

Appreciative Inquiry and the UUA Board at General Assembly 2008

The experiential planning methodology that will be explored at General Assembly 2008 is Appreciative Inquiry, or AI. Members of the UUA Board are moving along toward the creation of Ends statements for the Association, and are able to use information from the Open Space process used at GA 2007. The prioritized statements in response to the question "In today's complex world, what is our mission as a faith community?" indicated that Unitarian Universalists have considerable energy and interest around three issues: youth and young adults, anti-racism/anti-oppression, and environmental concerns. At General Assembly 2008, invited leaders will use AI to explore what our best experiences and practices around these issues have been in the past.

According to Mark Lau Branson, author of Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change¹, AI has its theoretical roots in three areas: 1) "new science," with its understandings of chaos theory and unpredictability; 2) social constructivism, the theory that connects the use of language and the construction of reality; and 3) the "power of images to bring change." To quote from Branson's work, he lists the assumptions of AI on p. 139:

- In every organization, some things work well.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Asking questions influences the group.
- People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language we use creates our reality.
- Organizations are heliotropic.
- Outcomes should be useful.
- All steps are collaborative.

While strategic planning that is based on a problem-solving model begins with an assessment of problems and deficits, then moves to analyze the causes of the deficits and of possible solutions, and ends with the

¹ Branson, Mark Lau (2004). Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change. Washington, DC: Alban.

development of an action or treatment plan, AI begins with a consideration of people's experiences of an organization's "best," in terms of narratives, practices and culture. Participants then imagine "what might be" and "what should be," and finish by analyzing areas of innovation that will result in the greatest commitment and highest level of participation in "what will be."

At General Assembly 2008, invited leaders will use AI to consider our mission as a faith community in the three areas prioritized most highly in the Open Space process in 2007: 1) ministries to youth and young adults; 2) anti-oppression/anti-racism; and 3) environmental concerns. They will use their perspectives and expertise around ministry, lifespan religious education, lay leadership, worship arts, outreach, and working with newcomers to Unitarian Universalism to consider what experiences in UU congregations they describe as "best." Taking multiple learning styles into consideration, they will use an interview protocol to develop verbal recommendations, and will then create physical models of their wishes around "what should be" to offer non-verbal representations to the UUA Board for their consideration in relation to the development of Ends statements.

On Thursday afternoon, trained facilitators will work with small groups of six to ten people who bring their backgrounds and expertise as lay and ordained UU leaders to the AI process. People will interview one another in pairs and report back to their small groups on their partners' wishes, then work in their small groups to create physical models that will be photographed. Both the interview results and the photographs of the models will inform GA participants in plenary discussions and decisions.

Time will be set aside during the Board's April meeting for Board members to go through the AI process, so they are informed and knowledgeable about this work. Their active participation in the Open Space process in Portland helped to focus and energize people, and their participation on Thursday in Fort Lauderdale will provide a signal of the importance of AI as another tool in the strategic planning "kits" of ordained and lay UU leaders.

Respectfully submitted,
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