycle.¹

The four key phases of an AI process are as follows:

- **Discovery:** Mobilizing the whole system by engaging all stakeholders in the articulation of strengths and best practices. Identifying “The best of what has been and what is.”
- **Dream:** Creating a clear results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose, such as, “What is the world calling us to become?”
- **Design:** Creating possibility propositions of the ideal organization, articulating an organization design that people feel is capable of drawing upon and magnifying the positive core to realize the newly expressed dream.
- **Destiny:** Strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system, enabling it to build hope and sustain momentum for ongoing positive change and high performance.

At the center of this cycle is *affirmative topic choice*. It is the starting point and the most strategic aspect of any AI process. Selecting affirmative topics is an opportunity for members of an organization to set a strategic course for the future. AI topics become an organization’s agenda

¹David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 15.

for learning, knowledge sharing, and action. The topics selected set the stage for the 4-D process that follows.

The process of selection affirmative topics:

- Involves a cross section of people throughout the organization
- Grows out of preliminary interviews into the organization at its best
- Challenges people to reframe deficit issues into affirmative topics for inquiry

Affirmative topics, *always homegrown*, can be about anything that the people of an organization feel gives life to the system. As a general rule, most projects have between three and five topics. Words such as empowerment, innovation, sense of ownership, commitment, integrity, and pride are often articulated as worthy of study. Topics can be about anything an organization feels to be strategically and humanly important. Human systems grow in the direction of their deepest and most frequent inquiries.

What is it that you want more of in your organization? Imagine dozens of people conducting interviews and dialogues on this strategic topic. What might they learn and what changes would spontaneously begin to happen?

Here are some useful questions to explore Appreciative Inquiry and its application in our communities.

1. Think about your organization or community with *an appreciative eye*. What are the positive factors that give it life when it is at its best? That give life to your relationships? That give life to your capacity for cooperation and partnerships? That give life to your leadership?
2. What do you want more of in your organization or community? What dreams do you have for its greater health and vitality? How might Appreciative Inquiry be applied to help you realize these dreams?
3. Appreciative Inquiry works its way into an organization or a community's communication system. It creates a narrative-rich culture through stories, best practices, and other forms of knowledge. In what areas is greater sharing of information essential to success in your organization or community? What benefits might result from broader awareness of stories of best practices?
4. What applications of AI are most relevant to your organization or community? What topics would you select to guide the inquiry? Who would you involve?

Appreciative Inquiry for Engaging Our Story

1. Prior to a full gathering of the congregation or conference, select a representative and diverse group from the congregation or conference, whose task is to...
 - a. **Brainstorm a preliminary list of appreciative inquiry interview questions.** When the full community gathers, people will break out into twos, each with an opportunity to tell stories while the other records in writing what they hear.
 - i. These interview questions will be asked from an *appreciative perspective*.
 - ii. They need to be in a form that invites narrative and storytelling:

For example:

Tell me about a time when you felt...

Describe what a _____ feels and looks like to you...

Recall a moment when you felt like you...

Tell me about your favorite...

Describe a memorable _____ experience of any kind, where you felt...

Recall a time when you felt...

A *great* resource for forming appreciative interview questions is Milestone Ministry's (<https://milestonesministry.org/>) Reformation Anniversary Milestone Moment (available as a free download at <https://vfmmilestonesministry.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/07-reformation-anniversary.pdf>).

Milestone Ministry offers Four Keys for practicing faith: Caring Conversations, Devotions, Service, and Rituals and Traditions.

"Caring Conversations" questions:

- What is your first memory of attending a Lutheran congregation?
- Martin Luther stated, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." (The Freedom of a Christian, 1520). What does it mean to you that a Christian lives this paradoxical life of total freedom and at the same time committed to serve others?
- In The Estate of Marriage, Luther wrote that fathers and mothers are "apostles, bishops, and priests to their children." He added that anyone who teaches the faith to another is "an apostle and bishop." How does this influence your life of faith with others? Tell about how you can be a follower of Jesus who shares the faith with family and friends.

Read Ephesians 2:8 (NRSV)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

- Name a gift you received and have not forgotten. Who gave it to you and why?
- An important contribution of the Reformation is an emphasis on the undeserved kindness of God. Even our faith in Christ is a gift that is “not your own doing.” In a world that likes to name our own achievements and what we deserve, how does this understanding of the Christian faith help us live out our faith with our neighbor?
- Reflect on how your life in Christ makes a difference in your daily life.

How might you use or reshape these questions in Appreciative Inquiry?

b. Gather the congregation or conference

- i. Have the group break off into twos. It will be more helpful to have people pair up with someone who is not a spouse, partner, or close friend.
- ii. Take two minutes (a minute for each) for participants to introduce themselves to one another. Choose an ice-breaking question that gives a light-hearted opportunity to share.
- iii. Conduct the Appreciative Inquiry Interviews.
 1. Each pair will need paper and pen or pencil.
 2. Participants in each pair will take turns interviewing the other. Using the 3-5 selected appreciative topics, instruct the pair that one will answer the questions first while the other listens and records what he or she is hearing. The listener should refrain from telling their own story; help prompt the story-teller to go deeper.
 3. After 4 or so minutes, a proctor announces that it is now time to switch roles. Proctors should monitor the group to ensure the right amount of time. Adjust as needed. Time needs to be allowed for people to go into some depth, but also so that all have a chance and the process moves within the allotted time (one hour suggested).
 4. Collect the written responses.
 5. At future gathering(s), reflect on the interview highlights, share dreams collected during the interviews, draft provocative propositions (design statements) incorporating the positive core, publicly declare intended actions and ask for support, and organize groups and/or teams to plan next steps.