An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI)
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“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10).

Introduction and Background

Appreciative 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 – in all kinds of organizational and life settings. It is centered in the art and practice of asking life-centered questions that can strengthen an organization’s ability to realize its full potential.

Because I intend this introduction for Catholic and faith-based settings, I am going to focus upon the context of parishes and ministry. When connected to Catholic spirituality, AI provides a framework for envisioning a parish, ministry or life-setting that is centered in seeing and telling the ‘Good News’ of the Gospel message as lived in the lives of its people. In over 32 years of service as Director of Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Cleveland, I have not discovered any organizational methodology that better connects our theology with our pastoral practice.

AI counteracts deficit-based thinking, which often is catalyzed by the commonly used approach of problem-solving. Constantly pinpointing weaknesses leaves a parish, or any other organization, focused on its lack of resources rather than the abundance of blessings which God has created. Negative thinking takes away the capacity to create new visions and new images of a vibrant future. It can stifle hope and produce a community lacking in energy and enthusiasm.

AI instead asks people to take a deep inventory of their personal and communal experiences. It embraces the power and inspiration of stories, inviting people throughout an organization to recount the events and times that have had the most vitality and inspiration. The compelling insights and images are brought together to form a vision for positive change and a fuller life.

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 1980’s, and named in his doctoral dissertation: as Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a Methodology for Understanding and Enhancing Organizational Innovation. Through his continuing leadership and in cooperation with theorists and practitioners throughout the world, it has been used successfully in a wide variety of organizational settings. It has proven to be very relevant for use in religious organizations and diverse cultures.

AI is reshaping the way people think about organizational life and change. Richard Beckhard, a leader in the evolution of organizational development over the past 40 years, noted in 1999 in his final speech before the Academy of Management that “Appreciative Inquiry is creating a powerful, enduring change in the way organizational development will be conceptualized and practiced both now and in the future. It is changing the way we think about change itself.”

Our styles of thinking rarely match the increasingly complex worlds in which we live. As Albert Einstein once said: “We cannot solve the problems of our time by remaining in the same ways of thinking that created them in the first place.” We need to commit ourselves to the ongoing discovery of more creative and fruitful ways of knowing. AI offers such a way.
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 parish and ministerial life should never be taken for granted. They help us to see the grace of God at work in our lives and inspire people to be Catholic – to live the “Good News” of parish life. This approach to envisioning the future with hope is reflected well in the words of Pope John XXIII: “Consult not your fears but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what it is still possible for you to do.”

**Underlying Principles**

Several key inter-related principles have been developed as foundational to Appreciative Inquiry. These principles are also supported by a wide range of studies in the fields of medicine, brain research, psychology, sociology and other areas.

- **Constructionist Principle:** We see reality not as it is, but as we are. We all wear ‘rose-colored glasses’. What we choose to see and talk about creates the world in which we live. This is further reflected in the importance of the questions we ask. The questions we use and how we word them are very significant. There are no neutral questions. The energy in people and their potential for positive change are affected by the first questions we ask.

- **Poetic Principle:** Organizations are like poems, or even Scripture, open to infinite interpretation. There is always more to see and discover if we are open to doing so.

- **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.

- **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 the organization or parish. By anticipating the future in a hope-filled and creative manner, we help to create it this way. Kennon Callahan, in *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, captures the thrust of this point when he writes: “The watershed question for many people in many congregations is: Do you believe that 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.”

- **Positive Principle:** Positive questions lead to positive images, which increase positive energy and positive relationships, resulting in positive change. Parishes, as all organizations, are largely affirmative and respond to positive thought and positive knowledge. The momentum for enhancing organizational life requires large amounts of positive affect, social bonding and creative energy. The old adage that nothing happens between strangers is true. Social bonding enhances collaboration, while positive affect lessens resistance to change. The more positive the questions used to guide community-building or parish 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 came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). AI helps us to find life and experience it more fully. It provides a practical way to take seriously the Scriptural message ‘Harden not your hearts.’ It places gratitude for God’s blessings and creation, and hope in our God-given potential, at the center of our process.

The apostle Paul shares this life-centered focus in his letter to the 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 Phillipi have turned against him, threatening all that he has accomplished with them. Instead of rebuking or problem solving, Paul advocates a change of focus towards things that give life and hope. He knows the fruits this will have. “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.

You also find strains of AI in the great mystics of the West. Meister Eckhart, for example, makes explicit the link between the life of faith and the appreciative perspective when he says:

> “Whoever possesses God in their being has God in a divine manner, and God shines out to them in all things; for them all things taste of God and in all things it is God’s image that they see.”

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

**4-D Cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny**

AI is often described as the 4-D cycle – Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. These 4 steps can be applied to a comprehensive organization-wide process, or more simply in the course of a substantive conversation. The intent is to begin with positive questions that reveal the “positive core” and then to build upon this core in generating positive change and transformation.

**Discovery**

A leadership team, using the initial questions in this paper and further questions based on affirmative topics, develops an organization-wide, interview-based inquiry into ‘what gives life.’ This process reveals ‘who we are when we are at our very best’.

**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 deeper dreams for the future of the organization. Activities are used that encourage imagination and creativity.
**Design**

Once the shared dream or strategic focus is expressed, people work in teams to co-construct elements of the ideal organization. Inspiring images and stories of the past become the foundation for crafting creative proposals for what is possible. These proposals connect the best of “what is” with the collective aspiration of “what might be.”

**Destiny**

The creative proposals from the Design phase become the framework for new levels of organizational engagement and self-selected action teams. An emphasis is given to sustaining an appreciative organizational culture that fosters ongoing improvisation and innovation.

**Appreciative Inquiry Interview Method**

Good questions evoke the stories which people hold within their minds and hearts. They connect people at the visceral level. It is these stories that reflect the deeper meanings, beliefs, hopes and dreams which people have about their parish. As it has been since the early days of the Church, telling stories is a powerful way to share our faith, to inspire others and to build the Church.

The interview method is perhaps the best way to bring out these stories and to help people to encounter each other in a meaningful way. The interview offers the most in-depth way to listen to another person and be attentive to their stories. Typically parish leaders and interested members can be easily trained to conduct these interviews. This process has proven to be very rewarding for those who do so. Examples of initial interview questions are given below.

**Beginnings**

1. To start, I’d like to learn about your beginnings in our Parish / Organization / Ministry.
   a. What first attracted you to our Parish / Organization / Ministry...?
   b. What were your initial excitements and impressions when you began here?

**Most life-giving experience - a best moment or high point**

2. Looking at your entire experience in our Parish / Organization …, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most proud and committed, most enthused about the Parish / Organization…? Tell the story of what made this such a fulfilling experience...
   What was it about you, and what others said or did that made it so?

**Things most valued**

3. What do you value most about …
   a. your self - as person and a Catholic…?
   b. the nature of your involvement and ministry here?
   c. the Parish / Organization …and what it has contributed to your life?

**Core image that best reflects what gives life to our Parish / Organization / Ministry**

4. As you think about the Parish / Organization … in general, what is the core image or factor that reflects what most gives life and represents its most essential, life-giving quality?

**Three wishes and hopes**

5. If you could imagine or transform our Parish / Organization …in any way you wished, what 3 things would you do to enhance its life and vitality?

**References:**

- Web site at Case Western Reserve University that links you to a world-wide portal of resources: [http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/](http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/)