

Appreciative Inquiry: The pluses and the minuses

DRAFT DOCUMENT: This is in the process of development. More will be added over time. As of 2/24/12

The information below is a mix of research and speculation; experience and dreams. This is a resource for practitioners. One of the ways we improve our work is by acknowledging the “minuses” and sorting out those that can best be addressed by modifying the theory or method and others that are simply set aside (there is no perfect theory or method so don’t try to make one!)

The pluses

Or the possibilities, dreams

The minuses

Or the concerns, hesitations, unanswered questions

Tends to produce a positive affect among participants. Building trust and a shared positive spirit. May lead to increased creativity, resilience and integration in thinking.		It’s uncertain that the initial positive affect generated leads to sustained organizational improvement. It would seem that much the same results of creativity, resilience, trust and positive spirit come from teams overcoming obstacles and problems together.
The positive focus may make it easier for some leaders to enter into a change process.		The positive focus may also be easily dismissed by other leaders. Edgar Schein is convinced that systems do not change unless there is a fear of loss involved (survival anxiety).
That the attraction of the dream, the new possibility, is such that it will generate the needed energy and commitment to produce significant improvement.		Most OD practice has assumed that there needs to be a level of dissatisfaction with the existing situation and a sense of vision or new direction. That it’s not either/or but both/and.
Tends to produce high energy around a change effort		Some evidence that implementation is weak. That the dreams and visions will produce a momentum for a few months (just as in other forms of OD) there is a need for action planning and monitoring systems if some projects are to be successful.
Participatory		The value of being participatory is shared broadly in the field of organization development regardless of the method used. Participatory doesn’t mean non-hierarchal in practice. Top leaders and stakeholders need to buy into the initial focus.
An integrated system: ways of working, values, underlying assumptions about the nature of people and things		A closed system: Practitioners tend to discount research, theory and practice that do not fit the existing AI culture
There is a disciplined, thoughtful set of methods that can be learned and used.		The approach has been so popularized that many assume they know how to implement AI processes when in fact they lack both an understanding of the method and the needed skills (facilitation skills, basic consultation skills). Note: The same may be said of the roader field of organization development.
Appreciative Inquiry works with the strengths. It invites a parish to build on what is already present in the parish.		Needs more sensitivity to the many occasions when a weakness in the system needs to be addressed in a timely manner or in order to provide the “space” for a more appreciative process.

Has drawn the attention of many to the possibilities in working with the existing gifts and strengths of the parish.		The approach has been around a long time. AI has a bit of spin in it when claiming it's so new. For example in Force Field Analysis there's an assumption of building on existing strengths. In strategic management and planning there's the assumption that you're better off working with strengths and opportunities than focusing on weaknesses or threats.
Too much focus on our dissatisfaction can paralyze us. Perpetual dissatisfaction is not a place to live.		Most work done on what motivates change suggests there is a need for some level of dissatisfaction. It's even implied in AI as we note the gap between what is now and what we want to be as we grow our strengths and gifts.
There is a value in striving to become better.		It can become an addiction in which we never find a time of being satisfied. The issue is one connected to all change processes not just AI. It can help us as a parish community to say "this is good enough" about parts of our life. "Perfection is the enemy of the good."

Considerations

Steinke quotes Edwin Friedman: "Actually religious institutions are the worst offenders of encouraging immaturity and irresponsibility. In church after church some member is passively-aggressively holding the whole system hostage, and no one wants to fire him or force her to leave because it wouldn't be 'the Christian thing to do.' It has nothing to do with Christianity. Synagogues also tolerate abusers because it wouldn't be 'the Christian thing to do.' (p. 13)

The authors of *Primal Leadership* write, "We've seen repeatedly that when teams (and entire organizations) face their collective emotional reality, they begin a healthy reexamination of the shared habits that create and hold that reality in place. In fact, for leaders to extend emotional intelligence throughout their teams and organizations, that's precisely where they need to start: by taking a hard look at reality, rather than focusing first on an ideal vision."

"Concentrate on what we want," the puppy teacher Diane Abbott counsels Abramson. "Don't give attention to what we don't like." The advisory could serve as a cornerstone of the "positive training" method endorsed by so many dog professionals. But when what we don't want is the dog relieving herself in the middle of the Duxiana mattress, trying to swipe a chicken from an outdoor table at Locanda Verde or eating your husband's prescription glasses, it can be difficult not to give her some attention." *New York Times Book Review Come. Stay.* Oct 16, 2011

Trying to remove negative feelings judgment

The refusal to speak about our “negative” or more critical feelings judgments doesn't mean that they're not there. They sit within us, unexamined and unchallenged. They get talked about in the corners of coffee hour and in the parking lot.

There are dangers here. You can create the suspicion that parish leaders are trying to suppress open conversation. It may also contribute to creating a fear-based parish culture; one with little real openness or candor. If the whole of what we think and feel is expressed in such an environment others may in subtle ways punish us. Trust erodes as this kind of thinking perks about just under the surface of parish life.

There are alternative possibly more balanced methods

- Shape productive conversations around matters that people have investment in. Pater Block writes¹ about creating conversations with sensitivity to whom we want in the room and having conversations “that will produce accountability to build relatedness, structure belonging, and move action forward.”
- Train leaders and members the communication skills of how paraphrase and use itemize response. Expressing both what we like as well as what concerns us.
- Use group processes that identify both what participants like and what concerns them about proposals and strategies. Spend time working on what they like—how to expand and grow the best, the strengths, the gifts.
- Use force field analysis—allow adequate time to explore how to build upon the driving forces.
- Use a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and spend time building on the existing strengths and taking advantage of the opportunities.

You can also within all these work out approaches that make use of some of the methods within appreciative inquiry--have people interview one another, identify mountaintop and best experiences, identify existing gifts and strengths.

Making these methods work is helped by:

- Having a good group facilitator
- Carefully designing the session—have adequate time for the work, use newsprint pads and have it up in front of people in a manner that makes it easy for them to stay within the structure of the process, and so on.

In all of this we are not so much talking about the theory of appreciative inquiry. We are noting how in fact it is largely used in the church at this time

A case

This is our assessment of a situation in which a parish attempted to use appreciative inquiry along with the idea of keeping the current rector in place during the search process.

A process was developed to address the issues inherent in the rector staying in place during a transition. It took a turn after several months away from the process that had been agreed upon and toward a direction that *may* lead to serious problems in the parish. The two primary potential problems are that after the new rector is in place:

- The parish may remain stuck in an inability to move from a stagnate, static and slow decline into revitalization; and to use an image that became common in the parish—to move from being a 3.5 star parish to a 4.5 star parish.
- That conflict may emerge between the new rector and key people in the congregation

The assessment we make isn't necessarily shared by others:

-We assume there are few in that parish who would see it as we do.

-We did not suggest that the Bishop intervene in the process. In fact we thought that would be a mistake. Such an intervention could be needlessly hurtful to the current rector and to others. Most people would be bewildered. Given the parish's long-term stance of seeing itself as in some ways apart from and wiser than the diocese, to intervene at that stage would simply set off massive resistance. Our guess was that the Bishop would not be heard.

-What we feared may not happen. The problems that occur when parishes ignore certain norms in the transition/search process are not inevitable; they simply seem to take place more frequently.

A course of action was suggested to the Bishop in which: 1) the candidates would be alerted to the kinds of questions they need to ask in this situation, 2) the Bishop consider suggesting to the candidates that their first few years were likely to have something of an interim quality, and 3) the Bishop assure them of his/her willingness to provide training and consulting resources and of support if difficulties emerge.

The conventional approach to interim/search work has been to have at least a year between the time of the long-term rector is leaving and the new rector arriving. That norm emerged out of years of experience and research. Speed Leas has maintained that one reason for that norm is a tendency for conflicts to develop in the new rector's relationship with the parish.

The broader issue is the need for the congregation to emotionally "let go" of the former rector. The assumption is that the combination of the time period and having to be in relationship with an interim priest allows a critical mass of people to enter into a new relationship with more freedom and integrity. While there are many examples of other types of organizations

(military, business) making a quicker transition that proves effective, those are situations in which the organizational culture supports that kind of transition. Interpersonal and symbolic relationships are important in all systems but maybe more so in churches.

There were several concerns expressed within the transition team managing the total process: 1) The parish had a history of disconnecting from the diocese, 2) the parish was sold an alternative process based on very exaggerated negative statements about the “standard” process, 3) the initial desire that the process be entirely appreciative and non developmental, and 4) the tendency noted above, for parishes without a year in-between with a different priest to stay stuck and get into conflict.

Those on the transition team with such misgivings set that aside out of a desire to be cooperative, an excitement about an experimental approach, and the agreement that the process would include some assessment work (what is the parish’s blindside, challenges, how we shoot ourselves in the foot)² and some developmental work (the rector was to recruit and lead a team in a structure parish revitalization program with other parishes).

The rector staying in place was to be used to help the congregation accept the need to face into difficult issues and to provide leadership to advance the development of the parish. The hope was that on his way out he might provide a way to jumpstart the parish into a new place. In that way the parish would not be a static or declining parish in need of a priest savior but a parish already in motion toward a new future. The rector would leave with more integrity and on a high note. Long avoided patterns and dynamics would be in the process of being acknowledged and faced into. The assumption was that this would make the parish more attractive to the best candidates as well as enhance the parish’s own sense of well-being and capacity.

The assessment and developmental elements of the process were discarded. The claim was that the parish really needed a totally appreciative process.

Some years ago when Rob Voyle was asked by several dioceses to provide an appreciative transition process there was a good bit of concern expressed about how appreciative processes seemed to lend themselves to misuse and the avoidance of difficult questions. Our understanding is that Rob assured people that he would build in some protection from that occurring. Part of the answer would seem to be in Rob’s process around “Assessing Congregational Needs: Four Factors.”³ There was no such assessment process at this parish, either as suggested by Rob or in some other form. Rob’s writings also suggest criteria⁴ to be considered if the search is to happen while the current rector remains in place. While some claim might be made that the initial process would have addressed most of these things, that ended up no longer being the case.

¹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, Berrett-Koehler Publ, 2008.

² “We’ve seen repeatedly that when teams (and entire organizations) face their collective emotional reality, they begin a healthy reexamination of the shared habits that create and hold that reality in place. In fact, for leaders to extend emotional intelligence throughout their teams and organizations, that’s precisely where they need to start: by taking a hard look at reality, rather than focusing first on an ideal vision. ... Groups begin to change only when they have fully grasped the reality of how they function.” (p. 172 *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman. The last sentence is quoted by Peter Steinke in *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*,” p. 73 as he explores the need for leaders to focus the energy of congregations on a mission related direction.

³ “*Assessing Congregational Needs: Four Factors Congregational Size: Small, Large, Medium*
Succession Predictability: Planned or Unplanned
Current Congregational State: Spirited or Dispirited
Future Potential: Congruent or Disparate”

From “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Inventing a Parish Specific Transitional Ministry”, Rob Voyle, 2009

⁴ “From our perspective congregations that have the following characteristics could easily engage in a search while the retiring rector is still present:

- Stable and energized;
- Have a clear sense of their future and are acting from a place of love and hope and not fear of an unknown future they need to control;
- A well differentiated rector who will not meddle in the search;
- Do not need major congregational development;
- Have the resources to engage an external search consultant so that search issues do not default to the church staff.”

From “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Inventing a Parish Specific Transitional Ministry”, Rob Voyle, 2009