

The Appreciative Way and the Search Process

In the previous section we have shown that Appreciative Inquiry is more than an organizational process; it is a way of thinking, seeing, doing, and being in the world that is fundamentally different from the problem-focused approaches of many organizational development practices. The problem-focused approaches are typically based on the medical model of “assess, diagnose, and treat.” While the medical model may be effective in helping treat physical medical conditions, it has significant limitations when dealing with social systems.

Diagnosis is essentially a sophisticated form of judgment and blame. The “cure” is often violent (in the form of surgery), or alienating (in the sense of rejecting or destroying invading bacteria). Medically speaking these can be helpful procedures, but when people in human systems are treated in blaming, violent, or alienating ways they typically respond with alienating and damaging reactions. Even with the best of intentions of trying to help, the process of blame often leads to negative spirals of enfeeblement where every attempt to help creates a more negative outcome.

The medical model works best in relatively simple systems that can be reduced to linear patterns of cause and effect. Churches and other social organizations are complex organic systems that cannot be reduced to linear cause and effect processes. When the entire system is involved in the problem, the entire system needs to be involved in the solution. In many cases these solutions will be independent of the problem, and will not be discovered from an analysis of the problem. For example, in the middle of conflict people often lose sight of the purpose of their organization. Reorienting them to the purpose and engaging them to achieve those deeper callings will often resolve the conflict without direct analysis, diagnosis, or treatment of the conflict.

It was in our search for an alternative to the medical model for organizational development that we discovered Appreciative Inquiry. What we have also discovered is that Appreciative Inquiry is not alone in using alternatives to the medical model when dealing with human systems. Appreciative Inquiry has parallels in, or is compatible with, other schools of thought, such as the change work of Milton Erickson and his students, solution-focused therapy, neuro-linguistic programming, positive psychology, narrative therapy, and, from a theological perspective, contemplative spirituality. In our lives and work we have synthesized these approaches into what we call the **Appreciative Way**.

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*If you want to find
a loving rector
then you will need to use
loving strategies
in the search process.*

*We need to know the rules
so we know how and when
to break them.
— Unknown*

*The incarnation teaches
us that sustainable change
must be an inside job.*

From our perspective the **Appreciative Way** is more than “doing an appreciative inquiry” process — it is a foundational way of thinking, being and doing that transforms every aspect of the search process. This approach leads to a search process that is incarnational, future-oriented, purpose-centered, solution-focused, values-informed, and inspired by love.

An Incarnational Search Process

The search process needs to be a process that is done with people not to people. Consultants, transitional clergy, and diocesan leaders need to incarnationally join the congregation where they presently are and not where the consultant wants them to be. From within this system they can create a search and transition process that honors the best of the congregation — and then uses their best as the foundation to co-create their new future in God.

Jesus never relied on only one method of healing. The Gospels are full of the varieties of ways he encountered people, entered into their unique worlds, and created strategies to bring transformation and healing. Using Jesus as a model, we reject the “one size fits all” approaches that impose a process from outside of the congregation. Our incarnational approach creates a process that respects and enriches the uniqueness of each congregation. While we detail many steps in the search process, not all congregations will need to do all the steps, and others may need to invent alternative processes to meet their needs. What we hope the reader will find here are the basic appreciative skills, and strategies to create and adapt these processes to meet their unique needs.

At the same time as we honor the congregation’s uniqueness, we also want to honor diocesan expectations and procedures. Diocesan search processes vary in the assistance they provide to congregations. While becoming one of us, Jesus never lost sight of his Divine perspective or objective. While consultants and advisors need to join with a congregation, they also need to remember that the congregation is part of a greater whole. The clergy are not coming simply to serve a congregation, but to be part of and serve a diocese as well. This manual is intended to be a resource for dioceses and congregations to co-create a search process that facilitates a new chapter in the shared life of the congregation and the diocese as they minister to their community.

Moreover, search processes are not just about congregations and dioceses. They also involve the candidates and their families. An incarnational approach requires that search committees join with the candidates in a mutual path of discovery and discernment. While some candidates may be disappointed when they are not called to a position, we want their involvement in the search process to enrich their lives and their understanding of their Christian life.

We want the search process to be a blessing for all involved. When a blessing comes at the expense of another it is not a blessing, it is theft, and such blessings are never sustainable. An incarnational search means that the process respects the physical, social, and spiritual environments of all parishioners, the candidates, and the diocese.

Purpose-Centered

There is an old design saying: “form follows function.” To create a process we need to know the purpose of each step, and we also need to know the greater purpose of the entire process, and the purpose of the organization in which the search is being conducted. When a rector leaves and parishioners begin to look toward the future, the first thing they typically begin to think is “What do we want in our next rector?” Unfortunately, this creates a search process that is disconnected from the congregation’s current and future reality. At the initial stage of the search process the real question is not about the next rector. It’s about the congregation:

What kind of parish do we want to become?

Only when this question is answered can the congregation reflect on the skills and abilities they need in a rector to help them become that congregation.

Our experience of congregational life suggests that one of the greatest needs in the main-line churches today is for congregations to rediscover and live their core purpose. This purpose needs to be lived in the context of their understanding of the local and global mission to which they are called. Apathy and conflict often arise because there is no unified purpose that inspires the activities within the congregation. Attempting to resolve this conflict without reference to a deeper purpose is futile. Consequently, most of the initial work in the search process is designed to help a congregation discover their core purpose.

Without knowing their God-given purpose and grounding their goals in this purpose, change processes are likely to be random, life-sapping distractions that mire the congregation in mindless mediocrity.

Great Minds have purposes, others have wishes.
— Washington Irvine

When you see what you’re here for, the world begins to mirror your purpose in a magical way. It’s almost as if you suddenly find yourself on stage in a play that was written expressly for you.
— Betty Sue Flowers

*You have to go and
fetch the future.
It's not coming towards
you, it's running away.*
— Zulu Proverb

*You can't change
the past,
but you can ruin
the present
by worrying about
the future.*
— Unknown

*Wherever you go
there you are.*
— Jon Kabat-Zinn

Future-Oriented

In the world of transitional ministry, considerable emphasis is placed on helping a congregation come to terms with its past, especially any problematic aspects of the congregation's past. We think this emphasis is often counterproductive. Rather than coming to terms with their past, congregations need to come to terms with their future. This future will be informed by our past, and while we cannot change one iota of our past, we can choose what we allow from our past to inform our future.

A central theme in the Gospels, and especially the Easter story, is the restoration of hope to a people who live in oppression. Hope is all about the future. It says we do not have to be limited by the past — that new life is available. Jesus didn't spend much time talking about the past. Most of his preaching was about the future and the coming reign of God. It was the coming of this future Kingdom of God, that was partially known in the present, which gave people hope despite the trials of the present and memories of the past.

Since the congregation will spend the rest of its life in the future, the **Appreciative Way** is focused on co-creating with God the congregation's preferred future. While very future-oriented, we understand that the path to the future is found by living fully in the present moment. We pay particular attention to discovering what is purposeful and life-giving to the congregation in the present moment, and then explore with the congregation how to increase this as they grow into their future.

While diagnosing and treating the difficulties of the past is not part of the **Appreciative Way**, we do not ignore the past. Rather, the past is viewed as a treasure trove of resources that the congregation can use as a foundation for building their future. Just as we pay attention to what is valuable and life-giving in the present moment, we also look for these realities in the congregation's past to strengthen their current consciousness. Specifically, parishioners are asked to tell stories about times when their congregation was at its best, or of their personal best experience as a member of the congregation.

From a theological perspective what we are doing is "remembering" the congregation. The act of remembering means to "re-member" or "put back together" in consciousness. Jesus used this understanding of remembering at the Last Supper. When we take bread and wine to remember Jesus, we are putting Jesus back together in our

consciousness. The past memory becomes a present reality. We use the process of appreciative storytelling to help the congregation remember itself at its best. We deliberately choose to remember the best, because when we are at our best we most closely approximate the image of God that God intended us to be. It is from within this God-given best that the congregation can discern its purpose. This purpose then forms the basis of the search process.

Solution-Focused

When responding to an individual's pastoral concern, Jesus did not waste time worrying about the causes of problems, nor did he spend time trying to get people to have insight into their problems. For example, in the story of the man born blind, the disciples asked, "Whose sin, his own or his parents, caused him to be blind?" Jesus refuted these notions and instead saw in the man's blindness an opportunity for God's glory to be manifested (*John 9:1-3*).

Likewise, in the story of the woman at the well, Jesus never explored why she had multiple husbands, nor did he require that she gain insight into her interpersonal problems. Instead, he used a strategy of ambiguity and confusion to help the woman come to a whole new understanding of the nature of life (*John 4:7-30*). Since learning and developing the **Appreciative Way** we have become fascinated with the strategic way Jesus engaged people to help them find transformational solutions for their lives.

Congregations often find themselves in search processes because of problems with their former rector. Conventional wisdom suggests that these congregations will need to gain insight into how they were also part of the cause of these problems before they can have a successful relationship with their next rector. It is not uncommon for these congregations to pay considerable sums of money to expert consultants to perform an analysis of the problem. From this analysis a report is written that describes the problem in great detail but does little — if anything — to actually change the system or create a solution.

From our experience, it is all too easy to come up with eloquent theories as to what is wrong and who is to blame, and at the same time have no strategy to resolve the problem. We can recall one example where a consultant had several theories as to why a congregation was conflicted and under-performing. When asked which of the theories told him what to do next to solve the problem he looked very

The man who really wants something finds a way; the other man finds an excuse.

— E. C. McKenzie

If we fall, we don't need self-recrimination or blame or anger – we need a reawakening of our intention and a willingness to recommit, to be whole-hearted once again.

— Sharon Salzberg

Beware of eloquent descriptions of problems masquerading as solutions to problems.

*A problem
is nothing more than a
situation with
insufficient resources
associated to
that situation.*

*It's not hard to make
decisions when you know
what your values are.
— Roy Disney*

*Congregations will readily
embrace their future
when they know
that it will contain
what they value and
find life-giving.*

puzzled and then said, “none of them.” Sadly, the recommendation that he find a theory that led to solutions was met with astonished resistance.

The **Appreciative Way** is focused on finding solutions to problems not ignoring or avoiding them. We respond to problems from the perspective of the solution, not from the perspective of the cause. We view problems as situations that have insufficient resources devoted to them. Finding solutions means finding the resources we need to achieve the desired outcome. We do not work to have less of a problem, we work to have more of the desired outcome. Developing strategies to achieve these desired outcomes often has little to do with the presenting problem.

Solutions also need to be incarnationally developed. Just because something has worked in one congregation does not mean that it will work effectively in another. We pay attention to the results of actions, continually modifying the action or strategy until it achieves the desired outcome. The incarnational approach to both the congregation in transition and the search process requires this solution-focused approach.

Values-Informed

As previously stated, people will resist change if they perceive that the change means they are losing something of value. Conversely, they will readily embrace a change if it is perceived as a blessing. A blessing is something of value. For change to be perceived as a blessing, the change must result in a final state that is perceived to be of greater value than the starting place. On the **Appreciative Way**, we discover what the congregation values in order to ensure that any change results in an enhancement of these values, or leads to something of greater value.

Congregations will readily embrace their future when they know that it will contain what they value and find life-giving. During the search process, we spend considerable time helping the congregation discover and articulate their core values, and then develop strategies to find candidates who share these same values. The congregation's core values are also important when developing search strategies, because the path to the future needs to be consistent with the desired future. We cannot use strategies that violate our values if we want to have sustainable outcomes. If we want to find a loving rector then we will need to use loving strategies in the search process.

Love-Inspired

We believe that at the heart of the universe is a Heart of Love that is the Source of our existence, both as individuals and within congregations. The search process needs to be first and foremost an engagement with the Heart of Love. Loving and being loved by God, and extending this love to the congregation, are essential ingredients of a search that will result in a life-giving outcome for you, your congregation, and your next rector.

The opposite of love is fear. Fear-based decisions are often uncreative, restrictive, and generally not sustainable. For the search process, we will want to ensure that decisions are made from a place of love rather than a place of fear. This means that the congregation needs to have a shared purpose and an image of a joyful and sustainable future. A shared purpose also means that no individual or group within the congregation is coercing or threatening a negative outcome if their particular desires are not accepted. We cannot use fear to motivate others and expect positive results. Motivating others with fear is the path of terrorism. The appreciative strategies for the transitional time and the search process are designed, in part, to help move people to a place of love, so that the process and outcome will reflect the Heart of the loving God.

In the following section we present several models of understanding change processes, based on the ***Appreciative Way***. These models are the building blocks that we use to design specific steps in the search process.

At the heart of the universe is a heart of love that embraces us and accepts us unconditionally. This heart of love is the source of our existence and life. This loving heart created us for a purpose and has given us every resource we need to fulfill that purpose.
