

CLAIMING THE LIGHT: APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND CONGREGATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly--John 10:10.

After two frustrating years of working on a difficult sexual harassment problem at a Fortune 500 company, an organization development consultant specializing in gender issues and conflict resolution sought help from David Cooperrider – a professor at Case Western Reserve University and the originator of "appreciative inquiry" (AI). The consultant told Cooperrider that, confounding her firm's best efforts, every measure showed that this company's harassment problem had grown *worse*. The situation had the consultant and her colleagues stymied. They were working hard, going backwards, and asking for help.

"What is it you want to learn about and achieve?" Cooperrider asked. They wanted to "put a dent" in a "huge problem" of harassment, the consultant told him. "Is that *all* you want?" Cooperrider asked. Pressed, the consultant reached beyond the problem and replied, "We want . . . high-quality cross-gender relationships in the workplace."

In the resulting model project, employees were invited – as a first step – to write about their experiences involving exemplars of healthy cross-gender working relationships. Dozens of responses were anticipated and hundreds arrived, each full of stories about employees working together creatively and happily. From these stories a program evolved that transformed the corporation.¹

Executives at Avon Mexico heard of the project's success and hired appreciative inquiry (AI) practitioner Marjorie Schiller to lead their whole corporation in an "inquiry" based on the same model. As an initial step, 300 one-on-one interviews were conducted, resulting in a flood of stories about "achievement, trust building, authentic joint leadership, practices of effective conflict management, ways of dealing with sex stereotypes, stages of development, and methods of career advancement – all focused on high-quality cross-gender work relationships."² Eventually the company won the 1997 Catalyst Award as the best place in Mexico for women to work.

The methodology that led to these remarkable events was spawned in the early 1980s when David Cooperrider – then a student at Case Western – was trying to figure out why the health clinic he was studying didn't have any of the problems he had been trained to "fix." What he learned later upended the organization development profession and revitalized hundreds of different kinds of communities around the world.

Re-Grounding Relationship

Ask, and it shall be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door shall be opened to you –
–Matthew 7:7.

As a 1980 doctoral candidate in organization development doing fieldwork at the Cleveland Clinic, Cooperrider considered **inquiring into what people most appreciate and value** rather than into problems to be fixed. He had been asking, "What is wrong with the human side of the Cleveland Clinic?" But he found little malaise and was impressed by the organization's flexibility, innovativeness, openness, and egalitarian spirit.

So, instead of studying what didn't work, he inquired into what worked best for those at the clinic. He asked about its sources of vitality and its highest hopes for its future. What he learned transformed the academic/professional organization development community in the United States and abroad.³

Now, more than 20 years since the Cleveland Clinic project began, thousands of appreciative projects around the world have joined the search. Whatever the corporate arena, each project begins by identifying a positive goal and its context. Then participants ask themselves – one-on-one at first – "what do we most value in the given context, what works for us when we are at our best, and what are our highest hopes for the future?" Following this "discovery" process, AI works with what's been learned, nurtures the growing enthusiasm, and opens the way to "co-create the future." It is always collaborative work generated out of strong relationships.

Problems are not exactly ignored in an appreciative environment. But rather than address them head on, appreciative practitioners help reframe core issues, however troubled and complex. AI projects with Cairo garbage collectors, Chicago revitalization, and Islamabad interfaith groups indicate that problems are not being ignored so much as reframed in ways that empower people (engaged communities) to make a difference. The reframing turns away from understanding what's wrong and shifts almost exclusively to seeking the light, moving toward the best opportunities at our disposal, however hard our circumstances.

In the case of the sexual harassment problem at the Fortune 500 company, the goal of putting a big dent into a huge problem was reframed as an inquiry into high-quality cross-gender leadership. Reframing instantly changes the tone and attitude around any subject, great or small, and the door opens on the most underexamined set of issues in our culture – what we most value and yearn for in life, whatever the context. A number of choices contribute to reframing:

- Regardless of the subject at hand, deficit-based language explaining what is wrong is replaced with asset-based language identifying what is right and what the individuals involved want to generate. People are asked to think beyond difficulties and their causes (such as a sexual harassment epidemic) to discern, study, and empower the positive values they want embodied (such as high-quality, cross-gender leadership teams).
- Giving everyone's story a place in the discussion and shifting from evaluation to valuation brings a shift in spirit, with significant increases in trust.
- In the reframing and developing dialogue, participants imagine and ruminate on a community's "positive core," listening to its members' highest aspirations and hopes, and empowering people to self-organize around the issues that most matter to them. As Cooperrider has written, "Full voice, convivial community, rigorous inquiry, shared speculation and dreams, articulation of things that matter, improvisation – these are ingredients that ensure that AI praxis does not devolve into sterile happy talk."⁴

In the appreciative inquiry process, problems tend to dissolve rather than be solved – to the amazement, I confess, of someone who spent years writing about the myriad problems pastors are asked to solve in today's church. Cooperrider and company are opening the way for people within any community (even those that are deeply conflicted or subject to the harshest conditions) to learn to trust each other when the right questions are asked, answered in a safe place, and then acted upon.

Most people are surprised to discover how satisfying and joyful it is to reframe issues and then to ask and respond to appreciative questions that give themselves and others the space to talk about what is most important to them. For the past five years I've watched thousands go through "appreciative interviews" (one of the first steps in most appreciative agendas), and the consensus seems unanimous – the conversations are deeply moving and often transforming.

Appreciative questions call for answers that reveal appreciation, achievement, success, and important experiences, big or small, rather than breakdown and failure. They seek the commendable and steer away from judgment. They attend to memories, feelings, and imagination as well as analysis and opinions. Appreciative interviews allow people to safely pour out their hearts about what is good in their lives, and the result is new, often unexpected relationships and a shared energy that discourages quarrels and undercuts fears of inadequacy.

Because people have so much difficulty at first talking about success and achievement without a counterpoint of problems and breakdown, practitioners learn to listen with enormous patience and to keep reframing the situation, always moving away from "understanding the problem" and toward "co-creating a transformed future."

Appreciative interviews achieve these remarkable outcomes by establishing higher ground for the dialogue, a place where what is most important to us allows the irritations and arguments of life to fade into perspective or just disappear. A safe personal discussion of our most cherished values and experiences, focused on matters

transcending disagreement and conflict, bonds people.

This bonding may not solve disagreements, especially at first, but it definitely changes people's feelings toward one another. With this kind of interview we immediately start to see the other person as a person, not an opponent or competitor. Even in conflicted communities it is difficult to spend two hours sharing with others what one most appreciates and values without emerging from the session with a friendly, even trusting, relationship.

Observing this over and over again finally disabused me of the long-held notion that trust requires years to establish. The alchemy can happen in a few hours, and the results deserve to be called miraculous. People become aligned with each other on the basis of their shared, reanimated primary commitments. Participants quit treating issues like wrestling matches and begin collaborating on what really matters.

Appreciative Inquiry's Potential

The success of the appreciative inquiry approach has led to its wide use, but the scope of its application signals its potential – not as a silver bullet for solving the world's ills but as a healthier, more generative framework for developing relationships that make community meaningful. AI is being applied to Suzuki violin instruction, village development in Nepal, municipal and state revitalization projects from Chicago to northeast India's Nagaland, grassroots interfaith activities on five continents, manifold educational and medical institutions, and small businesses as well as corporations.

Both Case Western Reserve University and Benedictine University offer graduate programs in AI, and hundreds each year participate in a multitude of appreciative inquiry workshops offered through the Taos Institute. More than 80 AI excellence-in-nonprofit projects have been sponsored in 70 countries through multimillion-dollar U.S. State Department funding. Thousands participate in the "[Appreciative Inquiry Commons](#)," a Web resource and community devoted to sharing tools and ideas for and among appreciative practitioners.

Distress within America's religious sector and a weary cynicism about the panoply of "new" organizational support structures may help explain the religious community's tardy response to appreciative inquiry. Statistics published in 1996 suggest that one in three American congregations fired its last pastor.⁵ In most ecosystems this would be called an epidemic. Even more disturbing, concerted hard work to overcome our ecclesial "problems" has not helped the general health of the institution much.

However, initial appreciative applications in religious communities offer considerable hope. My own first contact with this novel, epistemologically based approach to community came when circumstances in 1994 placed me in the initial planning group of what later became the [United Religions Initiative](#) (URI), a global grassroots interfaith organization. From the start, Cooperrider and Dr. Diana Whitney (a frequent project partner and one of Cooperrider's most respected AI colleagues), along with several of their doctoral students, guided the organizational design process for URI. The sudden

emergence of URI represents the largest start-to-fully-developed appreciative project in the world.

During a four-year process, many thousands were involved in writing and signing a URI charter. Three years after the signing, 211 active United Religions Initiative Cooperation Circles in 48 countries had self-organized, and the number continues to increase each month. Observing AI's approach to building strong, vital relationships among different faith communities in a very short period of time has been a continuing education.

AI's remarkable ability to engender trust and enthusiasm even among distrusting people bodes particularly well as we consider revitalizing life **within** faith communities. A few years ago Loren Mead's seminal work on the "[once and future church](#)" initiated a conversation about a new world and its implications for faith communities, and spoke persuasively about the need to develop new social architecture for the church. We will explore how appreciative inquiry might be a beneficial contributor in that quest.

The benefits for me start at a personal level. As an interfaith-formed Christian, the discipline of being an appreciative inquirer deepens my spiritual practice, enriches me theologically, and has improved my capacity to be a good husband and father.

The issue here, though, is generating vitality, engagement, and health in communities of believers. It's been argued that AI's most congruent, comfortable context ultimately will be the faith family because congregations already encourage AI's emphasis on values, storytelling, visioning, and serving the highest good – activities easier for a church council or pastor to broach than a corporation board or its CEO. In fact, Cooperrider's father was a Lutheran pastor who struggled painfully for years before successfully integrating his congregation racially, a drama that did not go unnoticed by a son who subsequently dedicated his life to community transformation without the acid etch of protracted conflict.

As an active United Church of Christ layman, David Cooperrider used AI to bring his own congregation through a remarkably successful journey – a transformation from being a liberal, mostly Caucasian church to being a fully multicultural and multiethnic faith family. Several years later his pastor remains happy with the outcome, and still incredulous that 400 members unanimously agreed about anything, much less a complex, successful strategy for opening the multiethnic door.

Diversity also characterizes AI practitioners. Contributors to the emerging AI literature come from a rainbow of religious and spiritual traditions around the world. Buddhists sharing what they treasure about their tradition are as illuminating and compelling as Christians doing the same – within the family or between traditions. Like the ubiquitous golden rule, AI offers a perspective that seeks out the goodness in any system of relationships and then gives participants ways to magnify and give life to that goodness.

The initial jolt I experienced upon encountering AI came in the form of a stunning realization that it systematically delivered on values the Christian family holds high but

often fails to embody, such as taking "the least of these my children" as seriously as everyone else in the community, and booting the debilitating judgmentalism that so often polarizes and shreds faith families.

Here a warning is in order: on first contact, most folks recognize something familiar about appreciative inquiry. I've often heard, "Oh, we already do that in our church." Indeed, wherever community gathers, even in crisis and breakdown, one can find flashes of light and goodness worth appreciating, however hidden to the casual or critical eye. Fortunate congregations—particularly vital, healthy ones—can be amazingly appreciative in all sorts of ways; I dare say they will also be among the first to embrace the developing nuance and complexity of an approach that investigates appreciation systematically.

But it is important to recognize that AI is not a miracle salve, not a set of self-help exercises or a one-chapter story. Instead, it is an empowering epistemological perspective that personalizes, honors, and learns from a community's best accomplishments and most precious values. Then it opens the horizon to take us miles beyond self-interest and old expectations, all the while staying grounded in the commitment bringing us to community in the first place.

Underestimating the scope of this opportunity is a danger. The "appreciative interview" that initiates and keeps punctuating most AI projects is so simple, powerful, and popular that you can head home, immediately use it with your congregation, and think you've mastered a new, creative fad. That would keep you from exploring "provocative propositions," an equally compelling appreciative tool for nurturing organizational health and enthusiasm, along with the self-organizing, ecologically based social technology that provides traction for delivering our dreams and visions. Simply put, underestimating this methodology kills the goose with the golden egg.

As we begin, it seems appropriate to address a question: **What is it that you want to learn about and achieve?** For my part, I want to learn how we can liberate the capacity of the church and its millions of followers to really do what is most important in our faith, freed from the agonies of internal conflict, focused on what we do best, and effectively translating the gospel of love to a world in pain. More specifically, I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to introduce a new treasure house for revitalizing congregations and their members.

How to Begin: Some Introductory Resources

Those who are seriously interested in using appreciative inquiry would do well to obtain one of the new textbooks addressing the subject systematically: [*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*](#) by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr or [*The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*](#) by Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom.

Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination is a mine of information, summarizing the emerging field of appreciative inquiry and its origins. The authors'

analysis of the discipline's "DNA" of interweaving principles and processes is particularly helpful. Identifying the "positive core," reframing situations, drafting appreciative questions, and all sorts of interactive processes relating to different aspects of the discipline are included, along with ten case studies and a six-page bibliography that add to its value.

A more recent book, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, gets my vote for best treatment to date. This book surveys the same arena found in *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* but also charts new territory. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom's case studies come from all sorts of communities and make their book a page-turner. The weaving together of history, philosophical underpinning, and practitioner wisdom is remarkably well done.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom's most important contribution comes in their last chapter, where they ask people richly experienced in appreciative inquiry what makes it valuable. From the answers, the authors identify and discuss six freedoms.⁶ They suggest these freedoms are "unleashed" in an appreciative approach to community:

- the freedom to be known in relationship
- the freedom to be heard
- the freedom to dream in community
- the freedom to choose to contribute
- the freedom to act with support
- the freedom to be positive

This evaluation of why the process is so helpful rings true to me, and I believe the six freedoms are a wonderful introduction to the whole field. However, I would not give up *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* for *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*. Having read each of these books at least twice, I'll return to both regularly.

Social Constructionism

Before heading to the bookstore for some appreciative inquiry texts, though, it's fair to ask how AI is more than a savvy gloss on "accentuating the positive," to survey AI's principles and practice, and to briefly consider how religious communities can use this gift.

Appreciative inquiry is an expression of postmodern social constructionism. As such it is preoccupied with language, learning, relationship, and generativity in living systems—and spends little time with "objective reality" or "absolutes," including ultimate truth or the "right" way to do something. As Cooperrider and Whitney state in *Appreciative Inquiry*, "Constructionism replaces the individual with the relationship as the locus of knowledge by valuing the power of language to create our sense of reality."⁷

Social constructionists pay attention to how people create meaning through dialogue. They believe that history and culture shape every expression of meaning; thus they hold that reality is never objective. Human beings are shaped and conditioned by the

idiosyncrasies of history and culture. At the same time, social constructionism does not see humankind as "determined" by its past or forever subject to the vagaries of war and human failure. Rather, it references science's most recent frontiers to offer philosophic grounding for the notion that human beings have the freedom to socially construct preferred futures for ourselves. Rather than trying to prove their case, they are hard at work embodying it, and case studies are proliferating.

Social constructionists recommend nurturing a radical agnosticism about our assumptions, about whatever "meaning worlds" we live in. They suggest cultivating an ability to distinguish between what is true and our own perceptions and conclusions.⁸ Recommending humility about what we "know" and the limits of our understanding is accompanied with a respect for inclusiveness and diversity, values guarding against the elitism so tempting to institutions, meaning systems, and the ego.

Both physical and social sciences have played a role in creating and understanding AI. When Cooperrider's doctoral research identified the unexpected power of focusing on positive outcomes, he and his committee chair, Professor Suresh Srivastva, asked themselves why. A multidisciplinary team including researchers in anthropology, behavioral science, medicine, psychology, and sports came on board. The team's research included examining how images help athletes compete and studying the Pygmalion phenomenon and the placebo effect. Ultimately its inquiry focused on what Cooperrider now describes as "the relationship between our images and our behavior; between what we believe to be true and what we create as truth."⁹

The principles and practice of AI grew from this research, and Cooperrider's dissertation, completed in 1986, was titled "Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a Methodology for Understanding and Enhancing Organizational Innovation." In 1987 Srivastva and Cooperrider published "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life," a professional, academic paper where the term "appreciative inquiry" was used in print for the first time.¹⁰

Quantum Physics

Research in physics, chemistry, and the life sciences also provides new ways to understand the power and efficacy of AI. Organization development and conflict resolution consultants often mention Margaret Wheatley as one who has provided an intellectual framework for understanding and learning about community in new ways. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (second edition) is quite accessible and a good place to start.

Wheatley's venues are Harvard and major corporations all over the world that seek her counsel. Her words are clear, spare, evocative, and, through it all, joyful. She has the remarkable ability to walk scientific neophytes through quantum physics, chaos theory, and the chemical, biological dynamics of open, living systems, drawing from these cosmic laboratories fascinating insights about postmodern leadership.

She suggests that the mechanical way of understanding the world described by Sir Isaac

Newton in the seventeenth century is inadequate and counterproductive today, even though most of our leadership and organizational models derive from Newtonian principles and assumptions. Communities are not machines, nor the sum of the rights and rules of membership. Rather, they are alive, dynamic, vital entities, capable of being influenced and co-created for good or bad. As Cooperrider has said repeatedly, "Community is not a problem to be fixed but a mystery to be embraced."

In a post-Newtonian world, power does not devolve from position in a static hierarchy but from the vitality of relationships, wherever they emerge in the community. Outcomes are not predictable, and an infinite number of potentialities await our engagement. At the beginning of *Leadership and the New Science*, Wheatley writes, "The quantum world teaches that there are no pre-fixed definitely describable destinations. There are, instead, potentials that will form into real ideas depending on who the discoverer is and what she is interested in discovering."

Later in the book Wheatley records scientists' astonishment at discovering unpredictable, beautiful, self-organizing patterns emerging from random, chaotic data when it is carefully monitored. She shares recent discoveries in chemistry and biology describing how open, living systems thrive and flourish. She then considers the implications of these observations for community and leadership. Near the end of the book, she suggests new kinds of leaders for a world evolving beyond Newtonian assumptions and practices:

Here is a *very* partial list of new metaphors to describe leaders: gardeners, midwives, stewards, servants, missionaries, facilitators, conveners. Although each takes a slightly different approach, they all name a new posture for leaders, a stance that relies on new relationships with their networks of employees, stakeholders, and communities. No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished.¹¹

Pastoral Leadership

From quantum physics, chaos theory, and self-organizing systems, pastoral images emerge for leadership. From chemistry and biology come compelling insights about how quanta – and people – relate to each other in meaningful ways. My own favorite gift from these discussions is the resurrection of freedom as a significant philosophical issue, not only in understanding our lives but the Creation. Uncompromising Newtonian arguments about cause and effect, paving the dismal way to determinism and predestination, are unlocked.

This is a serious cracking of the foundation of the intellectual assumptions you and I grew up with, but this cracking and its implications are liberating rather than devastating, renewing not confusing, and joyful rather than painful to all save those so invested in their own truth as to be blind or even abusive of truth anywhere else. Appreciative inquiry sits comfortably in the post-Newtonian world, unshackled from the causes of our woes and encouraging us to freely co-create the world we pause to envision. It proposes a world where achieving peace and justice as a norm for the human family is more than a good idea or an occasional accident of history – it's a possibility we can make real day by day.

In the church we have a healthy skepticism about any new system that offers to deliver the truth, in whatever form, so it helps to know that AI is not so much a new truth as a new way of approaching the truth, whatever your culture or faith, a new way of knowing what we know and knowing each other. AI pays attention to how adaptive and imitative we are, to how we define and are drawn into the future by the images we put in front of ourselves. So, through a growing, deepening set of relationships, the dialogue focuses on the most promising, appreciated, valuable images available, whatever the context.

An appreciative attitude does not ignore the brokenness, difficulties, or tragedies in life, but seeks to reframe them in reference to the light. My father grew up in the Depression singing the deeply appreciative "Count your blessings, name them one by one..." The poet in Psalm 139 speaks of God discovering light in the darkest, toughest places as a matter of course, and AI aspires to do the same.

Appreciative Principles: the DNA of Appreciative Practice

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.--Philippians 4:8

A principle is a "basic truth, law, or assumption," my dictionary says. According to Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, eight principles¹² represent the essential values and assumptions made in appreciative inquiry, defining notions without which AI would be mischaracterized. Like any self-respecting product of American higher education, I approached these principles analytically at first, inspired by them but having lots of questions.

Living with the principles for several years has been instructive. Each one offers a particular insight into knowing, individually and in relationship. In this short space the principles can only be summarized and set next to what Watkins and Mohr identify as "generic processes" characterizing appreciative projects. They devote a chapter to bringing these principles and processes together in what they call the discipline's DNA.

The Constructionist Principle. From social constructionism comes the assumption that what we know about ourselves and how we know it is fateful because it so influences how we understand and relate to God, ourselves, our personal past, and our potential future. Being offered safe ways to relate personally to people who were strangers, for instance, is not only a pleasure—it enriches us and opens new possibilities for the future. Taking personal as well as corporate responsibility for what we know and how we know is the implicit suggestion of the constructionist principle, and doing so opens up new universes.

The Simultaneity Principle. This principle suggests that inquiry and change, learning and formation, happen simultaneously. When the first question is asked in any inquiry, change begins; the nature of that initial query, its assumptions, even its tone and

overtone, will significantly shape and influence the outcome. Start any organizational study with a deficit analysis, detailing how failure has spread its ugly stain, and at the end of the day you are liable to have even less trust in the room and a magnified sense of breakdown. Start the same inquiry with an asset analysis, discovering what works well even during bad times, and you are liable to get to the end of the day with a sense of blessing, renewed trust, and unexpected enrichment.

The Anticipatory Principle. This principle acknowledges how much the images and notions we put forward act as self-fulfilling prophecies. The athlete visually imagines crossing the finish line in front and does. Teacher expectations of students, redundant research attests, exceed intelligence or parental support as the most important predictor of a student's success. Expectation, in other words, is yeasty, an actual creative force influencing what is to come. It should not go unexamined or underutilized.

Attending to the complex relationships between the best of what was, what is, what can be, and what will be—bridging memory's treasures with high visions of the future—is inspiring and remarkably generative. And, as they say in an appreciative Nepalese rural development project involving tens of thousands of villagers, "What you look for is what you find," and "Where you think you are going is where you are going."¹³

The Poetic Principle. Great poems, like people, cannot be captured by a single explanation. The poetic principle assumes that, as a poem can be read and interpreted in multiple ways, so relationship and community can be generated and understood in endlessly valuable and authentic ways. The principle gives us "permission" to understand the past and influence the future in terms of our own languages and experience, our deepest passions and commitment—and to become co-creators of this many-faceted world. Collaborating with fellow travelers at this level is a measure of a life well lived.

Wrapped implicitly within the poetic principle is a spiritually grounded respect for every human being, an assumption that, given the opportunity and the context, every person is a poet and an embodied poem, capable of unique discoveries, novel syntheses, and gifts for enriching relationships with other human beings.

The Positive Principle. This principle extends Cooperrider's discovery in the early eighties and should not be confused with "the power of positive thinking." The "positive core" AI practitioners ask about is the essential goodness or value in a person, relationship, community, project, or goal. In the appreciative journey from fishing for best memories to embodying best visions, the positive core is the life-giving source of energy, the container holding everything together and making it significant to us. Identifying and supporting that positive core in asset-based language, exploring it with all the epistemological tools at our disposal—personal dialogue, history, dreams, imagination, reflection, analysis, and artistic expression—lends appreciative work its passion and excitement.

At first read, these principles may seem unrelated, lacking symmetry or an integral logic. Theorists have begun considering such symmetry, and the spiritual implications of

the discipline are inspiring discussion.¹⁴ Perhaps a unified appreciative theory will emerge.

However, organization development consultants who have mastered AI 101 and are committed to the approach tell different stories about AI's intellectual root structure than do therapists with similar experience and commitments. The poetic principle suggests that these stories may all be true and useful, mutually inclusive in the development of a new discipline. The principles themselves remain open-ended, available for thousands of different environments and applications, though more comfortably set within Wheatley's world than Newton's.

The Power of Appreciative Inquiry by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom exemplifies this sense of an alive, still developing discipline by proposing three additional principles (listed below), all based on the authors' work as practitioners.¹⁵

The Wholeness Principle. This principle claims that "the experience of wholeness brings out the best in people, relationships, communities, and organizations." Wholeness, related etymologically to healing, is never a "singular story" but "a compilation of multiple stories, shared and woven together by the many people involved." Rather than focusing on commonalities, we learn to enjoy our differences, which leads to "higher ground rather than common ground."

The Enactment Principle. This principle observes that "acting 'as if' is self-fulfilling," pointing to visionaries like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Martha Graham, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose strength came from living their dreams in their daily lives. The claim is that "transformation occurs by living in the present what we most desire in the future" or, "more simply, positive change comes about as images and visions of a more desired future are enacted in the present."

The Free Choice Principle. According to this principle, "people and organizations thrive when people are free to choose the nature and extent of their contribution." Allowing people to self-select their engagement and focus on their own interests as they get involved, "liberates both personal and organizational power."

Appreciative Practice

An astonishing proliferation of appreciative applications taking advantage of these eight principles grows daily, most of them utilizing one-on-one, small group, and large group activities. Group process, of course, is an industry today in the church, as elsewhere. An appreciative approach, though, offers some special tools for any group facilitator. Watkins and Mohr call them "generic processes."¹⁶ One might call them pedagogic priorities, winners in the contest to identify what is most important to learn, to know, no matter what you are studying.

Considering these processes in terms of appreciative questions dramatizes their usefulness, especially if we set them in context. Let us imagine, say, that at our church

we've decided to do a three-day appreciative inquiry into the kind of community we'd most like to become over the next five years. Inquiries can be broad gauge or narrow, as long as the positive core is clear and the questions truly appreciative. The initial process, the "positive framing," actually precedes the inquiry, beginning with planning, and continues until the end.¹⁷

Positive Framing. As a person of faith, what is most important to you about the Church? And what do you most value about our particular congregation? What does it do when it's at its best? What are its most important, inspiring achievements as far as you are concerned?¹⁸

Identifying Sources of Vitality. Would you tell me a story or two about when the congregation has been most alive and effective? What was the source of the vitality, as far as you could tell? What made it compelling? Where and how is God active in this congregation? What kind of involvement has been most valuable to you – and are there ways you'd like to be engaged but haven't yet tried?

Discovering Themes. As we listen to the stories in our group about how we really love and value our church, as we hear about the mountaintop experiences we each have had, what are the common threads, the themes that emerge? As we consider these themes connecting us at the heart level, and as we think about our church's next five years, what are two or three of the topics you think should be explored as we consider our future?

Developing Images of the Future. If our congregation exceeds our best expectations for growth, development, and ministry over the next five years, what could it look like in 60 months? As we set our sights on the kind of congregation we would like to become, what images would you choose to convey your own best vision of our future?

Creating the Future. Staying focused on our sources of vitality, remembering the themes that emerged from our stories and the issues they evoked, looking again at images that draw us in the direction we wish to go, what kind of planning does our vision ask for, and how would each of us like to address the task? What will I do, what will we do together, in these coming weeks, toward becoming the vital, effective congregation we want to become?

The linear progression of these processes is obvious, but as a formal inquiry moves forward, the processes keep getting used in different ways. Appreciative projects usually begin with one-on-one extended conversations, experiences so popular that people mistakenly assume that "appreciative interview" is the same thing as "appreciative inquiry." Indeed, the questions, answers, images, and stories from the first interviews inform and resonate through the whole process.

After the interviews, the pairs usually join in working groups of eight, tell each other's stories, and report back to the full group, which can range from a few dozen to thousands. The group then works with these stories, identifies themes, and is encouraged to dream and imagine outside of the box, with individuals being given opportunities to consider different ways to be engaged.

Following this discovery process, various funneling processes are used to take the most engaging, compelling images and "provocative propositions" and begin designing strategies for the future. The provocative propositions turn out to be as compelling and important as the initial interviews. Grounded in the values, history, and best experiences of the community, the propositions stretch and challenge the status quo, set affirmative goals on the horizon, and call for involvement from everyone in the community. At the end people are given the time to start taking the first steps in creating the future.

In learning the methodological aspects of AI, remember that the discipline emerged from a graduate school of management preparing consultants for corporate America. Hundreds of AI practitioners are concerned with engaging CEOs adequately to wean them away from problem solving. They have designed sophisticated project models for taking advantage of the principles and processes. Almost all of this interaction involves pairs of people developing into small, interactive working groups who eventually align with the whole community, energized and working on a shared vision. Many of the projects focus on appreciative strategic planning, though strategic planning is only one of many different kinds of inquiry.

The most popular AI model is called the 4-D process. It emerged in Zimbabwe from an appreciative project building relationships between nonprofits taking care of children in various parts of Africa. Typically, a full-blown 4-D appreciative inquiry takes two to five days and guides a community of learners from **discovery** to **dreaming** to **design** to **destiny**, or, as some say, **delivery**. Becoming a practitioner means mastering the group dynamics and processes attending this approach as well as other models that map the movement from appreciating to envisioning to co-constructing to sustaining.

Appreciative Culture

One can discern growing interest in moving beyond discreet inquiries to exploring sustainable appreciative culture. Two characteristics of most inquiries suggest some parameters for appreciative organizations: they make inclusiveness a priority, and every participant is treated with special care.

AI is frequently called a "whole system" approach because it seeks to engage **as many players as possible**. A good practitioner working with a congregation regarding strategic planning will probably suggest that young and old, members and friends, near and far be included if possible. What about the custodian, your banker, a local neighborhood leader, and a few representatives of the AA group that uses the fellowship hall?

To be sure, small leadership groups initiate the planning and decision makers need early engagement. But they will be asked: Who will participate? Can we enlarge the circle? Who is being left out? This is not simply an egalitarian commitment; in practical terms, every participant left out represents important gifts lost to the community.

A second appreciative characteristic, folded implicitly into both the principles and

processes, is this: Treat **every** participant as an important player with gifts to contribute and leadership potential, a stakeholder whose feelings, engagement, commitment, and contribution can be significant. How we see each other and are open to each other's contributions has everything to do with eventual outcomes. The appreciative interviews and small report-back groups give everyone a sense of speaking freely and being heard seriously when an inquiry is launched. Three hours into the event this usually causes a corporate buzz, an excitement and sense of solidarity, even among people who are shy or in the habit of disagreeing with each other.

Personalized treatment for everyone in the community is the groundwork for appreciative culture. This fosters a generative, creative environment that nurtures deep personal relationships and seriously identifies people's gifts and commitments. It is also **self-organizing**: within the boundaries of the community, its purposes and agreements, people are encouraged to gravitate to issues and work groups they find compelling and collaborate with others in that arena.

Appreciative leaders are excellent listeners and inviters. They encourage people to seek their heart's desire as they get involved, a significant shift from traditional routes to leadership responsibility. The implications of this new approach to "assigning" tasks does not become clear until, in reporting back highlights of appreciative interviews, a community's excitement about who it is at its best starts to bubble.

This self-organizing tendency represents another connection to the dynamics of *living* systems Wheatley describes. Self-organization can feel strange and threatening to anyone who grew up with mechanistic models like organizational charts (where the church is a pastor, a council, some committees, a choir or two, a congregation, and a Sunday school).

Thinking beyond expected roles, challenged to identify what in our midst is most important yesterday, today, and tomorrow, trusting that the system needs freedom and openness more than my guidance or old models, and then encouraging people to follow their hearts in achieving a dynamic new vision . . . this is frightening territory at first, unsettling our habits and assumptions. But living in the vibrancy and enthusiasm of an environment where everyone's gifts and engagement really matter quickly becomes its own reward. Nothing valuable need be lost.

Emerging issues about appreciative culture range from enlivening our personal lives to being sustainable appreciative organizations over the long term. Diana Whitney, besides working with corporate behemoths, leads a workshop in appreciative living and focuses the discussion around four questions:

- Who are you at your best, when you are most alive, engaged, and committed?
- What is your positive core, the life-giving center from which your best thinking and contributions emerge?
- What are your most courageous dreams?
- What are your greatest possibilities for serving the world?

The clarity and power of these simple questions indicate Whitney's mastery of the art of writing questions and provide an extraordinary blueprint for church dialogue groups, young or old.

The first book about appreciative leadership was published in late 2001. *Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder* was edited by Marjorie Schiller, Bea Mah Holland, and Deanna Riley. In a thoroughly collaborative venture, 110 AI professionals and practitioners were invited to interview individuals they would characterize as "appreciative leaders." Eventually 28 accepted the challenge and did interviews; 15 stories were selected for the book.

From this research Schiller and her colleagues developed an appreciative leadership model with characteristics categorized three ways. In terms of values, **genuine**, **credible**, and **respectful** best describe these leaders. Characteristics the leaders associated with worldview were **envision**, **inspire**, and **holistic**. In terms of practices, an appreciative leader **challenges**, **encourages**, **enables**, **coaches**, **inquires**, and **dialogues**, a list reminiscent of Wheatley's leadership metaphors. The editors go on to identify five themes shared by the leaders profiled. Though none of those profiled are religious leaders, the first theme they share is that appreciative leaders are "belief-based with an explicit spiritual orientation and practice."¹⁹

Five years earlier, discussing postmodern principles and practices, Diana Whitney had written, "Notions of leadership shift dramatically from the leader as authority or one responsible for vision, action, and organization, to leader who fosters public conversations among multiple stakeholders. Leadership becomes a process of ensuring relational meaning making, of ensuring that multiple, diverse voices are heard, of creating and holding space for stories to be shared and meaning to be made among globally disparate and diverse people."²⁰

These pastoral overtones of AI fit with conversations on the Internet about its spiritual dimensions. As we've seen, ontological, cosmological truth claims are not raised by the discipline itself. But utilizing AI's tools, paying attention to the positive core, and taking advantage of the poetic principle delivers many of us straight into the heart of our religious faith and spiritual practice. In sum, for folk who take their congregations as seriously as their families, AI represents a revitalizing approach to community.

Appreciative Inquiry in the House of God

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another--John 13:34.

No one is counting yet, but dozens of AI projects are taking place in religious communities in the United States and Canada. Gregorio Banaga's doctoral dissertation addressing AI and congregational strategic planning has helped generate considerable Catholic interest.²¹ The work of Robert Voyle, an Episcopal priest and psychologist, and Helen Spector, an AI master practitioner who has worked with half a dozen Christian judicatory bodies, is particularly exciting. Appreciative methodology is making inroads

in Fuller Seminary's curriculum,²² and doctoral degrees in AI from Benedictine University are seeding the work in Catholic groups across the country, as documented in Susan Star Paddock's [*Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church*](#).²³ Still, at this writing appreciative inquiry in the house of God remains largely new territory waiting to be explored.

Appreciative work in congregations, as anywhere else, begins with reflections, then questions, and then sharing the questions. What are your best images and associations with your congregation? In what ways are people engaged, clearly committed, and happy to participate? What do members most appreciate and value about their faith, this faith family, and their engagement? What kind of opportunities do people have to really share each other's stories? When people are treated really well in your community – and in its ministry – what is it like?

Another good introduction might be utilizing the five processes Mohr and Watkins identify and taking to heart the appreciative values and reframed perspective we've been discussing. Identifying and reflecting on what is most life giving and meaningful to a faith family, giving members a safe place to talk about faith and values, and learning to discover, enjoy, and gain from **everyone's** engagement is a good starting place. Both clergy and lay leaders can look to what enlivens their communities and characterizes them at their best and begin to extrapolate. "Appreciative" possibilities in the context of a faith family are endless. One that has been particularly meaningful to me relates to corporate prayer.

A few months prior to meeting David Cooperrider in 1996, I held a part-time interim pastorate in a small rural congregation that some said was nearing death and needed a dignified funeral. Instead it bounced back and is thriving today. During an 18-month interim we approached the prayers of the people in a new way. Following the Sunday sermon, I took paper and pen and walked into the middle of the congregation, barely a dozen those first few months. I invited them to reflect on the past week and share things they were thankful for and things that concerned them. People poured out their hearts. Following what were sometimes 15-minute discussions, I would lead them in prayer, mentioning all the thanksgiving and all the petitions, and together we concluded with the Lord's Prayer.

A year later the coffee-hour conversations were all about answered prayer. It didn't dawn on me until three years later, after taking an appreciative inquiry intensive, that we had developed an appreciative approach to the prayers of the people in that small church. We heard each other talk about what was important enough to be thankful for and important enough to share with God as a concern. As the year progressed, the subject of answered prayers came up again and again, to continued thanks.

Similar explorations await every aspect of congregational life. Voyle divides his time between interim ministries and appreciative training and coaching. He is full of examples about the difference AI makes in his ministries.

For years he has led clergy trainings on sexual abuse in the church – a tough, important

subject full of unhappy, fearful issues. After being introduced to AI, he began similar trainings by asking people to share, one-on-one, stories of experiences in which they felt incredibly respected. What made being respected so important? And what might we learn about generating quality respect for everyone? The tough issues still must be addressed if we want congregations safe from predators and abuse. But reframed, the energy can change. We learn the joys of exemplary, gracious behavior as a context for creating safety and accountability. As a golfer noted, "Telling me **not** to hit it into the trap just about guarantees I'll hit the trap!"

So at Voyle's workshops now, the emphasis shifts away from negative expectations and images, away from "Why?!" and a judgmental attitude, moving instead toward asking, "What do we know about genuinely safe, respectful, involved relationships, particularly when some are laity and some clergy? And how can we best create these kinds of relationship in our life together?"

I stumbled into an appreciative approach to prayer; more consciously all the elements of liturgy might be revisited and reinvigorated through an appreciative perspective, particularly when artists and their work are included. Rereading scripture from an appreciative viewpoint is illuminating. The familiar passages used in this chapter jump out and empower me in new ways these days.

Spiritual formation (at both personal and corporate levels), homiletics, pastoral care,²⁴ and congregational dynamics, including conflict resolution,²⁵ can all be richly rewarded using appreciative approaches and protocols.

A host of hermeneutical and theological issues await discussion. Here at the starting gate we might note that AI is a treasury of applied epistemology, and that ontology is nowhere to be found except implicitly and potentially, embodied only when an actual community makes a commitment to know itself in new ways and asks its first appreciative question. Juxtaposing **applied systems of knowing and implied systems of being**, thereby sidestepping any specific cosmological or ontological truth claims, may be the empowering factor in AI's success in hundreds of different kinds of environments. Put simply, AI can help all of us ask better questions, including those of us in faith families.

Religious education opportunities are a universe to themselves. AI assumes that lifelong learning and development are as important to institutions as to individuals. Much of this territory is already being explored in a variety of institutional environments. One of the 21 principles of the United Religions Initiative Charter, for instance, states, "We are committed to organizational learning and adaptation."

Ultimately, issues of mission, enrollment, and vision deserve a full appreciative exploration. First, I suspect, will come hard questions about appreciative ethics, morality, justice, and peace;²⁶ these tough issues may be the most illuminating and transforming of all. Perhaps in tackling them appreciatively the Armageddon scenarios tempting literalists from all sorts of traditions will fade like a bad dream, and the joyful work of providing spiritually grounded respect and an opportunity for a good life to

every person on the planet can proceed.

We must remember that this new discipline comes from people preoccupied with organizational dynamics, and church administration, so barren an arena in some churches, can also be revitalized appreciatively. Clergy evaluation, for instance, is one of the toughest issues in the ecclesiastical portfolio, as attested to by books, courses, training, and continuing bad experiences. An appreciative approach shifts the focus toward mutual valuation exercises that foster growth and improvement and a shared sense of collaboration.²⁷

Pursuing any of this systematically is impossible, however, without a transformed frame of reference.²⁸ Voyle says a conversion is required, by which he means "a profound reorientation in the way you look at the world, yourself, and God."²⁹ It means developing one's perceptions and valuation to discern and pay attention to what is most life-giving, most valuable, rather than focusing on cause and blame when difficulties arise.

It means attending more to the abundance of God's love than to the drama of human sinfulness, or, as Voyle says, "Did Jesus come to stop us sinning or to make us loving?" He thinks that until love is the actual focus of relationship, God has little room to participate. His first sermon at a new interim post is always titled, "What in God's Name Is Going on Here?" As long as God is part of the story, he is interested, he says. But if it's last year's gossip, he just doesn't have the time. Rather than exorcise demons, he seeks to create a safe, sacred space where the community can identify and attend to what is most important about its life now and in the future.

Helen Spector, as far as I know, is the first AI practitioner to do a full-blown 4-D appreciative inquiry with large judicatory bodies and denominational leadership groups. A strong-willed, controversial bishop had retired, and the new bishop invited Helen to help design a transition process and event. A large two-day gathering was planned. First, all judicatory congregations and organizations organized one-on-one appreciative interviews focused on their most life-giving experiences of ministry; stories from the reports helped shape the coming event.

Seven hundred participated, including representatives from all judicatory congregations and organizations, 110 youth, and 30 trained as facilitators. After one-on-one interactions, small groups self-organized around five denominational vows (with individuals selecting the group focused on the vow they found most compelling) to envision the work of the people of the diocese over the next 10 years. Later, groups were organized geographically so that people would be working with neighbors as they dreamed and made specific plans about the future of their church.

The bishop made it clear that the days of dicta from the top were over. "Tell me where your heart is leading you, the work you want to embrace," he said. "That is what we will support." Many were skeptical, but those who believed made serious commitments and went to work, and the energy and goodwill generated by the end of the second day exceeded everyone's expectations.

Spector points out that it could not have happened without the courage of the bishop "not to have the answer." She believes this willingness is the toughest appreciative issue for clergy. "From a leadership standpoint, to be able to hold the space for your people, to not give them the answer, to encourage and believe in their capacity even when they don't know they have it in them. The answer lies within them if they listen." And that, she says, is what the appreciative interview is all about.

"Courage comes from leaders believing that it's in the people – that the 'story' and the capacity to be faithful is there in them – and holding the space by not telling them the answer. That is hard. There is always somebody with 'the answer.'"³⁰ Spector's experience is that the power of the story told and listened to by every member represents the real treasury. If handled with care and respect in an expanding circle, these storytellers, their faith journeys, and their talents represent the necessary resources to renew and transform the community and its members.

Another of Spector's projects, involving 50 leaders of a major denomination, led one executive to report, "Appreciative inquiry has enhanced our functioning, our ability to serve congregations. And our work has become energy giving instead of energy draining." Asked about her own most important learning, she said it was "the ability to frame questions appreciatively."³¹

Susan Paddock's *Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church* is a short but splendid first book about Christian community and AI. Appreciative theory is clearly summarized in six quick pages. Then Paddock, a family psychotherapist and convert to Catholicism, devotes her second chapter to the congruence of AI with Catholic social teaching, Pope Paul VI's teaching on dialogue, and themes from Vatican II. Throughout the text, scripture is used to underline appreciative notions, and the final pages are an invitation to start using AI in your own community.

In this context, chapters are devoted to stories about Catholic congregations and agencies using AI for local and global community building, strategic planning and mission statements, enhancing pastoral transitions, and spiritual renewal. Considerable Episcopal interest and interfaith applications also receive a chapter. Along the way, dozen of appreciative projects are detailed, including Catholic Relief Services, a group of churches and schools in Garfield Heights, Ohio, the Diocese of Cleveland, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and more. In each story, Paddock emphasizes the specific questions used in the inquiry and the results. A quick read, this book immediately demonstrates the remarkable gift appreciative inquiry represents for any community of faith and practice.

If this summary seems a bit enthusiastic it's because I'm still a beginner, hungry to discover better ways to nurture relationship and healthy collaboration, to revitalize and magnify the faith community's generative power in a world badly in need of more help from faithful folk. David Cooperrider makes a point whenever he begins a new project, whatever the context, that he is not an expert. But he is a fellow inquirer who has paid considerable attention to how we learn and what we learn.

As such he and a growing number of colleagues are happy to help create appreciative questions, to introduce the notion of positive core, to share this novel social technology of powerful relationship and trust formation. They are happy to help design a venture's learning/transformation process, focusing on what is most important to the venture's purpose and its best possible outcomes. And the church and any congregation can become the beneficiaries of these processes. The appreciative congregation, if it emerges in force, will come from faith families everywhere, with the wit and wisdom to learn how to love each other – children of God each one – in new, appreciative, and creative ways.

As an activist in interfaith relationship development, I was asked to facilitate a public discussion including a Christian seminary president, a rabbi, and two Muslim community leaders. The discussion came two months after the September 11 tragedy, and it was tempting to wade into the problem from a hundred different directions.

Instead, I began by asking each participant, "What is it that makes your faith so precious to you?" Then I asked about the gifts – the wisdom and insights – that their extraordinary traditions have to offer us about peace, about comforting the afflicted, about justice, about living when there is no justice, and about relating to the stranger. More than 150 neighborhood folks representing a dozen different faiths came together in a local city hall that night.

After the initial hour, many went to the microphone to ask questions and make their own contributions. Fascinating information was presented and hard issues were raised, "mea culpa" was heard, and the tone of the talk, fully engaged, was consistently respectful. The evening concluded as it began, with prayer and goodwill, with seeds of a plan to come together across faith divisions on a regular basis to learn from each other, and to give the local community a new kind of religious voice. Two years later, a group meets regularly, provides interfaith programs, and keeps the dialogue going.

That community evening was hardly an AI intervention, yet we enjoyed a warm, provocative appreciative culture for a few hours, and the people came out of it energized, enthusiastic, and wanting more. It is the kind of environment and experience one hopes for not only between strangers but within families, including faith families. May it be so in yours.

In benediction, let me invite you to reconsider what the author of Ephesians meant when he wrote, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations..." (Ephesians 3:20).

Where to Learn More

The following short sampler of available materials on appreciative inquiry represents the cream of the crop from one reader's perspective.

For reasons already mentioned, I think Whitney and Trosten-Bloom's [*The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*](#) is currently the most important item in the AI bibliography. And anyone who wonders whether an appreciative approach is appropriate in religious, spiritual settings needs to read Susan Starr Paddock's *Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church* and have their fears allayed.

The most recent edition of Sue Hammond's [*The Thin Book*](#) is an engaging nontechnical booklet that quickly and clearly introduces and sets the AI context for newcomers. If you need a brief introductory text—for a class or board of directors, for instance—you might want to use Cooperrider and Whitney's even shorter 40-page summary, simply titled *Appreciative Inquiry*. It's the best of many short versions.

As noted above, Watkins and Mohr's book, [*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*](#), was the first thorough textbook about AI. A perfect companion volume for a college or graduate course would be the new edition of *Lessons from the Field*, a book that quickly sold out its first edition and is now back in print. *Lessons* is a collaborative collection of stories and resources, including the essays by Mac Odell and Gregorio Banaga, Jr., mentioned above. The book surveys a number of the most successful AI projects here and abroad and has the largest AI bibliography in print.

Anyone wishing to swim in deeper water can turn to [*Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change*](#). This dense anthology collects 18 essays exploring theoretical aspects of the discipline—heavy slogging if you haven't been in a graduate seminar recently but important for the serious student. It includes Cooperrider and Srivastva's historic 1987 essay, "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life," which challenged the tenets of traditional organization development. "Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing," which may be Cooperrider's most important theoretical essay, and Gervase Bushe's provocative "Five Theories of Change Embedded in Appreciative Inquiry" are included as well.

Two more recent books are helpful for leaders who have already been introduced to the discipline: [*The Appreciative Organization*](#) is a collaborative project shared by six of AI's wisest elders. *An Encyclopedia of Positive Questions, Vol. 1* is the first in a series, it is hoped, as people everywhere learn to craft powerful appreciative questions; questions for volume two are being solicited.

[*AI Practitioner: The International Newsletter of AI Best Practices*](#), a quarterly, is the first periodical to be published about the discipline and is available only on the Web by subscription. Equally important, and free, is the AI listserv.³² The first Web site devoted to AI and religious leadership is www.clergyleadership.org. Founded by Rob Voyle, it includes some valuable resources (for example, appreciative evaluation tools) that can be downloaded.

Case Western Reserve University and Benedictine University offer graduate degrees in AI. [*The Taos Institute*](#) schedules ongoing workshops and publishes books about AI, three of which are included below. Another valuable resource is the Appreciative Inquiry Commons (online at ai.cwru.edu), a worldwide portal devoted to the fullest

sharing of academic resources and practical tools on appreciative inquiry and the rapidly growing discipline of positive change.

Notes

1. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 123ff.
2. David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000), 12-13.
3. It has never been a solo effort, and could not be, given appreciative inquiry's dependence on relationship and collaboration. Starting with his own mentor and frequent co-author, Suresh Srivastva, Cooperrider shares credit for the growing wealth of appreciative wisdom and success with dozens of academics and practitioners creatively contributing to the field, as the bibliography demonstrates.
4. Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr. *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), xxix.
5. Paul Chaffee, *Accountable Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 4-5.
6. Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), 238ff.
7. David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000), 26-27.
8. Kenneth Gergen's work, in particular his *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge, 2nd Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), has had a strong influence on AI.
9. Watkins and Mohr, 29. Cooperrider's seminal essay on the role of image, published in 1990, is titled "Positive Image; Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing."
10. This essay and the one mentioned in the previous note are both reprinted in *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2000).
11. Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001), 165.
12. The first five of these principles, say Whitney and Trosten-Bloom on page 53 of *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*, are derived directly from the early writing of Cooperrider and Srivastva (*Appreciative Management and Leadership*, 1990). The other three were added by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom themselves and are presented in their book *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).
13. Mac Odell's "Appreciative Planning and Action: Experience from the Field," a chapter in *Lessons from the Field*, tells the story of working in hundreds of Nepalese villages. The account is a particularly moving and instructive example of AI at work.
14. "Spirituality at Work" by Diana Whitney is an essay about taking your spirituality to work in ways that challenge and inspire your colleagues rather than make them wary. It was published in the online *Appreciative Inquiry Newsletter* (No. 7, November 1999).
www.aradford.co.uk/Pagefiles/07newsletter.htm.
15. Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), 69-79.
16. Watkins and Mohr, 39. Their summary language defining "generic processes" is plain and instructive: choose the positive as the focus of inquiry; inquire into stories of life-giving forces; locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry; create shared images for a preferred future; find innovative ways to create that future. As they themselves say, though, using these learning categories or procedures without appreciating the principles compromises the inquiry and its power.
17. The following questions are not a protocol for a proposed interview. If they were, however, they would be preceded by several paragraphs that would set a more specific context for the interview, preparing the ground for the questions.
18. Most people have difficulty at first expressing what they appreciate without dragging in what they do not appreciate. Facilitators learn to keep setting aside the problematic by focusing on what is valuable.

19. Marjorie Schiller, Bea Mah Holland, Deanna Riley, eds., *Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder* (Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute, 2001), 162.
20. Diana Whitney, "Postmodern Principles and Practices for Large Scale Organization Change and Global Cooperation," *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2000), 238.
21. The fruit of Gregorio Banaga's work can be found in "A Spiritual Path to Organizational Renewal" in *Lessons from the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry*, edited by Sue Anise Hammond and Cathy Royal (Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Company, 1996), 261-271.
22. Mark Lau Branson, Homer L. Goddard Associate Professor of Ministry of the Laity at Fuller Theological Seminary, recently published *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).
23. Susan Starr Paddock, *Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church* (Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Company, 2003).
24. Dozens of medical and therapeutic appreciative projects are surfacing, mentioned in AI listserve postings and publications, a number of which should interest pastors and counselors.
25. At the Interfaith Center at the Presidio in San Francisco and Pacific School of Religion, Peggy Green has developed a project titled "First Be Reconciled" for generating friendly, collaborative relationships between evangelical and gay and lesbian Christians.
26. Two weeks following the tragedies of September 11, 2001, 60 peacemakers gathered at American University in Washington, DC, for a three-day training in AI called "Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding: A Practitioners' Exploration." The majority were on-the-ground peacemakers from Bosnia, Jerusalem, West Africa, and similarly conflicted areas of the world, along with the agencies serving them.
27. Protocol for an appreciative congregational valuation process can be found at www.ClergyLeadership.com.
28. The same point pertains to the business community. AI requires a CEO to look at a corporation with new eyes. Getting that to happen is one of the toughest steps in landing an organization development contract using AI in the business community.
29. Conversation, October 15, 2001.
30. Conversation, August 21, 2001.
31. Conversation, December 12, 2001.
32. ailist@business.utah.edu.

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Resources on Appreciative Inquiry from the Congregational Resource Guide

Anderson, Harlene, Kenneth J. Gergen, Sheila McNamee, David Cooperrider, Mary Gergen, and Diana Whitney. [*The Appreciative Organization*](#). Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute, 2001.

In this 55-page volume, the authors argue that the old hierarchical organization is no longer effective and needs to be replaced with a model based on the following premises: nothing will motivate people unless it has meaning for them; meaning is created through relationships; and appreciating others' words and actions increases value within relationships, organizations, and the world at large. The authors use examples to flesh out these concepts, contrasting the results produced by existing organizational structures, leadership approaches, evaluation methods, and communication styles with those that "appreciative organization" methods have produced in their own work.

[Appreciative Inquiry Commons](#)

ai.cwru.edu

Hosted by Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, this Web site is a worldwide portal to academic resources and tools on appreciative inquiry and the discipline of positive change. Among its many offerings are tools, practical methodologies, and stories from the field; listings of upcoming workshops and conferences; listings of programs offered by consulting firms; universities and institutions with appreciative inquiry programming; annotated bibliographies of publications on appreciative inquiry, and appreciative inquiry resources available in seventeen foreign languages.

Branson, Mark Lau. [*Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*](#). Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004.

Mark Lau Branson offers an account of how one Presbyterian church used appreciative inquiry to understand its history, encourage its members to discover and pursue their dreams, and call a new pastor who could help make those dreams reality. He makes clear that AI – an attitude as well as a process – broadly applies in many settings. Branson outlines a five step sequence: (1) focus on the positive; (2) inquire into stories of life-giving forces; (3) locate themes and topics for further inquiry; (4) create shared images for a preferred future; and (5) find innovative ways to create that future. He discusses the theory and provides biblical grounding for this work. He outlines the process in some detail, yet continues telling a story – how the theory played out in a real Presbyterian congregation. He proves his point by helping the reader experience it.

[Clergy Leadership Institute](http://www.clergyleadership.com)
www.clergyleadership.com

The mission of the Clergy Leadership Institute is to increase ministers' effectiveness by offering training that integrates theological reflection with organizational psychology. The Institute believes appreciative processes are the most effective way of enabling people to manifest their God-given talents and abilities. The Institute's Web site features detailed information about its appreciative inquiry and leadership training programs, clergy sabbatical programs, clergy search resources, coaching services for personal and professional development, and consulting for congregational development.

Cooperrider, David, Peter F. Sorensen, Jr., Diana Whitney, and Therese F. Yaeger, eds. [*Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change*](#). Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 2000.

This is a collection of articles on the change methodology known as appreciative inquiry, which focuses on what is best within an organization, defines what makes that possible, helps participants create a vision that goes beyond those circumstances and experiences, and assists them in developing a means to transform their vision into reality. This book provides an overview of the philosophy and methodology of appreciative inquiry, its various applications, and the possibility of its universal application. Intended to serve as a source book for students of organization development, this book is written in an academic style and its content goes far beyond simple explanations and examples of appreciative inquiry, drawing from a variety of disciplines and research to illustrate the basis and power of this approach to change.

Hammond, Sue Annis, [*The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*](#). Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Company, 1996.

This slim volume is designed for those wishing to get a quick overview of what appreciative inquiry is and what it can do. Written by a change management consultant who has been inspired by the results she has achieved by using appreciative inquiry in her own work with client companies, this book includes

easy-to-digest examples of appreciative inquiry principles, brief and inspiring case studies, sample questions, and a resource guide for those wishing to study appreciative inquiry in more depth. A quick and easy read, this is a great first book for those wishing to learn more about this methodology.

Hammond, Sue Annis, and Cathy Royal, eds. [*Lessons from the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry, Revised Edition*](#). Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Company, 2001.

This book shares the theory and processes of appreciative inquiry through the stories of organizations and communities who have experienced the power of this change methodology. Each case study provides rich detail of the process undertaken, and the author of each of these stories shares what was done and what was learned during the appreciative inquiry process. In addition to these case studies, this book includes answers to commonly asked questions about the methodology, sample questions, graphic models of the process, and an extensive resource section. This is a book for those wishing to learn not only about the principles and practices of appreciative inquiry but also to understand the results it is capable of producing in a variety of settings.

Mead, Loren B. [*The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*](#). Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1991.

Mead asserts that the church's understanding of mission is shifting as once-familiar clergy and laity roles change and as church executives are called to provide more support with fewer resources. The result, he says, is that a new church is being born around us. While it was once assumed that a church's mission was to convert persons in far-off lands, now churches must focus on crises in their surrounding communities. And, whereas clergy were formerly assumed to be powerful guarantors of community morality, now they must help laity engage in and serve a turbulent world. While alerting us to the challenges of reinventing the new church, Mead also offers hopeful signs of the future church's emergence. Church leaders will find in this book a deeper understanding of the critical opportunities facing those who seek to renew a church that will become, in Mead's words, "a centering presence from which we may serve the new world that God is creating around us."

Paddock, Susan. [*Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church*](#). Plano, TX: Thin Book Publishing Company, 2003.

In this short but informative book, author Susan Paddock summarizes in just six pages the theory of appreciative inquiry. She then documents the compatibility between appreciative inquiry and Catholic theology. Using case studies of organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, the Diocese of Cleveland, and a variety of Catholic schools and parishes, she explores the effective use of appreciative inquiry to build relationships and community, to do strategic planning and create mission statements, to enhance transitions, and to facilitate spiritual renewal. In her account of these case studies, Paddock emphasizes the specific appreciative inquiry questions that were posed and the results they achieved.

Ricketts, Miriam W., and James E. Willis. [*Experience AI: A Practitioner's Guide to Integrating Appreciative Inquiry with Experiential Learning*](#). Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute, 2001.

This book outlines the transformational organization change process known as appreciative inquiry (AI), and how its results can be enhanced and accelerated with experiential learning (EL), which involves immersing participants in structured and shared experiences that encourage risk taking followed by meaningful reflection on these experiences. In just 78 pages, the authors initiate an inquiry into the power of embedding EL exercises in the AI process to build trust and rapport, create community, enhance risk-taking, build buy-in for change, and accelerate the change process. Four client stories highlight how integrating experiential learning exercises with appreciative inquiry methods can maximize learning. Includes a glossary of terms and phrases.

Schiller, Marjorie, Bea Mah Holland, and Deanna Riley, eds. [*Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder*](#). Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute, 2001.

Building on the foundation of the appreciative inquiry methodology used in organizational consulting, this book examines how appreciative practices can lend power to the leadership role. This exploration takes place largely through stories of leaders who are transforming their industries or communities through appreciative ways of communicating, relating, and envisioning. Insights and inspiration can be found throughout the stories in this book, and the final chapter offers readers a model of appreciative leadership. Also included is a discussion of the characteristics, actions, attitudes, and worldviews of appreciative leaders. This is a helpful resource for anyone seeking a guide to a mode of leadership that honors the individual, brings out the best in others, and creates through vision and a desire to better the world.

[The Taos Institute](#)

www.taosinstitute.net

The Taos Institute is a nonprofit educational institution focused on social constructionist dialogues – the processes by which humans generate meaning together. Its Web site includes information about the Institute, its workshops on social construction and, more specifically, appreciative inquiry, as well as ordering information about its books: *Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder*; *The Appreciative Organization*; and *Experience AI: A Practitioner's Guide to Integrating Appreciative Inquiry and Experiential Learning*.

[United Religions Initiative](#)

www.uri.org

The United Religions Initiative is based in daily, enduring interfaith cooperation. Its Web site features information about a variety of URI peacebuilding initiatives, press

releases about recent interfaith efforts and accomplishments, resources and education about a variety of religions and spiritual traditions, a link to a URI children's Web site, descriptions and ordering information regarding URI publications, and links to other interfaith peacebuilding sites.

Watkins, Jane Magruder, and Bernard J. Mohr. [*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*](#). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001.

This is one of a series of books about cutting-edge developments and state-of-the-art practices in the field of organization development. This volume describes appreciative inquiry, a theory and practice for approaching change from a holistic framework. The authors define AI, outline the theory and research on which it is based, and describe the current state of the practice. They then describe in detail the five core processes of this methodology: focusing on the positive, inquiring into stories of life-giving forces, creating shared images for a preferred future, and innovating ways to create the preferred future. In addition to providing the rationale for each of these processes, the authors also provide case studies to show how they work. The book closes with a discussion of AI as a new paradigm for research and evaluation and answers to frequently asked questions about AI theory and technique.

Wheatley, Margaret. [*Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*](#). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

In this update of the original 1992 version, Margaret Wheatley relates cutting-edge scientific theories and principles to the issues that trouble organizations most – chaos, control, freedom, communication, participation, planning, and prediction. With up-to-date examples and stories from her own work as an organizational specialist, Wheatley suggests that ideas drawn from quantum physics, chaos theory, and molecular biology could improve organizational performance. Though this book is more of an inspiration to creative thinking than a how-to manual, Wheatley does offer some suggestions for organizations seeking to remain healthy and to grow in this time of challenge and rapid change.

Whitney, Diana, David Cooperrider, Amanda Trosten-Bloom, and Brian S. Kaplin. [*Encyclopedia of Positive Questions, Volume One: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Bring Out the Best in Your Organization*](#). Euclid, OH: Lakeshore Communications, 2002.

This is a thoroughly practical guide to implementing appreciative inquiry in a congregation or judicatory. The authors begin by explaining why positive questions are important. They then offer an encyclopedia of sample positive questions, each group of which focuses around a topic. While some topics might apply more directly to corporations, others (such as "strength in diversity" and "integrity in action") apply just as directly to congregations. In addition, the authors provide guidance on how to choose your own affirmative topics – as well as how to develop positive questions and how to create a protocol for appreciative inquiry. This book is

short on abstractions but full of concrete ways to begin an appreciate inquiry process in your organization.

Whitney, Diana, and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. [*The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change*](#). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003.

Has your congregation spent energy and resources on "problem solving," only to find that problems either persist or worsen? A new approach – appreciative inquiry – shows that "if you want to transform a situation, a relationship, an organization, or a community, focusing on strengths is much more effective than focusing on problems." Drawing on years of experience in applying appreciative inquiry (AI) to organizational change, Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom present both the principles of AI and case studies that demonstrate how AI works. Congregational leaders who have grown tired of negative approaches to problem solving will be refreshed by the theory and examples presented in this book.