

Appreciative Inquiry – Survey

The Concept of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a common practice, is not an exact science. It is the art of asking the right questions of committed stakeholders and developing a composite picture of the past, present, and desired future. Aspirational organizations like churches are perfectly suited for this approach because it resonates with Scripture. Nearly two thousand years ago, the author of Hebrews was practicing a rough model of AI.

- 1) Remember the reasons for the community's existence (Heb. 1:1–4, 2:1–4).
- 2) Purposefully think about the good things of the past (Heb. 6:10, 10:32–34).
- 3) Retain the best basics yet move on to what is transformative (Heb. 6:1–4).
- 4) Get rid of things that entangle (Heb. 12:1).
- 5) Imagine, with faith, an improved future. What we focus on, and how we frame our situations and opportunities, does much to cultivate our reality. The Hebrew writer stresses the superiority of Jesus (Heb. 7:21–8:6, 9:11–14), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:18–29), and the examples of faithful forerunners and leaders (Heb. 11:1–40).
- 6) Encourage transformative attitude and behavioral changes (Heb. 10:23–25, 12:1–17).
- 7) Promote productive *surplus thinking* (we have these advantages and treasures) rather than only *deficit thinking* (what's wrong with us and what's broken).

The result of an integrative process like this inquiry is that it taps into our hearts, minds, and collective aspirations, discovering what enlivens and gives energy to the broader church family. Author Mark Lau Branson suggests a lens for looking at the past:

*“Organizations are heliotropic. This is a botanical term about a plant’s orientation—plants lean toward the sun. Similarly, organizations lean toward the source of energy—whether that energy is healthy or not ... As memories and imaginations are engaged to nourish participants with the best and most life-giving resources, the church will lean in the direction of those narratives and practices.”*¹

In any congregation, leaning into healthy energy would be thinking about Christ, knowing our story of faith, seizing great memories, living up to what we already know, and doing what still works while also grabbing new opportunities and practices. It is important to balance these features for change because some people overly reminisce about the past and others too quickly disparage the past.

AI is a useful way to help a community treat their challenges as adventures—not as a nuisance or problem to be solved. People have more confidence in journeying to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward good parts of the past (the known). This approach usually resonates with Christians.

¹ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), Kindle Edition, Kindle locations 621–622.



Survey Questions

The Appreciative Inquiry Survey. The appreciative inquiry concept is aspirational rather than overly analytical and was described in more detail on the previous page. Precisely 90 of the 200 members participated in the survey. There were seven questions:

1. Strive to remember your entire experience at the _____ Church. When were you most alive, motivated, and excited about your involvement?

And describe what made it exciting.
2. What practice or characteristic of the church would you like to discard and leave in the past?
3. What past strength would you like to recover?
4. What are the GREATEST FEATURES of the congregation?
5. What are the WEAKEST FEATURES of the congregation?
6. What additional feature would you like to see become a strength.
7. How would you know if the _____ disciples were collectively fulfilling God's purpose(s) in their lives?
8. If you were able to peer many years into the future, to 2040, and you discovered that we collectively achieved great things to God's glory, what are some things that you think would have enabled us to get there?

It is possible to create multiple choice questions to obtain quantitative information about perspectives. For instance,

Over the last five years, what have been the STRONGEST FEATURES of the congregation?

(Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Relational Unity
- ☐ Doctrinal Soundness
- ☐ Worship Experience Commitment of Members
- ☐ One-Another Relationships Bonds w/ICOC Fellowship
- ☐ Exemplar Lives of Members
- ☐ Communication Evangelism
- ☐ Outreach Fresh & Progressive Thinking
- ☐ Engagement w/Community

Survey Interpretation and Reporting

There will be some judgment calls as to which survey responses to include. Too many replies deter readers from more serious reflection. The basis of selections followed these considerations:

1. **Provided Clarity and Resonated with Other Responses.** Responses that are very clear and most resonated with the thoughts of others were included more often, especially if they helped underscore “surplus thinking”—the positives and advantages—and stayed within topic.
2. **Preserved a Level of Anonymity.** Responses to the early aspirational questions can often be recognizable but were left intact because there was no risk of exposure. To protect overall confidentiality, responses involving criticisms were sometimes edited to remove elements that would identify the source.
3. **Accommodated the Reader.** Responses that required significant clarification were removed out of respect for the reader. The same is true for responses that appeared too edgy, involved unresolved feelings, or appeared too personal, since there is no way to know if the appropriate conversations have occurred. Edgy comments have their place in formal discussions, but they can be less helpful in print, where it is more difficult to interpret innuendos.
4. **Allowed for Truncations and Small Edits.** A long response might be condensed for brevity or broken up into separate comments, preserving the most salient and unique thoughts. A meaningful response that is difficult to read might be slightly edited for improving its clarity, without changing the idea.

It is suggested that someone independent of the leadership reviews, interprets, and compiles the survey results – possibly a trusted outsider. This will alleviate any perceptions of bias and handle issues of identity. Even when surveys are conducted anonymously, it is possible to detect some identities based on content.