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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Using Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Congregational Change

Jason Locke

Abstract: *Successful navigation of congregational change is difficult. Churches face numerous technical and adaptive challenges. While leaders can often guide their churches through technical change with logic, negotiation and even force, adaptive change requires a deeper form of reprogramming and congregational discernment. The College Church of Christ, having been in decline for nearly two decades, went through an intensive process of appreciative inquiry to elicit data that might fund a new, life-giving narrative. This article discusses that process and challenges that arose in moving on to next steps.*

Introduction

Since 2009, I have been the senior minister for the College Church of Christ in Fresno, California. At its peak, this church was the largest Church of Christ on the West Coast, but it had since shrunk from 800 to 300 in average attendance. In order to better understand this decline and the congregation's place in God's mission, I needed to do some listening. Using appreciative inquiry, I collected positive memories and feelings about the congregation's past. The goal was to craft a new narrative that might move the congregation toward a clearer sense of its identity and increase its capacity for mission.¹

By using the word "identity," I mean a congregation's unique contextualization as a concrete manifestation of the universal church. Lesslie Newbigin defined the congregation as the "hermeneutic of the gospel." In doing so, he attempted to locate Christian identity as belonging to a body of believers rather than solo Christians. Newbigin was also keen to make a correlating claim about the congregation rather than the individual as the source of Christian mission. The church would do well, he stated, to remember its identity as rooted in the personhood and message

¹ I use the word "mission" in its broader sense, not in reference to the global missionary effort.

of Jesus Christ, who carried out his mission in the context of community. Newbigin claimed that the church's identity is by its very nature "missional" in the sense that it proclaims the truth of God's reign made visible in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²

My project sought to address the lack of a shared narrative that could renew the church's identity and mission.³ Groups tend to function from a sense of shared identity. This identity results in group behavior that influences and orders the actions of individuals in the group. The goal of this project was not to change group behavior but rather to affect underlying factors that shape the College Church's shared social identity or lack thereof.⁴

The College Church seems to have possessed a strong, shared identity at its genesis. Its aging facilities are excellently located in close proximity to Fresno State University and within a half-mile of an elementary school, middle school, and high school. At its launch in 1964, the congregation was a homogenous group of socioeconomically similar whites who viewed the world in similar ways and whose roots were in Oklahoma, Missouri, Texas, and Arkansas.

A clear sense of identity marks the first half of the College Church's history. Its ideal site, new facilities, and strong leadership allowed the church to capitalize on opportunities for growth. Based on interviews I had previously done with long-time members, I believe the congregation's mission was shaped by a dogmatic, perhaps elitist, mindset common in Churches of Christ of that day.⁵ The focus was on activities, and people who

² As Newbigin said, "[The church] exists in him and for him. He is the center of its life. Its character is given to it, when it is true to its nature, not by the characters of its members but by his character." *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227. He admitted that congregational life in his context of Great Britain was far from ideal, and he was aware that his contemporaries were often embarrassed by key aspects of the church, namely its humanity. Thus his intent was to redirect attention to the congregational level as the place where Christians find their identity and then live out their mission.

³ The project described in this paper was for my doctoral thesis. The research occurred in 2010.

⁴ For more on social identity theory and the power of a shared identity over behavior, see Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, Anthony S. R. Manstead and Miles Hewstone, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 555-60.

⁵ The sectarianism prevalent in Churches of Christ stemmed, oddly enough, from an initial desire to bring unity to the fragmented Christian scene of the early 1800s. By vocally pursuing unity, Churches of Christ chose an anti-sectarian approach. In the process of fighting sectarianism, however, they created their own firm boundaries that excluded

reflect fondly on this time speak of “involvement” as their major takeaway. Ironically, tragedy also marked this time. Two ministers died, one in a tragic accident and the other took his own life after having been quietly dismissed for sexual impropriety.

The second half of the church’s history, starting roughly in 1987, contained a fair share of moral failing, leadership indecision, and decline. The congregation had begun to cut loose from its former sectarianism. Its corporate worship evolved in the 1990s. A more grace-centered stance emerged, costing the church many long-time members.⁶ Diversity and experimentation increased. While most remaining members regarded the new, outward forms as a healthy sign of transition, the church did not seize a unifying identity to support renewed mission.⁷ A troubling sign was the dismissal of four ministers, one for sexual immorality and another for abuse of power. Following this string of firings, the church went twelve years without a senior minister until my hiring in 2009. This produced a leadership vacuum that allowed unofficial leaders to vie for power.

Various segments of the congregation began to display competing identities and narratives. Few if any wished for the sectarian thinking marking its early years, but some longed for a return to the glory days when church membership was greater and when founding members controlled the narrative. Others began to looking outward, somewhat idolizing the style of Fresno’s evangelical megachurches. Some prominent individuals grabbed onto a quasi-nationalistic form of religion that blended worship of God and country. Another strong segment of the church claimed a story of

all who did not practice their version of anti-sectarianism. For a good overview of sectarianism in Churches of Christ, see Gary Holloway and Douglas A. Foster, *Renewing God’s People: A Concise History of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), 108-9. For more on this, see Mark Love, Douglas A. Foster, and Randall J. Harris, *Seeking a Lasting City: The Church’s Journey in the Story of God* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2005), 138-39.

⁶ This stance of a community shaped by God is not foreign to the DNA of Churches of Christ. In spite of a tendency to be judgmental of those whose church structures and biblical interpretations differed, Churches of Christ maintained an underlying focus on a community of faith made holy by the work of God. This focus on God’s grace as a defining force may have been temporarily buried, but it has the potential to resurface in congregations such as the College Church. Love, Foster, and Harris, 150-52.

⁷ Holloway and Foster note that Churches of Christ moved in two separate directions in recent decades: (1) toward a sectarian conservatism; and (2) toward a more open progressivism. They also note that the long-term pattern of spectacular growth in Churches of Christ ended in the 1980s. This trend precisely mirrored the history of the College Church, demonstrating that the College Church’s actions and beliefs throughout its early history were funded by a deeper narrative that ran across the spectrum of Churches of Christ.

shared brokenness, and they sought to protect each other from the chaotic forces at work in the broader church, at times in shared disdain for certain church leaders. Other story-lines stemmed from the social and economic locations of the various members.

Underlying it all and perhaps hastening its narrational disintegration, however, was the church's poor leadership and lack of interaction with its changing neighborhood. The church had become invisible to its neighbors. God calls the church to participate in the mission of redemption. The College Church lacked a corporate sense of identity that would propel it toward partnership with God's mission in its unique, local incarnation.

Many church consultants and church renewal experts write about the need for something similar to this project. Robert Dale speaks about tapping into the "theological roots" of a congregation in order to restore the church's dream for the future.⁸ James Hopewell writes that "narrative can be a means by which a congregation apprehends its vocation."⁹ Diana Butler Bass builds on Hopewell's work by stating that congregations can embody the stories they tell.¹⁰ Perhaps the key description of this process comes from Mary Clark Moschella. She describes this intervention's process as a way of "co-authoring the future" and subsequently finding new ways for a congregation to think and act together. She says that "no one composes a life story alone."¹¹ Indeed, my intent was not to compose but to discern a story shared by the members themselves. This project's goal was not just to

⁸ Robert Dale, *To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981), 131.

⁹ James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 193.

¹⁰ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 100. Many others use a similar language. Gil Rendle discusses the need to move a congregation out of the safe, weak stories in which many are allowed to operate. The goal is to move from shared monologue to shared dialogue out of which a new story emerges. Rendle, "Narrative Leadership and Renewed Congregational Identity," in *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*, ed. Larry A. Golemon (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010), 31. George Hunsberger writes about a congregation's need to discern its "missional vocation," a calling that is unique to each particular church in its context. The process he describes has some similarities to the task of forming a congregational narrative. Hunsberger, "Discerning Missional Vocation," in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, ed. Lois Y. Barrett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38. George Bullard describes the need to write a congregation's "future story" based on what God has done in the past and what a church's leaders perceive about their future. George W. Bullard, Jr., *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 133.

¹¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 238.

listen but to help the church see God's future possibilities emanating from what God had already done in its midst. This would allow the co-authoring of a new future that might create the possibility of partnership in the mission of God locally.

The College Church wanted hope for the future, but fragmentation and decline made that difficult to grasp. New vision could not simply come from its own denomination since most Churches of Christ were struggling.¹² The goal of this project was to help clarify the church's identity so that its ability to participate in God's mission could increase. How that would play out was not fully dependent on the College Church alone but also on its context and on God's plans for both.

The College Church's Changing Context

The church exists to bring God's hope. This cannot be a false hope that stems from the futility of human striving. It must stretch back to creation and to the very nature of God while looking forward to God's glorious end. As Jürgen Moltmann wrote, the church is to be the "source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come."¹³

Appreciative inquiry seeks to tease the story of God's work from the memories and feelings of a church's members, but the theological starting place for this project must not be in those feelings. It resides in the belief that God chooses to work through imperfect humans. God works through human particularities in order to bring transformation. By acknowledging particularity, a narrative taps symbolic language that allows God to move the church toward what it can become.¹⁴

¹² Stagnation and decline were apparent hallmarks of many churches in North America at the outset of the third millennium. A unique struggle for Churches of Christ lay in the fact that almost all were strongly sectarian and believed they were the "only true Christians." Some congregations left this mentality behind, but many were subsequently unsure how to relate to the broader Christian world and were ambivalent about many of their own unique traits and practices. The College Church clearly fit within the larger milieu of churches that moved away from rigid sectarianism but had yet to find a clear, new identity. This project's purpose did not seek to comment on broader issues or the scope of sociological changes within Churches of Christ and mainstream North American Christianity. See Holloway and Foster, 123-31, for a brief synopsis of the presenting issues.

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, translated by James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 22.

¹⁴ Compare this with the words of Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998), 7: "Weaving together the human and the divine enables us to hear our own

Truth-telling is a provocative and dangerous endeavor. If it could hear and accept its true state, the church might be receptive to God's transformative work. Without such a humble stance, however, honesty becomes an assault on a group's self-deception which produces an automatic defense and hardening of its perceived identity.

With this thought firmly in mind, it was necessary to acknowledge the College Church's fallenness. I needed to demonstrate the College Church's disconnect from its neighborhood. I selected eight church members to conduct interviews with non-members who lived or worked nearby. This was not a scientific sampling or study. The goal was to gain a preliminary impression of how some non-members who lived or worked near the church property viewed the church.¹⁵

The outsiders interviewed had little to no impression of the College Church. When asked to describe a time when the church was helpful to the community, most replied, "What church?" or "No impression." One person referred to an annual car show on the property; another to a private school that used the building. Their answers revealed an unimpressive footprint in the environs.

The group's interviews painted a picture that was at once hopeful and discouraging. The interviews were hopeful because the church displayed attributes that these outsiders would like to see in a church. Their answers were discouraging, however, because the congregation was invisible outside its walls. Despite a mistaken belief that they were connecting with their neighbors, the College Church was making no lasting impact on those interviewed.

The College Church was no longer a thriving church with a clear sense of identity. It lacked consensus about its beliefs and how to live them out. Competing narratives fueled conflict among groups that lacked meaningful cross-pollination.¹⁶ Because of a compartmentalized leadership

stories retold with clarity and new possibility. And when our own stories are retold, our lives are transformed in the telling."

¹⁵ They used a simplified form of ethnographic inquiry in asking questions to a cross-section of people who live and work near the College Church building. They interviewed ten non-members including two store managers, an employee, the manager of an apartment complex, a high school coach, a college student and a university professor. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. They also interviewed approximately twenty-five fringe church members.

¹⁶ The College Church did not intentionally discourage this kind of communication, but the structure seemed to promote what Anderson and Foley describe as "secret keeping." Some of this secret keeping might have been caused by the traumatic events of the past. Regardless of the cause, they argue that such a practice causes the community

structure, leaders had difficulty hearing broad and honest feedback that might have made them aware of this reality. Some leaders perhaps hoped to produce consensus by composing a few statements and publicly reading them or posting them.

Not coincidentally, the church lacked any meaningful interaction beyond its property. The College Church knew its neighborhood when it began in 1964 because its members were of the same socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural strata as those who lived there. Over the years, its context changed. To be fair, broader changes swept across American society. The need for reflection on a church's environs seemed irrelevant in a previous era. Churches were once strong social constructs deeply embedded in the social classes that defined them.¹⁷

Lacking a new, life-giving narrative to shape its identity, the College Church was no longer able to proactively engage its surrounding community. Trapped by fragmented and disjointed narratives, the congregation looked to the surrounding world with no clear purpose. Pockets of the church shared a sense of identity that shaped their actions, but the church as a whole had no shared understanding of itself and no clear mission. The church was fortunate in many regards, but its undiscovered identity helped ensure that its treasure was buried.

Appreciative Inquiry and Its Resultant Narrative

My ministry project involved the collection of memories and feelings from church members through group interviews. I chose group interviews as my primary research tool since this project called for the knowledge, experiences, interpretations, and interactions of the membership. This type of research is qualitative but not without objectivity. I implemented methods developed in an approach called appreciative inquiry as described in separate works by Mark Lau Branson and Mary Clark Moschella.¹⁸

to "remain stuck in fixed patterns of interaction, roles are rigidly defined, and stories are closely monitored in order to keep the secret safe. Such secret-keeping is deceptively mythic: prematurely announcing that reconciliation is possible without allowing participants in the story to name that which needs to be reconciled." Anderson and Foley, 17.

¹⁷ Wilbert Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1985), 63-64.

¹⁸ Jennifer Mason explores the reasons for using qualitative interviews in research. The interviews for this project fall under the rubric of her discussion. Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 63-67. While Mason provides the theoretical backdrop for this data-collection process, the concept for this particular project stems directly from the works of Mary Clark Moschella and Mark Lau

I chose to use the church's adult classes as the setting for collecting data. Many members felt most at ease in the confines of their separate groups. For some, groups were even more important than the main assembly. Some expressed dismay when temporary changes altered the class format. Six adult classes were in existence at the time. As the primary leaders of these groups, the elders played a crucial role in clearly stating the case for this process and allaying fears.

The project took place over seven weeks. The first week acquainted folks with the process. Approximately 175 people attended this forty-five-minute introduction. This was comparable to the usual total attendance on any given Sunday. I described the typical sense of identity that shaped most Churches of Christ in a previous generation. I noted that changes to the church left it vulnerable to confusion about its core identity. I went on to ask what it would look like if the College Church were driven by the mission of God. To close the first session, I explained that their classes would become like focus groups for the next six weeks. I calmed some worries by stating that these were not to be gripe sessions. The church had its weaknesses, but this project's strategy was to elicit positive memories and feelings. I suggested that they would be listening together for the Spirit's formative work in their midst.

Weeks two through four were for data collection. All adults met in their normal groups. My research assistants followed a weekly protocol and led the group interviews. Sessions had the serendipity of producing cross-breeding as folks were exposed to others' feelings and memories. Many folks learned new information about each other and the church.

Appreciative inquiry uses an intergenerational and interactive style of questioning, seeking input from as many sources as possible.¹⁹ The five basic processes of appreciative inquiry are to (1) choose the positive as the focus of inquiry, (2) inquire into stories of life-giving forces, (3) locate themes that appear in the stories, (4) create shared images for a preferred

Branson. Both describe church settings where they implement the types of interviews and data collection used in this intervention. Moschella focuses more on the ethnographic nature of this research. Branson views this data collection as a form of appreciative inquiry. Moschella, 116-20; Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 72-76.

¹⁹ Paul C. Chaffee, "Claiming the Light: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Transformation," *WWW.congregationalresources.org: A Guide to Resources for Building Congregational Vitality*, ed. Richard Bass (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005), 85.

future, and (5) find innovative ways to create that future.²⁰ In my project, I focused on the first four. Innovation and implementation would hopefully flow out of this project, but they were not within its confines.

These group interview sessions were the equivalent of Branson's second process: "inquire into the stories of life-giving forces." These positive memories and feelings had the potential to reveal more than members' reflections on the past. They could also provide a glimpse into expectations about the future since past experience tends to shape how one looks ahead. We were less interested in the details of historical events than in the feelings and perceptions attached to them. If the College Church believed God had been at work, then it ought to be able to describe it.

For my group interview template, I borrowed a questioning framework from John Savage's *Listening and Caring Skills*. He lists four levels of "story listening": (a) data back then, (b) feelings back then, (c) feelings now, and (d) self-disclosure, or the "Aha!" moment.²¹ In weeks two through four, the interview team helped the groups discuss and listen to the first three levels of story as laid out by Savage. In weeks five and six, the groups talked about enlightening moments they experienced in the interview sessions—Savage's fourth level.

Interviewers followed an exact protocol for each of the three group interviews. Interviewers digitally recorded the group sessions. As respondents answered, the interviewers also made brief written observations about the respondents on field note observation forms. Every response was recorded and transcribed. The interviews were transcribed and resulted in 112 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Nearly 150 different church members shared in at least one of the interview sessions. This was a significant representation of a congregation that numbers about four hundred including one hundred children aged eighteen or younger.

I studied, coded, and organized the group interview data and utilized these responses to identify key themes. I began by organizing the data according to the dates of the group interviews. I read and reread the

²⁰ Branson, 28. He also delineates a 4-I model that works through the five processes. The four I's are initiate, inquire, imagine and innovate. For all practical purposes, this intervention was concerned only with the first three I's. The fourth I, innovate, will be the task of the church after this project's completion.

²¹ John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 79-81.

data from oldest to newest.²² This involved three layers of reading the data: literal, interpretive, and reflexive.²³

First, I used a literal reading of the data. As I became familiar with the interviews and the field notes, I paid special attention to words, concepts, and events that appeared repeatedly in the responses. In order for me to consider these as significant, these repeating themes had to appear in multiple group sessions and be affirmed by multiple respondents within a group. I tagged or coded the responses and organized the responses that had correlating codes.

After the data was read and coded, I then utilized an interpretive reading of the interview data. I looked beyond the data for tacit meanings and shared assumptions that underlay the experiences and feelings of the participants. I used my inside knowledge of the College Church's history and context. I used the interview data to move beyond the surface answers and shed light on the significance of repeating refrains and key points in the church's past.

Finally, I did a reflexive reading of the data. I figuratively took a step back and wondered aloud if I might have been reading too much into the data. I asked if my own involvement in the process might have steered the information too strongly in one direction or another. I reexamined my own coding methods in addition to my observations, comments, and reactions to the interviews.

As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I carefully looked for themes and words that surfaced often throughout the interview process. Only when a theme had this kind of broad support did I add it to my preliminary list of seemingly significant items. Some concepts prominent in one group did not make their way into the vocabulary of other groups.²⁴

²² My guide for organizing the data comes from Moschella, whose model comes from Mason. Moschella describes this as a "spiral-like learning process," where the researcher gradually circles the data and goes into deeper layers of immersion and understanding. Mason, 147-50; Moschella, 167.

²³ Mason says that many qualitative researchers make use of all three levels of reading the data. Mason, 149. See also Moschella, 172-73.

²⁴ For example, the word "diverse" or "diversity" appeared nine times in the transcripts. Based on my knowledge of the College Church and the changes that have taken place over the years, I might have expected diversity to be something church members would value. As I took a closer look at this concept within the group interviews, I discovered that it was exclusively limited to one class. Moreover, the very first respondent in this group had mentioned diversity as the thing most impressive to her when she came to the College Church less than two years ago. Though seemingly significant in one

After sorting through the transcripts multiple times, I discovered eight major themes or ideas that repeatedly appeared throughout: (1) Acceptance/welcome, (2) Family, (3) Openness/authenticity, (4) Grace and forgiveness, (5) Spiritual healing, (6) Involvement/inclusion, (7) Youth and college ministry, and (8) Worship. I do not mean that all eight were of equal importance. Four were clearly the most significant, occurring over and over again in interview after interview. Themes five through eight appeared significantly but with less regularity.

I used the data to produce a congregational narrative by week seven. All steps had to be completed by then: data analysis, narrative composition, and recording. Only three weeks separated the last interview session from this deadline. Moving toward completion required not only rigor but speed. The guiding principles for writing this kind of narrative came from Moschella,²⁵ but the exact movement of the narrative depended on the data.

On their own, these eight themes meant little for the College Church's future. Many had described what made them feel good, and those things might not have been life-giving. Several spoke fondly of an incredibly talented and beloved youth minister whose work in the early 1980s focused on choral groups and major productions. Although his tenure ended with great moral failing, a number of long-time members described those years as the church's most exciting era because they felt as if their children were active. Yet when one scrutinizes the fruit of that period, one unearths family after family whose children are either not in church or who experience deep personal and spiritual problems. Church members want to interpret those as good days, but the results of that era are hardly positive. This dissonance was hard to rectify.

Another popular era in the College Church's past was the late 1980s. Respondents often described the preaching minister back then as a dynamic speaker who motivated and inspired. Many spoke of those years as the greatest in the church's history. That same preacher committed adultery, left his wife and displayed other destructive attitudes. Rapid collapse and fragmentation followed his tenure—a sign that deeper problems were present. How does one rectify the fact that this “high point” had many so aspects that do not appear in step with what it means to follow Jesus?

This process helped capture but did not erase those tensions. Members' memories or feelings may not actually be life-giving, but we

instance, this lack of discussion in others eliminated “diverse” as a major concept for my research.

²⁵ Moschella, 191-213.

hoped to reframe them and give them a new trajectory. Some of the key traits valued by the College Church (acceptance, healing, grace) were clearly self-serving, producing a spirit of back-slapping and navel-gazing. This process gave me the chance to hear those appreciated attributes, speak with affirmation, and then add, “If we value these things, then what would the mission of God lead us to do?”

Throughout the interview process, I shared the data with my two fellow staff members, ministers who were part of the College Church for decades—one since birth and the other since 1982. They appreciated many of these same attributes, but they also were instinctively aghast at what seemed sentimentality and romanticizing of their church’s history. As long-tenured insiders, they had the “disadvantage” of knowing too much. Their visceral reaction was to reject some respondents’ feelings because their responses showed ignorance or avoidance of major problems.

My task was not to reject these contradictions but rather to find how God used the idiosyncrasies and failings of the College Church. The discovery that a congregation is flawed is an unavoidable necessity and allows for celebrating the fact that God uses flawed vessels for good purposes. But this discovery must accompany the desire to be drawn outward by the Spirit for God’s good purposes in the world.

One particular response provided a possible bridge. One aged respondent talked about the popular yet troubled youth minister who was spoken of so highly. While some only mentioned the “exciting” aspects of his ministry, she grasped a different level: “That youth minister was a tragic young man. He took his own life! That was such a horrible time for all of us because everyone cared for him. Everyone. He was so deeply troubled, but the congregation raised itself and got past that.” Without being negative, she plainly recounted the unvarnished truth. Though she did not speak of God’s work directly, she spoke of what looked to be God’s redemptive work.

This was a primary key in unlocking a potentially life-giving narrative. God could teach the church to love its context by admitting its own brokenness. This flowed clearly from both the interview data and the church’s history. This single response became a lens for describing a unique way in which God’s kingdom could take on flesh in this particular congregation.

Early Implications and Problems

The initial impact of this project was the start of conversations about renewing the College Church’s focus. God had richly blessed this

congregation. There was cause for thankfulness. God needs all kinds of churches, just as the body needs a variety of gifts and activities. God can use each unique body of believers in distinct ways to proclaim and live out the good news of Jesus.

The work of appreciative inquiry demonstrated at least three key areas that could either propel the College Church toward life-giving change within the mission of God or lead to its implosion. First, appreciative inquiry demonstrated that the fragmented, human-centered outlook of many members could provide a platform for a healthy identity. While the eight themes identified through appreciative inquiry might be rooted in humanistic feelings, God is able to work in the particular human situation to bring life and renewal.

I utilized an outside consultant to examine the research and reflect upon its results.²⁶ He believed that the interviews and the narrative accurately depict the College Church's story, warts and all. The consultant noted the members' lack of references to God's activity in their midst. He permitted that the questioning process might have caused this, but it seemed clear that the responses focused on relationships of acceptance and forgiveness—a reflection of their experience of God's grace—not on actually receiving God's grace.

The consultant further saw that while church members used the language of God and the Holy Spirit, many focused on human feelings rather than on listening to or talking about what God or the Holy Spirit was doing. He suggested that the work going forward was to move the congregation toward greater God-awareness and greater identity with God's mission.

The difficulty would be in moving beyond self-congratulating tendencies of the past toward a greater understanding of what it means to be led by God's Spirit. This project produced a foundation for building a sense of shared identity. To enact this, the church and its leaders would have to think in corporate rather than territorial terms. Existing groups would likely be a roadblock, sustaining a primary loyalty within the group rather than to the church. If the fragmentation of the past continued, it would doom the process of renewal. If the fragmented stories could

²⁶ John York is Professor of New Testament and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Lipscomb University in Nashville. He has been a frequent guest at the College Church and has family at the College Church. He has also served as an unpaid consultant and mentor to me at various points in my Fresno ministry.

coalesce into a new narrative, then the church might open themselves to God's new and unfolding mission.

Second, this project demonstrated the power of leaders who sit among church members and listen carefully to their stories and feelings. Those in the College Church leadership who participated in this project felt a sense of unanimity about how God was pulling the disparate parts of this congregation together. One elder whose work allowed only one week of participation was unsurprisingly least connected to the product and most disturbed by the resultant conversations. Leadership must flow up from within the congregation rather than sit separately. If congregational leaders could more deeply dwell among the members, they might help discern how God was directing the church.

In the initial days following the project, the temptation was to forget the narrational trajectory and revert to what came naturally. For the elders, what came naturally was group-think in the fragmented adult classes. This had already produced disconnected activities directed by various leaders with no overarching direction. God was calling the congregation to a more unified mission and to new activities that reflect this. The ability of leaders to continually sit among the broader church and help narrate God's new work would prove to be a crucial test for solidifying the work of appreciative inquiry. The inability of leaders to do this would perhaps be the main limiting factor.

Third and finally, this project affirms that a congregation should seek its unique identity within the mission of God. The church is not a self-help club or a bastion of group-think holding out against a changing world. The church is not just one of many priorities for those who follow Jesus. It is the means through which believers learn how to follow Jesus and live out their Christian lives. The ethical demands of following Jesus are intended for those living in community. The suffering witness of Christians is neither a solo enterprise nor hidden from the world. As Hauerwas and Willimon write in reference to the church, "We are not called to help people. We are called to follow Jesus."²⁷ Our sole purpose is to follow Jesus as God leads us into the world.

The struggle for most congregations today is to reclaim their singular purpose. In the Western world, church has come to symbolize much more than discipleship. Because following Jesus has become one of several priorities, believers have expectations of church that have little or nothing

²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 121.

to do with God's expectations. This confusion also blinds outsiders to the benefits of Christian community by convincing them that churches are concerned mostly about things that matter little. The church is to be the bearer of hope in the world. Meanwhile, the world is in grave need of the very thing the church is supposed to carry to it.

Concluding Thoughts and Impact on the Church

In the six-plus years since this project's completion, I observe both the possibilities and limitations for those wishing to pursue appreciative inquiry as a tool for congregational change. The possible trajectories for life-giving identity and mission are plainly visible in the College Church. This gives hope to those who wish to see renewal in a declining church. Yet the fractious divides of inward-looking, competing narratives and the lack of proactive leadership have resurfaced in destructive ways. One might argue that they arose in defensive reaction against the formation of healthier, outward-looking trends. Two major crises illustrate this.

In 2014, less than four years after the project, a woman accused an associate minister of sexual impropriety. It was a difficult charge to prove, but the investigation uncovered clear misconduct on his part. The elders had no choice but to sever ties.

Many of the College Church's long-time members rallied and refused to believe the "slander." Even some elders were caught in the desire to protect this minister and kept some important information from the church. About 20% of the church left—a few with disgust at the sloppiness of the process, and many others with anger over his firing. Even a professional mediator was unable to fully solve the tension. Simply put, the residual weakness of the leaders and continued fragmentation of the church were not able to withstand this major crisis.

Then in 2016, the elders decided to remake the adult classes. They believed the church needed to move into a new way of thinking and acting. They saw the need for leaders, new and old, to have freedom to lead the whole church and not be pigeon-holed with groups that were tempted to think in old, territorial ways. They felt the church was ready to take the next major step of seizing a renewed identity.

Leadership proceeded without adequate discussion and conversation. Unsurprisingly, the most dominant adult class took this as an attack upon their own identity and refused to buy into a corporate vision for the future. They retreated into a defensive stance and declined to participate.

While the discontinuation of these groups was like a faith-filled move toward a renewal of the church's identity and mission, the leaders' lack of involvement with this major group doomed the process to failure. Ironically, this one group's answers during the appreciative inquiry project were among the most influential in shaping the ensuing themes. This group helped rewrite the church's story, but its members now turned inward rather than embracing a new, outward mission.

This ongoing struggle points to the greatest potential downfall of any attempt to move an inward-focused congregation toward greater participation in God's mission. While appreciative inquiry can create the trajectory for mapping out congregational change, it does not overcome the potential weakness of a leadership vacuum. Nor does appreciative inquiry make easy the arduous task of working with people who often behave in less than ideal ways. Just as Moses could not instantly lead the people from Egypt to Canaan, we too must struggle to guide our people through the wilderness. Tools like appreciative inquiry can help set the compass. But the hard work of managing, leading and guiding must still be done by those who tirelessly refuse to give up.

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