Bringing the generations together:
The role of Appreciative Inquiry in a local church’s transformation for mission

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is gaining in popularity and used as a tool for researchers to gain insight into the narratives that fuel a system. It is also becoming known as a methodology that allows holistic, system wide transformation. This paper documents the use of AI in a local church as a key tool used in the rediscovery of its missional imagination. The church was heavily conflicted and AI was employed to encourage various parties to begin to listen to each other and find areas and dreams that were held in common. The background and context of the church is explored and shown to be in need of adaptive (rather than technical) change. The AI questions used and the format of discussion groups is outlined and evaluated. Initial missional endeavours that arose out of this process are recorded. Concluding remarks are made about AI and its effectiveness in guiding a conflicted local church towards health, a positive outlook for its future, a stirring of a missional imagination and examples of how this began to lead to engagement in local mission.

Introduction

The story of CBC reflects these demographic changes and I want to briefly explore these for two reasons:

1. For the purposes of this paper this will help with understanding this particular context
2. I think this case study can be generalised to many similar contexts across Australia

Camberwell Baptist Church (CBC) is a 120 year old church, situated approximately eight kilometres east of Melbourne. The church was founded when the suburb was a small rural outpost however the extension of tram and train lines in the early 1900s saw Camberwell grow significantly. Today it is a bustling middle/inner suburban residential, educational and retail centre.
Several of the older people in the church have been members of the church for longer than fifty years. They are now moving into their later years and long to see their church continue. The younger people in the church are typical of the demographic renewal occurring in what has now become an upper-middle class area. They are mostly professionally qualified and feel that they live in a different world (high mortgages, job insecurity, globalization, technology, educational levels, etc.) than that of older church members.

**Background/Situation of CBC**

Camberwell Baptist Church was founded in 1891 and grew from its inception. It was thriving by the 1920s as Melbourne boomed and sprawled outwards in an easterly direction. Records of the children’s Sunday school, shows the hall was packed with hundreds of young people. As these young people grew up, sporting teams and youth societies were started. The current sanctuary was started in 1939 as many of these children were approaching the age for marriage.

After the Second World War, changing demographics show a flood of what were to become “Baby Boomers” from 1946 onwards. Three important social developments occurred in the next years that were to shape the church climate.

First, the “Boomers” that grew up and filled the church throughout the 1950s and 1960s eventually married and generally moved five to ten kilometres in an easterly direction to settle. These years were also the era of the establishment of many churches in these suburbs further out from the centre of Melbourne.

Second, the gradual movement of the younger generation away from the area enabled the older generation to keep things the way they had always been. Consequently, there wasn’t much internal pressure to modernise the church’s worship services. The older musical style kept other younger people from joining the church.

Finally, at the time of the greatest possibility of change for the church, they called a renowned biblical expositor to become their pastor. This gifted preacher quickly filled the church with older and more socially
conservative people. The legacy of this climate lasted two or three decades until recent times.

Therefore preference for style of church life and mission at CBC was represented in the conflicting generations. Both groups within the church made demands typical of their preferences, particularly in the area of church music. Over time generational preference became conflictual and at times turned to outright hostility. Numerical decline followed both the demographic changes within the area and also the toxic system that developed which was not attractive to newcomers. As a consequence previous pastors resigned, church meetings were divisive, denominational consultants were called in for help and an Intentional Interim Pastor (IIP) was appointed.

Using Appreciative Inquiry to move from technical to adaptive change

AI was introduced when CBC was at a point where the technical changes previously employed were not working and often only fuelled conflict. The attempted technical changes taught by any number of populist churches and organisations added a level of pain that was destructive and actually divided and inhibited the system from moving towards meaningful, adaptive change.

This was the challenge for this church in this context if it was going to meaningfully engage in mission in Camberwell let alone become healthier as a system.

Heifetz identifies when an organisational climate is in need of moving from technical to adaptive change, “Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs or behaviour.”

Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky identify the sorts of organisational signals that flag if adaptive leadership is required. These include: a persistent gap between aspirations and reality; the responses within the current repertoire are inadequate; difficult learning is required; new
stakeholders across boundaries need to be engaged; longer timeframes are necessary; and disequilibrium is experienced as a sense of crisis starts to be felt.

There were three primary and deep reasons why adaptive change was needed at CBC.

First, Western culture is going through profound change and the decline and aging of churches is common.

Second, technical solutions alone will not enable a local church to move toward missional faithfulness in the new world that is emerging.

Third, technical options ignore and often violate the system’s patterns and rhythms. They call for either simple or complex changes and do not bring out the best of the church system that currently exists and gives life. Often they risk expatiating its’ death rather than rejuvenation and rediscovery.

Here we move specifically towards Appreciative Inquiry. The AI methodology is designed to bring life as described by Watkins and Mohr,

 Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the “life-giving forces” that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. It is a journey during which profound knowledge of a human system at its moments of wonder is uncovered and used to co-construct the best and highest future of that system.\(^3\)

AI was employed in this situation at CBC because of its intention to find the good in an otherwise conflicted system. Sue Annis Hammond comments, “The major assumption of Appreciative Inquiry is that in every organisation something works and change can be managed through the identification of what works, and the analysis of how to do more of what works.”\(^4\)

The people of CBC were already beaten up enough – and that hadn’t worked. Susan Star Paddock adds,
In troubled times it’s easy to focus on what’s wrong, but the usual problem solving approach to life often provides more discouragement than effectiveness. Our brows knit in concentration on the negative, while the answers to our problems elude us. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) reveals that those answers are often already present in our experiences. AI helps us explore when things have worked well, when things were at their best, and identify the causes of success.5

Introduction of AI at CBC

At the commencement of 2005 AI was explained to the Church Leadership Council. The church leadership had been heavily conflicted and needed a path to find common ground. The need for better communication and listening skills within the church and from the leadership, was articulated and consequently the church responded positively to the nature of AI and its epistemological undergirding with gratitude and hope. The ten assumptions about AI were explained.6

It was this suggested that Quarterly Church Meetings, which had been the points of open conflict, become the entry point for the introduction of AI. The church needed to move conversations toward sources of life and gratitude.

Two key questions were designed for discussion in mixed age groups at the Quarterly Meeting. The first question enabled the folk present to share and listen to personal experience:

**Question 1.** Reflecting on your entire experience at Camberwell Baptist Church, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?

A second question was designed to identify at a deeper level, other stories and memories that resided in the churches’ collective memory:
**Question 2. Reflecting on your entire experience at Camberwell Baptist Church, when has the church seemed to be at its best? Describe what it was like? How or why did it occur? What happened? How did it feel?**

A large majority at the meeting enjoyed the opportunity to talk and listen. At the following Leadership Council meeting time was given to record the narratives and themes that were emerging. This was designed to ‘hear’ the listening process and also equip the leadership group for continued listening. The leadership were then asked to conduct further informal, cross-church, discussions that could explore more deeply the themes that were emerging. The Leadership Council struggled with this greatly.

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process continued on. At this point the church still had underestimated its significance. This is probably because stories of the past tend to be understood as dry history lessons and reminisces of the “good old days.” Stories that were emerging were retold on the cover of the churches weekly bulletin for added emphasis and reinforcement.

The majority of CBC’s history shows that technical solutions (musical style, solid leadership, building programs, gifted preachers, etc.) have carried the church forward. Therefore it was an initial disappointment in the AI implementation to realise how few of the leaders in the church bought into it. It was not so much that they rejected AI because they enjoyed the listening processes. Their challenge was that once the listening was done, they quickly reverted to applying technical solutions to adaptive challenges. For AI to work... the Leadership Council were forced to learn to listen to the people they were called to represent in their decision making. It was an important lesson to find that this research process (which is overtly biased towards being appreciative) does not necessarily avoid hard issues. In this case, in a healthy sense, it held the Leadership Council where it didn’t want to be. It had to learn to listen.

The church continued to revisit similar AI inspired listening times throughout that year at each quarterly meeting. Business items were
reduced to brief periods of each meeting in favour of the AI initiated conversations. For example, in August when the Annual General Meeting (AGM) fell due, arguments over budgets and elections were foregone in preference for conversations. For the first time in many years the church enjoyed a smooth and uneventful AGM.

At the AGM the following question was discussed in small groups:

Looking back over the various decades of this churches’ life and witness what have been some of the highlights where God has clearly been evident?

Responses started with the 1990s, and people spontaneously reflected on some of the highlights that still resided in their living memory. The church then did the same for the 1980s and 1970s, etc. This was so that the church could discover how far back its memory went and what narratives were foremost in people’s memories.

Two questions were selected for the November meeting in order to capture the positive group dynamics and conversations now functioning at quarterly meetings and direct the conversations towards imagination for a shared future:

Question 1. What are the essential, central characteristics or ways of life that make our church unique?

Question 2. Make three wishes for the future of our church. Describe what the church would look like if these three wishes came true?

The orientation of these two questions was towards the dreams and wishes that the members had for their church. These dreams and wishes were deeply connected to the memories that were revived in the first AI directed meeting ten months earlier in February. The music and
service format used in the church were not mentioned (these were topics that previously divided deeply).

Possibilities for a missional imagination were developing and ideas and experiments that emerged included:

- Concern for ongoing and increasing hospitality to new immigrants to Australia
- Recognition of the need for a deeper prayer base and spiritual rhythm throughout the life of the church
- A desire for the youth ministry to again be thriving with youth from the local community. This led to the employment of a youth worker/pastor to coordinate this area.
- Priority for developed small group life throughout the week with a focus on local neighbourhoods
- Discussions about how the church property could be redeveloped to support missional endeavours as well as the ministries in the church, including the creation of a neighbourhood house
- Many people wished to continue the connectedness between generations, nations, and genders in the different activities of the church rather than being divided off into separate areas
- A ‘Teaching English as a Second Language’ ministry was developed for new migrants, especially overseas students who were particularly vulnerable
- The church kindergarten was ‘reclaimed’ as an important part of the churches ministry to local families
- A children and young families worker was employed to coordinate the churches growing interest in ministry to this area

Concluding Remarks

1. Pastoral leadership, in any conflicted church, is a huge challenge. AI was a valuable tool that enabled a family system to move with trust in technical solutions towards adaptive change. The AI process was profoundly healing for many parts
of the church. The differing generations came to enjoy being together to listen and pass on the narratives running deeply within the church.

2. The AI process enabled the church to transition from toxic and conflicted and to begin a journey together towards engaging in the mission of the Gospel.

3. The AI process was successful at bringing a diverse collection of people from different cultures, traditions, nationalities, ages, and theological convictions together in conversation and partnership. Whilst many in positions of leadership struggled to “get it,” many others throughout the church appreciated AI, and the hopes and conversations it enabled. The narratives that emerged from AI allowed a wonderful, God stimulated “counter-narrative” to emerge that is continuing to renew CBC.

4. Finally, AI enabled the church to imagine mission and engage in mission both, within its existing structures and programs and also in new ways.

Biography

Andrew Menzies is Principal at the Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave (A Recognised Teaching Institution of the Melbourne College of Divinity) and was Senior Pastor at Camberwell Baptist Church from 2005 to 2010.

Endnotes

6 Branson, Mark Lau, Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change, (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004), p139, The ten Appreciative Inquiry Assumptions are: in every organisation, 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; organisations are heliotropic; outcomes should be useful; all steps are collaborative.