A Note about the Theory: The thesis of Appreciative Inquiry is that an organization (such as a congregation or some group within a congregation) can be constantly kept thriving and recreated by its conversations. AI builds upon a congregation’s best stories. It is not chiefly a planning method. It is a new way of seeing and creating. And if that new creation is to feature the most life-giving forces and forms possible, then the conversations must be shaped by appreciative questions. These are very different from what happens in a group whose approach to their life together is to identify and solve problems. If your committee or other group is interested to infuse the positive spirit of AI in your way of being together, you might see how you could adapt the following steps for your use:

Step 1 – Interviewing Each Other
This is very different from having a group discussion. It involves individuals really reflecting thoughtfully on certain kinds of questions, and also listening to each other. The questions are some variation on the following:

- Describe a time when the congregation (or group, etc.) operated or performed really well. What were the circumstances? What was your part? How did you feel about it?
- What do you value most about this congregation (or group, etc.)? What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important here? What are the best features?
- How has this congregation (or group, etc.) made a difference in your life? How has it affected you?
- Make three wishes for the future of this congregation (or group, etc.). (Notice that this is purposefully open-ended rather than asking what you would like to see changed or stay the same.)

Step 2 – Extracting Themes
This step is much easier if notes on the interviews have been kept – better yet if the answers to each question are sortable, such as on different index cards. A small group sits down with the written interview notes and looks for themes that recur. Themes may be expressed explicitly, or they may appear more subtly in metaphors or recurring images or repeated turns of phrase. In other words, this step is interpretive. It is a mining job. The people who do it need to be perceptive, preferably not strict literalists. They need not to have an agenda of their own but be open to whatever is to be discovered in the data. If their initial read of the data yields many more than about five themes, they probably need to go back and look for ways to reduce the number to five or fewer. The product of their work is a statement on each selected theme that may be a short paragraph or may be a page or more. The statement fleshes out the theme to describe it in some detail and say what its components are, what is important about it, etc.
Step 3 – Creating Provocative Proposals
These are descriptions of the future as if it were the present. They are not proposals in the usual sense of saying: “The Board should do this” or “the Minister should do that.” Instead, for each theme statement, the group working on that theme writes up a vision of the future wished for in relation to that theme. One Provocative Proposal may contain multiple elements. It may be about the future six months from now, a year from now, or five, or possibly ten years, but probably not further out than that. The idea is to be thought-provoking, to stretch or challenge or innovate. At the same time the Proposal needs to be something likely to excite people and produce passionate engagement. The more vivid examples to appeal to the senses and the imagination, the better.

Step 4 – Implementing the Proposals
Some group or body takes on the task of designing a plan for making each Provocative Proposal (vision of the future) come true, seeing that the plan is put into action, and then keeping an eye on the results to see when adjustments are appropriate – or when it’s time for another Appreciative Inquiry cycle to swing into motion. In other words, AI is not a process that a group does once, once and for all. It is a way of being, thinking, and working together that becomes constant so that the group is always more or less engaged in some step or other.

Resources – The QUUest Bookstore has ordered a few copies of the two books noted below and is prepared to order more if people are interested. All you need to do is ask.

- *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, 2d ed., Sue Annis Hammond (Thin Book Publishing Company, 1998). As the title suggests, this book gives a brief account of AI theory. It is geared not specifically to congregations but to organizations generally. If my two-page summary sparks your interest, you could use this book as the next step to discover whether you want to investigate more deeply.

- *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, Mark Lau Branson (Alban Institute, 2004). This is the book that First UU’s Transition Team used as a detailed guide throughout the Sankofa Project.

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