

Healthy, Vital Congregations Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Practicum

Thomas R. Hawkins
Assistant Chair, School of Technology
trhawkins@eiu.edu
217-581-7426
Eastern Illinois University (600 Lincoln Ave. Charleston IL 61920)

Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training (AIFT) dates and location
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Brief description of the organization, group, or community you worked with.

I worked with First Presbyterian Church of Charleston, Illinois. It is a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation with a worshipping community of approximately 120 people. Most of the congregation consists of university faculty and administrators. My spouse, Jan, and I are installed as co-pastors of the congregation. She serves 3/4rds time and I am 1/4 time because of my full-time, tenured faculty position at the University. We have now served this congregation for ten years. It has a budget of approximately \$250,000 and has recently completed most of the items in its second five-year strategic plan. In speaking with Jan, we thought that this would be an opportune time to engage the congregation in planning for the next three to five years using Appreciative Inquiry rather than the more traditional strategic planning approaches.

List the names and/or category of stakeholders you included in the Core Group, the cross-section of people that helped you identify the topic and modify the interview guide.

Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations are governed by a group of elected leaders who serve as a Session or what in other polities would be called a church council. At First Presbyterian Church, this group consists of nine people elected in rotating classes of three members each. The group is relatively inclusive of all constituencies within the congregation. There are five women and four men. Two members are under 40. One member is over 65. The remaining members of the Session are in their 40s and 50s. Some have been in the congregation their whole lives; others have joined the congregation in the past three years. Members of the Session served as the Core Group that identified the topic and modified the interview guide. They represent an inclusive, democratically chosen cross-section of the organization. The group's size – nine people – was also appropriate for the task.

What was the positive topic that the Core Group identified for inquiry? What method did you use to help them identify the topic?

The Session meets monthly. At the November meeting, we engaged in an exercise similar to the “root success analysis” that was presented during the training at Lone Star College. On a large sheet of newsprint, I drew a tree trunk and roots. Green post-it notes were provided so that, when we were ready, everyone could add “leaves” to the tree. On the newsprint, people were invited first to name the trunk. Several suggestions were generated and placed on the trunk using other post-it notes. The various responses were consolidated and reduced to about three options. After some discussion, the Session decided to name the trunk, “Healthy, vital congregation.”

We then worked with the roots of the tree using a similar process. Using post-it notes on a separate whiteboard, people listed some of the roots necessary for being a “healthy, vital congregation.” Many options were generated. These were narrowed down to four or five “roots” using a process in which participants were given a certain number of colored dots to place on the items they thought most important. They could place one dot on several different post-it notes; or they could place all their dots on one item of great importance to them. In the end we decided upon four roots that included good communication, growth opportunities, opportunities to serve others, and effective leadership.

We then used post-it notes to place “leaves” or the results of a healthy, vital congregation on our tree. These generated many ideas and pictures of what a healthy, vital congregation would be doing. After everyone had placed their leaves on the tree, we together discussed what our “root success analysis” suggested as a positive topic for conversation with the whole congregation.

The Session determined that the positive topic would be “How can First Presbyterian Church best assist all people in their lifelong journey of loving, knowing, and serving God and neighbor?”

This process took approximately two hours, which was slightly longer than our usual meeting length of 90 minutes. We took a few remaining minutes to assign future planning to a smaller group of individuals within the Session. Some took responsibility for working on the interview guide; another volunteered to work on publicity; another member agreed to work on set-up and refreshments for a planned congregational gathering.

Attach or include the modified interview guide they used, i.e., the generic interview guide slightly modified for the positive topic of the inquiry.

- See attachment “interview protocol”

What method of interviews did people use to inquire into exceptionally positive moments, face-to-face paired interviews or some other way?

The interview protocol was developed by the smaller group and brought back to the December Session meeting. The full Session engaged in paired interviews around the questions. After this “test run” the interview guide was slightly modified into the document that is attached.

In mid-January a congregational forum was held after extensive publicity and personal invitations from the Session subgroup assigned the task of gaining participation. Approximately 60 people gathered in late-January on Sunday afternoon for a four-hour congregational forum.

After an overview of the processes and some preliminary icebreakers, people were invited to form pairs and interview one another. Directions for the paired face-to-face interviews were shared, two Session members briefly demonstrated before the group the first question so everyone had a model for how to proceed. Then participants were given 50 minutes (25 minutes for each person) to conduct the interviews.

Attach or include a list of the Life-Giving Forces (what they MOST wanted to create MORE of) that the group identified in the stories they shared.

After the paired interviews, people were invited to gather around tables of 6-8 people to discuss the interview data. Partners in the paired interviews were asked to join separate tables so they were not in the same group. Table groups were given instructions on sharing a summary of their interviews and writing key life-giving moments on a flipchart that was placed beside each table. After generating these life-giving moments, tables were invited to step back and name some life-giving forces – what they most wanted to create more of in the congregation.

-Attached is a list of the life-giving moments and the life-giving forces generated by the tables

Attach or include the Provocative Proposition(s) the group or organization created from the LGFs.

- Attached is a list of provocative propositions created from the LGFs

Attach or include the Strategic Intentions the group or organization developed to realize the Provocative Proposition(s) they created.

- Attached is a list of strategic intentions created from the provocative propositions

Impact or Results: What organizational, group, or community attitude, process or structure changes have people made as they move toward realizing the provocative proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their strategic intentions or initiatives or pilot projects? What stories of success can you share?

Strategic Intention #1 (We are a congregation that experiences the praise of God and prayer for the world at the center of our life together...)

- Instrumentalists have been incorporated into at least one or two Sundays each month with a positive response from the congregation
- Jazz Sundays have been scheduled and held quarterly, with a very strong positive response and request for more frequent incorporation of this musical style in worship.
- New PC(USA) hymnals were purchased using memorial funds and were dedicated in September, 2013.

Strategic Intention #2 (We are a congregation that welcomes and fully includes all persons...)

- An internal audit of the building was conducted to identify non-ADA compliant steps and ramps. In July, ramping that was ADA-compliant was installed on the ground floor between two wings of the building.
- A contract for \$14,000 was signed to upgrade the elevator between the two floors of the building.
- Working with a local vendor, the congregation's webpage was upgraded and made more visually attractive. A link to a Facebook page was created. The Facebook page and the webpage are maintained by the church's administrative assistant, who was provided with

additional financial compensation and training to assume these tasks. The church's webpage link is www.charlestonpcusa.org

Strategic Intention #3 (We are a congregation that loves children and youth...)

- A team of volunteers has been organized to provide a Saturday enrichment program for children at least once each quarter.

Strategic Intention #4 (We are a congregation that values opportunities for people of all ages and stages of life to experience Christian community and to grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God...)

- An adult study focused on contemporary social and political issues was organized and well-attended from April through June, when it was suspended for the summer months. Issues discussed included: cybersecurity, use of drones, immigration reform, gun control, and other issues.
- The outreach and fellowship committee rented the local community pool for one Friday evening and sponsored a family swim night in July.
- The outreach and fellowship committee sponsored a summer potluck picnic and vesper service at a local state park that was attended by nearly 50 people.

Strategic Intention #5 (We are a congregation that makes a difference in the world and in our community. We provide material support for projects from which we will never benefit personally because we are called to be messengers of Christ's love...)

- A week-long mission trip to the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Depot was sponsored in June. Participants helped prepare flood buckets, hygiene kits, and other emergency/disaster materials for warehouse storage and shipping both nationally and globally.
- A mission trip to a local PC(USA)-related home for behaviorally disordered youth was sponsored in October. This trip was targeted for those who could only attend a weekend-event rather than a full-week mission trip.

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We are a congregation that makes a difference in the world and in our community. We provide material support for projects from which we will never benefit personally because we are called to be messengers of Christ's love.

- Two individuals volunteered to coordinate a Books To Prisoners collection project. They approached the local public library about participating in this project. So far over 50 boxes of books have been collected and forwarded to persons incarcerated in Illinois prisons.
- An individual in the congregation has volunteered to coordinate a project that collects needed items for a local day camp/school that serves the developmentally delayed.

What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

The Provocative Propositions are placed on the Session's (Church Council or governing board) agenda on alternative months. Discussion takes place about what progress we are making, what

successes we have had, and what steps we need to take in order to live into these propositions more fully.

Stories about the projects we sponsor are regularly reported in the church's monthly newsletter. They are also highlighted in an email communication sent by the co-pastors each week to the entire congregation.

What did you wish for the inquiry? What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation? What was your "personal best" experience related to facilitating the inquiry?

Jan and I have served this congregation for ten years. After such a length of time, there is a tendency for both the congregation and its leaders as well as the installed pastors to become too comfortable. We hoped that using an appreciative inquiry approach would help generate new energy and provide new direction and challenges for both the congregation's leadership and for us. It certainly exceeded our expectations in this regard.

I would describe my "personal best" as occurring in the early phases of this process. The congregation's leadership has a strong orientation to traditional forms of strategic planning. It has an almost instinctual habit of thinking in terms of deficits and gaps that must be closed. Endorsing a strength-based approach is counter-intuitive for them. This project also occurred in the midst of the university's process of adopting a new strategic plan, which was very much the traditional approach in which gaps and deficiencies were identified and addressed. Convincing the congregation's governing body to risk something very different presented the largest challenge I faced in this process.

Have you received permission from the "client" or "clients" to tell us their story? In other words, does Company of Experts.net have permission to share this story with others? If not, please try to obtain this so others may learn from your story. If you could please answer each question as if telling us a story. Attach any materials that you may use such as power points, agendas, etc. It helps for us to "experience" your facilitation. Also, if you take pictures and we may use those, please include them.

You have permission to share this story with others.

IDENTIFYING LIFE-GIVING EXPERIENCES

With a partner in the room, interview one another. Use the space on the page to make notes. You will need these notes when you report your interview results at table discussions. The basic interview questions are:

I.

Tell me a story about the best times that you have had with First Presbyterian Church when it was encouraging you to love, know, and serve God and your neighbors. Looking at your experience, when did you feel most excited about your involvement in this experience?

II.

Talk for a moment about some of the things you value deeply, specifically, about First Presbyterian Church when it is at its best in helping you love, know, and serve God and your neighbors. When you see First Presbyterian Church at its best, what about that experience do you value most? What is the single most important thing that First Presbyterian Church has contributed to helping you grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God and neighbor?

III.

What do you experience as the core value of First Presbyterian Church? Give some examples of how you experience this core value.

IV.

(A) What three wishes would you make to heighten the core strengths of this organization in helping you love, know, and serve God and your neighbors?

(B) If there were one thing you never wanted to see changed about this congregation, what would it be?

(C) What single small change could we make now that would have a big impact on leveraging our greatest strengths as a congregation in how we help people love, know, and serve God and their neighbors?

Some Suggestions for Your Interview

1. Let the person you are interviewing tell his or her story. Save your story for when the roles reverse.
2. Be genuinely curious about the other person's experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
 - Some questions you can use to probe further are:
 - Tell me more about
 - What was going on that caused you to feel that way?
 - What makes that important to you?
 - How did that affect you?
 - What did you contribute to that experience?
 - What was First Presbyterian Church doing that helped you do this?
 - What were other people doing that helped you?
 - What do you think was really making it work?
 - How has this experience changed you?
3. Watch your time. We will give you a two-minute warning before roles switch. Make sure you pace your time so that you can answer all four questions before the roles switch.
4. While we are sharing the general information we gather, be sure to clarify anything that is confidential. Also, when we share information at tables, NO NAMES are to be shared, only the general information and stories you gather.

LIFE-GIVING MOMENTS

Below is a list of the life-giving moments that were generated out of the interviews.

- When we went on our mission trip to rebuild homes after Hurricane Katrina
- When we went to Camp Carew for a mission weekend to rebuild camp cabins after the windstorm
- Helping with Soup Stop to feed hungry people in our community
- singing in the choir for the Christmas cantata
- teaching a children's class on Sunday and forming relationships with them
- serving as a liturgist/lector in worship and looking out at the congregation as I spoke
- the welcome I received from the pastors when I came for the first time after my divorce
- the welcome I received here even when people know we are a gay couple
- an opportunity to sing music from around the world, even from cultures I don't know well
- worship and prayer services who have held outdoors, like our pet blessing or summer vespers in the park
- potluck meals like the Harvest Dinner or Easter Breakfast or Pentecost Picnic when we all bring something to share and eat together
- when we do something for others beyond ourselves, especially when they are in real need.
- worship that allows for silence and isn't too busy with words and movement
- study groups by our pastors where we are allowed to share our doubts and not told what to believe or do
- when we have really opened up to each other and shared things about ourselves we were afraid to say for fear of being judged, and being accepted instead

LIFE GIVING FORCES

We want more

1. Opportunities for serving others,
 - a. some may be mission trips to serve others in need elsewhere
 - b. some may be regular opportunities to give financially to support projects that help others in our community and around the world
 - c. some may be regular opportunities to give in-kind gifts to support projects that help others in our community and around the world
2. Diversity of music styles and "tones" in worship: voice, instrumental, silence, global, classical, contemporary
3. Communication technologies that help us engage in 360-degree communication within the congregation about what we are doing and to the community around us that helps them know opportunities to participate in what we do and who we are
4. Settings where we can gather to share meals with one another, share our ideas and experiences with each other, learn from and with each other

PROVOCATIVE PROPOSITIONS

We are a congregation that experiences the praise of God and prayer for the world at the center of our life together.

- We value the Lord's Supper as an open table where all are welcome.
- Our worship includes a thoughtful examination and enactment of our faith through scripture, music, preaching, and prayer.
- Our worship is participatory, seeking new ways to include the gifts of children, youth, and adults.
- We have an adult choir that leads the people in prayer and song rather than offers a "performance" to the congregation as audience.
- We fully utilize the new *Presbyterian Hymnal* to expand the range of music we sing, including traditional, contemporary, and global songs.
- Classical, jazz, traditional, and contemporary music styles are blended together in worship on a regular basis to appeal to an inclusive range of generations and experiences.
- In addition to vocal song, we enrich our worship with an ever-changing mixture of instrumental music.
- We seek opportunities outside our main Sunday worship service to gather for prayer and praise.

We are a congregation that welcomes and fully includes all persons.

- We want our building to be truly handicap accessible, including a welcoming handicap entrance and a real elevator and as few interior barriers as possible.
- We reach out and invite those outside our congregation to know about us and become part of us through an up-to-date webpage, the use of latest technology, and continued use of traditional media such as individual mailings and newspaper announcements, including personal invitations to those we know.
- We seek to model and encourage formal and informal conversations that foster non-judgmental and respectful dialogue across theological, political, socio-economic and other differences.

We are a congregation that makes a difference in the world and in our community. We provide material support for projects from which we will never benefit personally because we are called to be messengers of Christ's love.

- We sponsor mission trips for all ages on a regular basis.
- We foster giving opportunities for in-kind projects such as hygiene kits, Christmas shoeboxes, and other projects.
- We schedule giving opportunities for projects that help others such as Marion Medical Mission (wells in East African villages), Blankets+, Two Cents for Hunger, Malaria Nets, and other projects.
- We teach and model generosity and stewardship of all our gifts in ways that promote mission and ministry.

We are a congregation that loves children and youth.

- We include children and youth as full participants in the life of the congregation.
- We seek to create opportunities for children, youth, and their parents or caregivers where they can grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God.
- We seek to attract young families through ministries such as a children's music program, a children/youth theater program, parents day or night out, service projects and fellowship events.
- We seek ways to relate to and include EIU students and young adults.

We are a congregation that values opportunities for people of all ages and stages of life to experience Christian community and to grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God.

- We offer small group opportunities on Sunday, throughout the week, and online for fellowship, study, and outreach. We are especially interested in groups that examine current events and their moral or ethical implications.
- We schedule regular all-church events where we build community, intentionally invite newcomers, and those who might become active participants in our congregation such as our Harvest Dinner, Summer Pool Party, game nights and Easter Breakfast.

STRATEGIC INTENTIONS

We are a congregation that experiences the praise of God and prayer for the world at the center of our life together.

- *The worship committee and music director, in consultation with our co-pastors, will seek to expand our music variety by adding services periodically that incorporate jazz and other nontraditional music in ways that are faithful to our tradition and set us apart from the number of congregations in our community that utilize solely contemporary praise music.*
- *The worship committee and music director, in consultation with the co-pastors, will develop a plan for regularly including instrumentalists on first Sundays of each month. They will especially emphasize the gifts of children and youth who are instrumentalists in our congregation.*
- *The Session will purchase the new Presbyterian hymnal, which will broaden the options for song to include global music and praise music.*

We are a congregation that welcomes and fully includes all persons.

- *The building and grounds committee will complete an internal audit of our building to eliminate remaining barriers to accessibility throughout our facility, insuring our facility is ADA compliant.*
- *The building and grounds committee will review the condition of our current elevator between ground level and the second floor and insure it is safe and hospitable.*
- *The outreach and fellowship committee will contract with a vendor to update the appearance and content of our church webpage so that it communicates to our own members and our community more clearly.*
- *The outreach and fellowship committee will develop a Facebook presence for the congregation to better communicate among our members and friends.*
- *The personnel committee will work with the church's administrative assistant to insure she is fully equipped to continually update the content on the church webpage and Facebook page.*

We are a congregation that makes a difference in the world and in our community. We provide material support for projects from which we will never benefit personally because we are called to be messengers of Christ's love.

- *The mission committee will identify, recruit, and implement a one-week mission trip to a PC(USA) project outside our immediate region within 2013.*
- *The mission committee will identify, recruit, and implement a weekend mission immersion experience somewhere in our immediate region within 2013*
- *Since one of our members has a child currently incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections, we will initiate a project in collaboration with Books To Prisoners that collects books (novels, dictionaries, and non-fiction books) for distribution to prisoners incarcerated in the penal system.*

We are a congregation that loves children and youth.

- *The faith formation and spiritual development committee will implement quarterly opportunities for children and youth to gather on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon for an*

extended experience of faith formation where they can engage in a mission project, prepare a skit or musical number to share in worship, or experience Christian community.

- *The faith formation and spiritual development committee will meet with the worship committee to explore and implement specific plans for how to insure our children and youth feel fully included in worship experiences.*

We are a congregation that values opportunities for people of all ages and stages of life to experience Christian community and to grow in the love, knowledge, and service of God.

- *The faith formation and spiritual development committee will work with T.O. and A. B. to initiate a short-term 9:30 Sunday adult study focused on current events and their ethical and theological implications.*
- *The outreach and fellowship committee will plan a summer picnic at Fox Ridge State Park to provide an opportunity for outdoor worship and a potluck meal in the summer, a time we traditionally have not scheduled fellowship events.*
- *The outreach and fellowship committee will work with the faith formation and spiritual development committee to rent the Charleston Rotary Pool for an evening the pool is reserved for families and their children for swimming and fellowship.*
- *P.L. and pastor Thomas will design a series of post-worship programs entitled “faith and film” where interested people can stay after worship, share a light lunch in our Fireside Room and then discuss a contemporary film’s theological and ethical issues.*