



Appreciative Inquiry - A Strategy for Being a Healthy Church

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a tool, which has been used in business as an alternative change-management strategy since the late 1990s. Its approach is based on a process of inquiring into that, which works in an organisation. It focuses on what is working, rather than what is broken. Since self-image is a major determinant in the actions and culture of an organisation, AI has potential to change self-image through the cultural change involved in asking generative questions. This paper applies the principles of AI to local churches, using its paradigm to explore ways of being church, rather than continuing with the struggle, many churches face of trying new programs and fixing problems doing church. Instead of asking what will we do, churches learn to ask the question, "Who has God called us to be?" AI helps the church recognise what God has already been doing among them and in the community around them. A key component of this strategy is the telling of life-giving stories. This strategy has also been successfully used as a means of church renewal.

Introduction

Perception is reality. How people view their strengths, limitations, purpose and relationships determines how they respond in the varied situations of life. Reality is constructed out of perceptions of events since everything is filtered not just through the

senses, but through people's mental furniture, their perceptions. The very existence of image consultants, media managers and "spin doctors" demonstrates that what people think is real is not necessarily the same as what is real. This phenomenon has been recorded in many areas, such as parents' perception of their children's obesity (Akerman, Williams & Meunier, 2007) through to foreign policy (Barhoum 1991).¹

The Importance of our Self-Image

How does this relate to the Church? A range of writers have observed the dualisms inherent in the thinking of Christians across centuries. These writers represent a range of Church traditions and nationalities (Buxton 2007; Haight 1976; Jantzen 1990; McGrath 2017; Ware 1995; Wright 2007). The Plato-inspired spiritual-physical divide, in particular, has had a range of impacts on the church's image of its place in and relationship with the world around it. This view can be traced back to some of the thinking of the early Church Fathers such as Augustine (Cary 2000, p. 118) and Reformers like Calvin (Cooper 2000, pp. 13–14), which developed into an essentially negative spirituality, where one was saved from evil, rather than saved for relationship with God; In such a view the spiritual is "good" and the "physical" is bad, one is saved from the world, rather than saved to engage with it. This can be observed in songs, where one longs to escape from this world to the perfection of heaven; in the dichotomy between the struggle between one's "flesh" and "spirit"; between doing something "in the natural" and "by the Spirit". One common outcome of this dualism is that salvation is viewed as a "rescue" from an evil world. Rather than the created world being something to enjoy, to care for and to transform by incarnating the Kingdom, it becomes something to avoid. (For an extended discussion of this topic see Buxton (2007)).

An unfortunate consequence of this type of thinking is that the world surrounding the church, including those we wish to be in ministry to and with, are seen as problems to solve, difficulties to overcome, even sins/sinners to be avoided. Rather than celebrating life (to use Buxton's phrase), Christians frequently retreat from the world around them. Evangelism becomes "calling them out" of the world, to be separate and holy. In such a world view, social action becomes irrelevant, since the world will be destroyed in fire anyway, to be replaced by spiritual perfection. In addition, people's difficulties can be dismissed as the consequences of their own sinfulness, the righteous judgment of God, so one doesn't need to help the refugee, the unemployed, or the battlers.

Both for its own sake and for the sake of the creation and people God loves, the Church needs to reshape its thinking into a more positive approach. Christians need to embrace a deeper understanding of the goodness of God. We need to value the essential goodness of the Church. We need to value and enjoy the goodness of Creation and the goodness of other people - including the goodness we can find in those who are not yet part of the community of faith.

One of the valuable messages coming from post-modern and emergent voices is the picture of the God who loves and accepts. For those who have reservations about some emergent theology, one doesn't need to look far in the Bible to find messages of God's grace and favour. The call here is a change of emphasis, to recapture the truth that the

¹ A simple search on Google Scholar for "perception is reality" or "perception versus reality" will turn up thousands of references. A helpful introduction can be found in Cooperrider, et al. (2001, Chapter 2)

message brought by Jesus is truly “Good News”. Christians need to understand that the Church today is an incarnation, a foretaste of the eternal Church; and in understanding that, learn again what it means to be a people who live in the light and presence of God’s extravagant love and grace. Rather than waiting for the blessings of a perfect heaven, we should be seeking to experience the shalom which comes now from relationship with God. For then we will be a people who will engage with each other and the community out of a wealth of spirit and being, rather than tending toward an existence as emotional and spiritual paupers. This then raises the question; how might one alter mindsets so that Christians and the Church can more easily see and pursue the good around them? One possibility is to use a process called Appreciative Inquiry.

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a tool which has been used in the corporate world for some years. (See, for example, Johnson & Leavitt, 2001.) Rather than being fear-based, AI tends to be value-based (Sutherland & Stavros, n.d.). It is based on the assumption that “organizations change in the direction in which they inquire” (Ramanathan 2009). That is, the questions asked shape the answers received and, therefore, they shape the future into which one moves (Boyd & Bright, 2007).

The core difference between AI and many other change and transition management tools is that it adopts an approach which focuses on building upon that which is working and that which is good in the organization (Norum 2001). This is in direct contrast to most other change and planning models, which focus on fixing those things which are not working or are problematic.

David Cooperrider originally developed this model for use in corporate environments (Cooperrider, Sorensen & Whitney, 1999).² Since then, AI has been adopted in many commercial and not-for-profit organizations as a tool for change, including churches and denominations across the world. A simple Google search or browse in a good library will demonstrate its wide adoption.

Principles and Assumptions of AI

To some people AI can appear simplistic or as little more than wishful thinking. Because of this, it is important to understand that there are sound principles behind Appreciative Inquiry.³

- The constructionist principle - words create worlds.
- The principle of simultaneity - inquiry creates change.
- The poetic principle - we can choose what we study.
- The anticipatory principle - image inspires action.
- The positive principle - positive questions lead to positive change.
- The wholeness principle - wholeness brings out the best.
- The enactment principle - acting “as if” is self-fulfilling.
- The free choice principle - free choice liberates power.

From these principles, a number of assumptions underlie the AI process:

² Later updated and expanded, See Cooperrider et al. (2001).

³ Summarised from Cooperrider and Whitney (n.d) and Sutherland and Stavros (n.d). There is some difference among writers concerning the number of principles involved. For example, the Australian Appreciative Inquiry Network lists only five (‘5 Principles of Appreciative Inquiry’, n.d). These are not different from the eight contained here, simply a subset.

- Assumption 1. In every system, be it society, an organisation, family, or another group, something works. Instead of looking for what is broken, look rather for what works (that which creates good) and grow it.
- Assumption 2. What one focuses on becomes reality. Negative questions and statements produce a negative reality.
- Assumption 3. Reality becomes created in the moment. Humans are capable of holding multiple realities at the same time. The most important reality is the socially constructed reality, that is, the reality that grows and is nurtured by personal relationships.
- Assumption 4. The art of asking questions of an organisation or group influences that group in some way.
- Assumption 5. People have more confidence and comfort about journeying to the future (the unknown) when they can carry forward parts of the past (the known).
- Assumption 6. It is important to value differences of opinion. Differences of interpretation, and differences that arise from many kinds of diversity are important (Loveless 2009).

AI Process

The basic idea behind AI, while deep, is not convoluted. In essence, one focuses on what's good and builds on that. Of course, like any simplification, there are cautions to be heard and pitfalls to avoid. However, even while acknowledging that caution, its power is still in its relative simplicity.

Rather than try and teach a new way of thinking, or introduce new programs, the AI approach can be used to highlight where the new way, the desired future, is already present and build on that. Based on the principles mentioned above, simply focussing on and doing those things which a church may already do which embodies Kingdom life will in and of itself cause that type of Kingdom living to increase. Mindsets will change and eyes will become more open to see the possibilities of where they can join in what the Spirit of God is already doing around them.⁴ Finding out what the Spirit is doing among and around the Church can be as simple as “ordinary” people telling the stories of times when they have found hope and life, where they have seen God at work.

The AI process is commonly described as the 4D cycle⁵, as in the diagram. The “4D” rubric

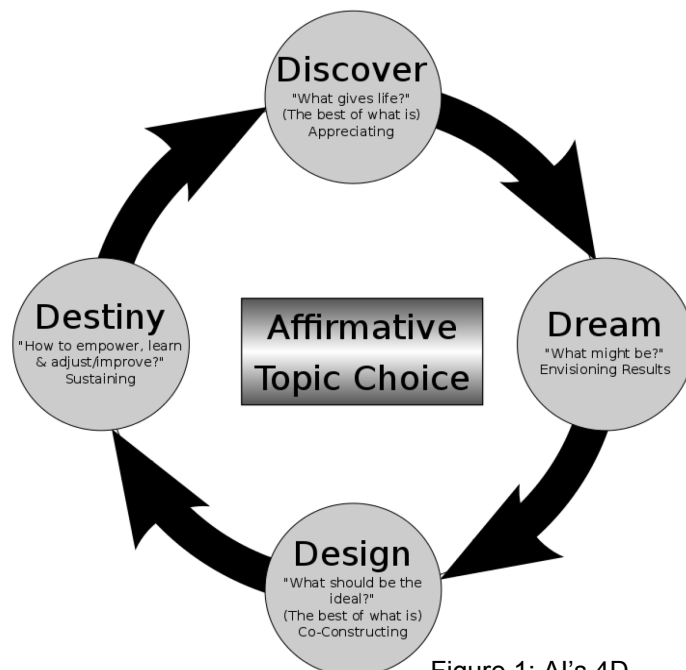


Figure 1: AI's 4D

⁴ If a practitioner attempts to change what people *do* using AI, the likely outcome is that it will fail. The goal is changing mindsets. See Bushe and Kassam (2005).

⁵ Some use an alternate 4I model: Initiation, Inquiry, Imagination, Innovation (Seel 2008; Serrat 2008, p. 2).

comes from the four stages of the process:

1. Discover

People share their stories of when their organisation is at its best. This is usually done through a structured interview. The storytelling is to be as rich as possible, to allow the imaginative power of the stories to begin to change the participants. People begin to appreciate themselves, each other and their organisation.⁶

2. Dream

People are asked to dream what could be. What they are trying to do is imagine what their organisation would be like if the high points of the “Discover” stage became the norm all the time. This is done on a large scale, though small groups may be used to make it more manageable.

3. Design

There is difference here, concerning how this phase should be approached. Some have this phase delegated to a team (Serrat 2008, p. 2), while others have the whole group of participants involved (English, Fenwick & Parsons 2003). The greatest benefit is to be found through involving as many people as possible (Seel 2008). Not only does ownership increase, and therefore commitment, but thinking theologically, if the Spirit of God is among the People of God, then including a multiplicity of voices actually increases the ways in which God is able to speak to the Church.

4. Destiny⁷

As the original rubric “Deliver” indicates, this is the phase where the dreams are implemented. A key part of this phase is experimentation and improvisation. Often small teams are tasked with implementation of one or more ideas which have arisen from the previous stages. For this stage to work, it is important that there has been a shift in values, to a point where people are not just permitted, but encouraged to experiment.

Appreciative Inquiry and the Church

Appreciative Inquiry resonates well with a range of Christian thought. It has been seen to be an application of Paul’s injunction to focus our thoughts on what is good (Phil. 4:8, so Paddock 2003, p. 2). The concept of appreciation also has strong links with the concept of gratitude. Intentionally focussing an individual, a church or even a denomination’s thoughts on what is good, on what is working, can easily lead to giving thanks to God for those things. This then echoes the intent of many of the Psalms (e.g. Psa. 9:1; 107:8-9, or the Hallel Psalms). It also echoes injunctions in Scripture to give praise and thanks, even in difficult times (1Chr. 16:34; Phil. 4:6-7; Col. 3:16-17; 1Thess.

⁶ Serrat provides a helpful list of generic interview questions:

- Think of a peak experience or high point in your work or experience in your organization.
- In that experience, think about the things you valued most about yourself, the nature of your work, and your organization itself.
- Think about the core factors that give life to your organization, viz., the really positive values it can build upon.
- What three wishes would you like to have that would heighten the vitality and health of your organization? (Serrat 2008, p. 2).

⁷ Seel notes that this stage originally was termed “Deliver”. However this was replaced with “Destiny” in order to reduce the mechanical feel of the original and to maintain a future focus (Seel 2008).

5:18; 1Tim. 4:4-5). While exegetically a little questionable, one could even look at Jesus' response to the Disciples in the account of the feeding of the multitude (Mtt. 14:13-21, 15:32-39 and parallels⁸). The Disciples focussed on the problem, Jesus redirected them to what they had and then performed the miracle. This parallels AI's focus on what is working, rather placing one's attention on what is not. In addition, the emphasis on story providing meaning as part of the AI process parallels the Scripture's own methods. People are invited learn about themselves and about God by entering into the story of God's interactions with his people over the millennia. This is particularly clear in the Hebrew Scriptures, which introduces God through the way he has interacted with his people, as well as through his laws and requirements. Story is also used to raise questions, to cause one to reflect, rather than provide answers, not only causing one to come to one's own conclusions, but also serving to draw one into the narrative, to identify as part of the wider narrative of God and his people. Appreciative Inquiry also fits well with ecclesiology. The act of listening to the stories of others gives those individuals respect, signifying that they matter. It also can seek to find the presence and actions of God among the whole people in a congregation, rather than focussing on the thoughts and experiences of a few. This reflects well on Paul's image of the Body of Christ in 1Corinthians 12, which indicates all are significant as part of God's work. This can lead to, and indeed depends on, a humility, which recognises and values the knowledge and experiences of others. Indeed, this process has been seen to affirm and even deepen the faith of participants (Paddock 2003, p. 14).⁹

It is unsurprising; therefore, that AI has been used in a range churches, denominations and Christian organisations. English et al. (2003, p. 83ff) provide a helpful, step-by-step example of the technique applied to the development of spirituality in a Christian School context. The process has even been implemented at denominational level. The Canadian Mennonites have used and promoted the use of AI among their congregations. (See, for example, Benner 2010; Rogalsky 2009a, 2009b.) Similarly, Paddock (2003) records the use of AI across a range of Catholic organisations and local faith communities. She observes that they include some early adopters among their number, with work being done as far back as 1996 (Paddock 2003, p. 12). The United Methodist Church commends the process in their leadership documentation (General Board of Discipleship & Heavner 2016; General Board of Discipleship, Jackson & Cataldo 2016).¹⁰

Not only has AI been used by a range of faith communities, the process has been applied for a variety of purposes. It has been used for missional engagement and strategic planning, for spiritual renewal, ecumenical engagement and staff transitions (Branson 2016, pt. 2; Paddock 2003 passim).

However, not all have applied AI appropriately. Some have tended to denote anything, which focuses on the "positive" as being Appreciative Inquiry. While such may indeed apply some of the principles behind AI, it does not necessarily apply the *process*. So, one may use an appreciative methodology or principle even while not engaging in an

⁸ While I am aware that some scholars interpret the two accounts a repetitions of the one incident, I am assuming these represent two different events.

⁹ Branson (2016, Chapter 3) has an excellent discussion concerning AI's compatibility with Biblical theology.

¹⁰ A very helpful set of examples can be found in Mark Lau Branson's recently updated Memories, Hopes, and Conversations (Branson 2016).

appreciative inquiry process.¹¹ Others have seemed to implement the process more fully, moving from the inquiry to the design and even delivery stages. There have also been a number of careful implementations, including a range of research theses (Brown 2010; Kohler 2011; McClellan 2011; Peavy 2010; Williams 2011). It is unclear, however, whether the process is then continued iteratively. Hays (2010), for example, fully implements the process initially, but there is no mention of any further iterations. Similarly, Kinnison (2016, pp. 125–128) commends the full AI process, but fails to highlight its iterative nature. Even though he doesn't note the iterative nature of the process, Nordenbrock (2011, p. 52) does emphasise that the Destiny phase is ongoing, involving continual review and development. Similarly, van Helden (2014) emphasises the need to reflect after the Destiny phase.

The risks of an unwise or uncritical use of the process was raised by Rogalsky (2013), when he addresses the issue of being “too positive”, not asking questions about, or addressing that which doesn't work (on which see further below). Another risk, and criticism, is that AI is and has been implemented as an event, rather than as a process. Benner (2010), for example, critiques the Canadian Mennonite hierarchy for failing to “follow-up” on the initial process. The risk here is that it becomes an expensive event which leads to little long-term change and at the same time raises a level of cynicism either about the leadership, about AI, or about both.

Whether or not churches and Christians will value and be able to implement the insights of AI will depend on the mindsets they bring, since these determine the starting point for the journey. People do not deal with reality on a daily basis; rather they experience their perception of reality in light of their intellectual and emotional framework, which has been formed from past experiences (Pegram & Tan, 2010, sec. 5.1; Voyle 2010, pp. 39–43). By focussing on what is working, AI allows the refashioning of the mental landscape, by choosing what is inquired about, by choosing the stories told.

More than simply asking, how can AI help to construct a positive mental landscape, another important question is, how can it help congregations to “be the Church” better. How can they be the sort of church envisaged above, churches which celebrate life? Part of the answer comes from research in the areas of social and emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman addresses the question of “What Really Matters” in the chapter by that name in *Social Intelligence* (Goleman 2006b, p. 311ff). He notices the creep of expectations and how, in the pursuit of some things (in his discussion money and pleasure), the treadmill never ends. Goleman refers to research by Kahneman, which indicates what actually does provide happiness or satisfaction for people—a life rich with rewarding relationships (Kahneman 2004). The answer to the question above concerning how AI can help Christians to be church better, is that since the AI process is inherently relational it will by its nature bring greater and longer-lasting satisfaction than trying to do more and better effort, programs and events.

Once people begin to tell meaning-making stories, relationships start to be built (Boyd & Bright 2007, p. 1026). The more heartfelt a story is told, the greater the

¹¹ Nell (2014, p. 7), highlights this misuse of the term by referring to “so-called ‘appreciative inquiry’”. A number seem to miss this important point. (See, for example, Dantis 2015, p. 188; Greenwood 2013, 2016; Perez 2011).

emotional and relational connection between the teller and the listeners.¹² Further, if stories of hope are told, if people share others' positive journey with God, they themselves will become more hopeful, more relationally connected and more satisfied with their experience of Christian community. This has been the author's experience in a church where this strategy was implemented.

It is important to note that for anything to be a part of true cultural change, it has to be a process, rather than a single event. This is no challenge to AI, since it is itself an iterative process. There are often mini-iterations in the Destiny phase. However, more than that, there is the need to make this process a part of the ongoing culture, rather than something which is completed and then moved on from. Rather than proceeding through an AI process, churches need to engage in the AI cycle in an ongoing way: asking generative questions, continuing to tell the stories, continuing to determine what the common threads are, continuing to hear God's voice and see his actions as he moves in and around the Church, in and through the surrounding community; then continuing to experiment, to try new ways of being Church in the community.

Bushe (2007) cautions about a too-superficial appreciation of the model. The key issue he raises is that of the work needing to be generative - being positive is not enough. What his story highlights is that the "right" questions need to be asked, not just positive ones about the goal. For example, the author was asked by a leadership team to assist in planning the transition from a long-established minister. The normal process involves description of needs and roles, creation of a position description (PD), advertising and interviewing based on the PD, culminating in a final appointment. Using AI, the initial question to the team was, "What aspects of ministry, both with the current and other ministers, have given your life and hope, have helped you to encounter God?" What arose was essentially a list of personal attributes which the team used to interview and find the right person. Roles were part of the discussion, but they were subservient to finding the person who would help the church build on the positive culture they were developing.

Bushe's (2007) discussion concerning raising "negative issues" is also useful. Rather than avoiding the negative, telling people that we can't discuss "what we don't like", he wisely suggests that the discussion be had, but that the leader move the discussion from purely negative territory into addressing the positive by asking questions like: "What's missing?" "How could this be done better?" "How should things be, then?" (See also, Grant 2006, p. 269). As is so often the case, a tool used unwisely or inappropriately can cause more damage than good. This highlights the need to have the process led wisely.

It is important to recognise that the dreams developed during the process are not pie-in-the-sky. Appreciative Inquiry is an iterative process, rather than a linear one. Through a wise process dreams become reality, but in the process the dream is itself moulded to fit goals and circumstances. Frequently when introducing the process to teams, "practical" concerns are raised. A helpful strategy is to "fill in the gaps" for people with concerns, letting them know that the process does eventually get to wise evaluation, but it may not be at that stage yet.

This also serves to highlight the need to know the audience. Are they flexible enough to adapt to a new process, a new way of thinking, a way which may be quite

¹² See Pegram and Tan (2010, Chapter 3). Similar conclusions can be drawn from other works on emotional intelligence which shows that emotional connection can result in matching physical responses, and therefore shared effect (Decety & Jackson 2006, p. 55; Goleman 2006a, Chapter 7).

foreign to their usual patterns? This is one of the points made by Mantegna. She also notes the need to ensure participants have the time to devote to the process (Mantegna 2011, p. 77). In our time-poor society, this is an issue which is easily dismissed. Practitioners need to make room for this process to occur, for it to inhabit people's minds and hearts. If it is rushed through as a quick fix, it will fail. In the case of the church, the goal is for AI to become a way of life, not simply a change process. It indeed may begin as a process, but the goal should be to see it as a new way of being - a way of living Gospel values.

Generative effects don't just happen, the key is the mindset of the participants. If the participants are still in a negative frame of mind, still assigning blame, still hurting or self-censoring, then generative effects will likely not occur. However generative effects will occur when the process is followed with wisdom and insight, that is, with skilled leadership. This echoes Grant's observation concerning the need to remain flexible in the application of the 4D AI model, where rigid adherence can actually stifle communication and relationships (Grant 2006, p. 279f).

In summary, AI is a process which is widely recommended as being useful, but it needs to be applied with wisdom and flexibility in the application of process.

Lessons from AI—Strategies and Application

So what might the application of AI to the life of a church look like, what might it entail? Some remarks have already been made in the previous section, however, here some examples of how this might look and how the principles/mindset reaches into people's thinking and acting as Christians will now be presented.

A very simple, but powerful strategy is to simply begin the inquiry process—to start asking people what they have found in their Christian life and in the congregation, that has been energising and life-giving, where they have encountered God. The whole process, its principles, assumptions and rationale, doesn't even need to be explained up front, this can be done along the way. Essentially the goal is to change habits/mindsets, to have people get into the habit of telling their "God stories".

This storytelling strategy has a number of positive outcomes. In and of itself, telling the "good" stories are encouraging - to use Buxton's phrase, we "celebrate life" (2007) and, in addition, we celebrate God's participation in it. In doing this, it is important that "ordinary" stories are encouraged. By their everyday nature, they break down the sacred-secular divide so common in western thinking. They remind us that God is found in all sorts of places. Because of that, people begin to hope, to look for the everyday acts and presence of God around them.

Having encouraged a minister to make his "strategic plan" a process of telling and hearing this type of story, the author had a conversation with one of the congregation members after a Sunday service once the strategy had begun. The member commented that it was a most encouraging and uplifting service. When asked why, she said it was because people had told their stories. Not the extreme "saved from the gates of hell" tales, but tales of simple, real-life encounters with God. This was at a time that congregation was recovering from a damaging and hurtful time in its history.

Another beneficiary of this strategy was the minister, himself a people person.¹³ He was finding it extremely challenging to formulate a classic strategic plan, especially since he wasn't "wired" to think that way. He was feeling overwhelmed and wanted help. To be given the goal of building the congregation's telling and hearing of these life-giving God stories was life-giving to him. Not only could he do that, not only was it playing to his strengths, but it was exciting for him to contemplate. To make it a more intentional process, closer in line with AI practice, he and the leadership were also given responsibility to listen to what themes were common among the stories. Through this, with wisdom, they could discover who the church was and where God was at work in and around them. This then could lead into areas for experimentation for future practice. His "strategic plan" for the next twelve months was the application of these initial parts of the AI process.

The deceptively simple theological underpinning to this is that if the Spirit of God is among his people, then God can and will speak through their voices. Too often churches have quelled the voices of those through whom God might speak, limiting his speaking to the educated, the professional, the orthodox. It is understandable in some ways why this has happened, yet the fear of the unorthodox, strange, unexpected or even heretical seems a poor reason to stifle the very voices God may speak through. I believe we need to hear the witness of Scripture in this. Often it is the unexpected one, the insignificant, the marginalised whom God has used to achieve his ends: the youngest (David, Joseph), the insecure and afraid (Moses), the sinners (Rahab, Matthew), the everyday "fishermen", the persecutor (Paul).

The scriptures are filled with imperfect people who so often seem to misunderstand God. Perhaps we need a little more imperfection in churches. Letting the unlikely voices be heard is one place to start. It would mean a church which was "messy", simply because it allowed people to be themselves, with fewer constricting rules, because people are "messy"! Such a church may indeed put some people off, but such a church could also be very attractive. People could be drawn to a place where their story mattered, to a place where they could be themselves without having to wear the mask of "having it all together," a church where people could be "real".

Of course, it doesn't begin and end with telling the stories, more is needed. If there are to be more "messy" churches, we need to become better at dealing with the consequences of the unexpected, the surprising, the confronting. Messy people often have disagreements. The health of a church is not defined by whether they have disagreements and conflict or not, but by how they resolve them. For a people who have the message of reconciliation, forgiveness and hope, it seems we often struggle to define these and provide concrete methods to achieve these in our individual and corporate lives. In the author's experience, more often than not, Christians avoid conflict and discomforting situations, brushing things under the carpet until they or the situation explodes, or until people leave (the congregation and sometimes the faith).

Voyle (2010) has developed AI, NLP and contemplative spirituality into strategies for helping individuals and groups deal with conflict and grief. He provides strategies (with accompanying experiential learning exercises) for resolving painful memories, grief and resentment. A strength of Voyle's work is that it is heavily focussed on providing tools to use, rather than simply outlining the problem. Voyle recounts his

¹³ His style is an IS, according to the DISC profiling tool (Institute for Motivational Living, n.d.; Pegram & Tan, 2010, Chapter 6).

frustration with an unhelpful seminar he attended where for five of the six hours they were informed about the negative effects of lack of forgiveness, with the final hour admonishing them about the need to forgive. Yet, nowhere was forgiveness or resentment defined, nor were any strategies to forgive provided (Voyle 2010, p. 21).

There are two levels of benefit if Voyle's AI tools are used - the individual and the corporate. If individuals in the Church live in a place of hope and life, rather than tied to past pain, it automatically creates a more positive, life-giving atmosphere in the Church. However, there are also situations where congregations as a whole have experienced pain and loss and hold onto resentments. In such situations, time by itself does not heal, but the use of strategies which enable the restoration of life and hope do bring healing and wholeness (Voyle 2010, p. 12). A key part of Voyle's methodology is the coach-client relationship. He acknowledges that it is possible to learn from the information in the book, but that it is in the relationship and journey undertaken by the coach and client that real change is effected. The benefits will be greater for the long-term if the coach can be someone who is part of the congregation or someone who has or can maintain a relationship with the congregation, even though an "outsider". Not only will this person be a resource for similar situations, but the shared journey itself strengthens ties immeasurably. Therefore, if they are part of the congregation the relational "capital" of the congregation will be built. This is nothing new. It is similar to the effects of any good pastoral care. The difference here is the strategies used to effect healing.

A key to effectively implementing AI is fostering a culture of experimentation, one that by its nature is permission-giving. If we truly believe that God speaks through the multitude of voices in our churches, then we need to take what they say seriously. Therefore, as people tell the stories and dream of ways in which the future may be better, there needs to be experiments, which attempt to make that future real. The role of leadership is to guide wise reflection on process and implementation. Rather than being gatekeepers, leaders become wise guides. Of course, it is expected that some experiments will not achieve the desired results, but that is okay! What then happens is the process begins again, looking at what works and building on that. If an experiment does work, then again, the process is applied, seeking to build on the success, learning from, but not dwelling on, the "failures".

There are many resources available which will assist with bringing AI into the local church. Sutherland and Stavros (n. d., p. 8ff), for example, explain what AI strategy might look like, as well as suggesting a series of "appreciative questions". For those involved in pastoral care or working with conflicted situations, Voyle's material is very helpful. There are also many AI resources on the Web, including some specifically addressing its use among churches and denominations. There is even a page of links entitled "AI in the Religious Sector" at The Appreciative Inquiry Commons ('AI in the Religious Sector - The Appreciative Inquiry Commons', n. d.).

Conclusion

Often the church operates out of a scarcity and judgement mindset, rather than one of grace and abundance. Frequently, this is coupled with a dualistic world view which is negative in its outlook to this world and its life in favour of "heaven". These attitudes are reflected in relationships among congregation members and with the wider community, and even in Christians' own self-image.

Appreciative Inquiry is quite simple in concept and relatively uncomplicated in practice, yet it is a method to implement and sustain successful congregational change. A key to maintaining that change is to recognise that AI is a process, actually a recursive process, not a program or a quick fix.

A joy in beginning AI journey is that the more people reflect on life, ministry and the church from an AI perspective, the more they see that is hopeful and life giving. When applied thoughtfully, this process allows a different mindset to be developed in a church—a mindset where the focus is on what the good God and others are doing in and around the people of God, a mindset where God is good and seeks to do more good, where we incarnate the Kingdom and celebrate the good life into which we have been born again, and a process which allows us to become and remain people who have and continue to experience Good News.

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