



Pastoral/Congregational Review The Appreciative Way

ORIENTATION TO THE APPRECIATIVE WAY

"The goal of an evaluation or review process should always be to improve the ministry of a congregation and the effectiveness of its members and staff. Through intentional reflection and collaborative discernment... done in the context of the congregation's call and vision, pastors, leaders and people all gain insight, discern new priorities and experience empowerment" (Jill Hudson, *Evaluating Ministry*, Alban Institute).

The hope is that pastoral reviews will 1) motivate and inspire pastors to grow in effectiveness and 2) strengthen the relationship between the pastor and congregation as together they seek to carry out the congregation's vision and mission.

To accomplish this, the Appreciative Way¹ shifts from a problem-based to a strength-based approach, while also identifying areas for growth in ministry. It begins by building on a pastor's strengths out of an awareness that what we focus on tends to become our reality. The Appreciative Way's primary focus is to identify "what is life-giving" or "what is working" so we can maximize it, rather than to ferret out "what is wrong" so we can "fix" it.

Meeting in focus groups, congregants are invited to tell stories of their church and their pastor at their best. The congregation gives thanks for God at work in the past and the present, seeking to build on this foundation as the pastor and congregation together look towards God's future. Thus the review tilts towards being *formative* (future-oriented) rather than *summative* (describing the past).

The Appreciative Way does not seek to avoid problems, but rather looks towards what will promote or nurture "success" rather than assigning blame for "failures." It draws out "what is life-giving" and empowering so it can grow, hoping to avoid negative spirals that weaken or enfeeble pastors and the church's mission. This approach is a corrective to review processes which have focused so heavily on "what's wrong" that good pastors and congregations have become paralyzed and weaknesses in ministry have been magnified. A goal is to build on a pastor's strengths, and work with his/her weaknesses in such a way that they lose their negative power by asking the question: "What resources would you need to increase your effectiveness in this area?"

¹ Appreciative Inquiry was initiated by David Cooperrider, and developed for church settings as The Appreciative Way by Rob Voyle of Clergy Leadership Institute. See <http://www.clergyleadership.com>. The description presented here comes from Rob Voyle's workshops and from the book *Core Elements of the Appreciative Way* by Rob and Kim Voyle, 2006, available through their website.

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada provides these revised guidelines after using the Appreciative approach to pastoral/congregational reviews in a variety of congregational settings for several years.

REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS (longer version)

1. Describe a time in the past year [or other period being reviewed] when you felt especially pleased to be part of this congregation and its mission and ministry. What did you value most about the congregation in that situation?
2. Recall a time in the pastor's ministry [during the period being reviewed] when you felt s/he was at her/his best. Describe that situation. What was it about the pastor's ministry that you especially appreciated or found to be particularly effective?
3. From your perspective, what are the two or three most important contributions that the pastor is currently making to this congregation's mission and ministry?
4. Given your knowledge of the pastor's gifts and our congregation's current vision and expectations:
 - a. where do you think the pastor should be focusing his/her energies over the next several years? (If possible, explain your thinking in terms of the congregation's vision and expectations.)
 - b. in which area(s) would you like to see the pastor grow in ministry?
 - c. What gifts does the pastor have that we are not using, which could contribute to our spiritual growth and to the mission and vision of our congregation?
 - d. how can we as a congregation strengthen our pastor's ministry and our ministry as pastor and congregation together?
5. Name two or three places where you believe God's Spirit is moving, calling us as a congregation to grow spiritually and in our ministry and mission. If the congregation discerned the same, what role might the pastor play in leading us in these directions? What role might the congregation play?

REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS (short version)

About our congregation:

1. What aspects about our congregation do you appreciate the most? Tell a story to illustrate.
2. In what area of our congregational life and mission would you like to see more growth?

About our pastor:

1. What aspects of the pastor's ministry do you especially value? Tell a story to illustrate.
2. In what aspects, if any, would you like to see the pastor grow in ministry?
3. How can we as a congregation strengthen our pastor's ministry among us?

An expectation is that the pastor will respond to a parallel/enhanced set of questions as part of the review, perhaps preparing something in writing and then sharing it in conversation with the review committee. This could be designed into the process as a focus group with review committee members and the pastor participating. Here is a sampling of questions:

REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTOR'S REFLECTIONS

1. Reflecting on your ministry at this church over the past year [or other period being reviewed], recall a time when you felt especially effective, engaged or energized in your ministry. Describe the situation. What did you value most about yourself in that situation?
2. When you are at your best in pastoral ministry, what about yourself do you value? What gives life to your ministry?
3. What is it about the congregation that you appreciate most?
4. What are the two or three most important contributions you believe you are currently making to this congregation's mission and ministry?
5. Knowing who you are, who the congregation is, and the congregation's current vision and expectations, where do you believe you should be focusing your energies over the next year or two? What gifts do you have which the congregation is currently not using, which could contribute to the spiritual growth and the mission and vision of the congregation?
6. In which area(s) of ministry would you especially like to grow? Name two or three goals for your own growth in ministry. Include at least one goal related to your spiritual growth.
7. What resources could the congregation offer that would make your future pastoral ministry here more effective, meaningful and satisfying?
8. Name two or three places where you believe God's Spirit is moving, calling the congregation to grow spiritually and in its mission and ministry. If the congregation discerned the same, what role might you play in leading the church in these directions? What role would you like to see the congregation play?

Some review committees like to have this self-report from the pastor and discuss it with him/her prior to the focus groups meeting; others ask the pastor to complete it before the focus groups but don't have the conversation with the pastor until after the groups have met. *In either case, it's important for the pastor to complete his/her self-report before the focus groups meet.*

It's important for the review committee to see where the pastor and congregation basically say the same thing, and even more important to note any areas where they differ significantly in their responses.

As a review committee, prepare a realistic set of recommendations for the pastor and the congregation for the next year or other appropriate period of time. Present these as part of the report (*see bottom of p. 4*).

DOING AN APPRECIATIVE REVIEW IN GROUPS: A SUGGESTED PROCESS

1. **Set up groups of 8-12 people in the congregation for storytelling, using questions such as the ones on p. 2.** The groups will need 60-90 minutes to meet, depending on the number of questions. Here are *several different ways* to set up groups:
 - Devote a youth/adult Sunday school hour to this with groups meeting concurrently.
 - Set aside several evenings, giving youth and adults the opportunity to sign up for a time that works for them. The church council and elders could be a group.
 - Instead of involving the whole church, form several focus groups. Participants could be chosen randomly or because they work with the pastor in a specific ministry area.
 - Consider having each group meet at a different time so the pastor can be present to hear the stories and perspectives presented. [See pros and cons on p. 6, #4].
 - If this group approach to storytelling is too big a change for some, an alternative could be for those persons to respond to the same questions in writing.
 - **Important note:** Other church staff members should give their feedback via interviews with review team members, **not** by participating in a focus group.

People tend to respond better in natural affinity groups, or if they have had opportunity to choose their group. Some people may feel more comfortable filling in a questionnaire ahead of time and bringing it along to the group; they can hand it in to the review committee if they wish (it may include things that don't get said in the group).

Important note: Meet with the pastor to get his/her input on the process and the questions. This could happen by the pastor attending some review team meetings.

2. Assign a leader and a recorder to each group and orient them ahead of time to their role.

Gather all the leaders and recorders together ahead of time for a training session. As part of the training, have them respond to the questions in the format of a focus group. That way, they will not be as tempted to give their own opinions when they are leading groups. When their time comes to lead and record, they should stay out of the discussion and concentrate instead on leading and recording!

3. If this kind of group leadership is unfamiliar in your congregation, consider inviting an outside resource person to assist with the orientation. See Appendix A on p. 7 for more instructions for group leaders.

AFTER THE STORYTELLING SESSIONS

Gather the recorders' notes, and have someone collate them.

- Name the stories in a brief, shorthand sort of way.
- Make lists of what people value most about the congregation (#1), what is especially appreciated about the pastor's ministry (#2), important contributions the pastor is currently making to our mission and ministry (#3), where the pastor's energies should be focused (#4), areas for growth (#4), gifts of the pastor currently not used (#4), where God's Spirit may be moving (#5), and the pastor's and congregation's role in moving in those directions (#5).
- Compare the above with the pastor's own reflections.
- Prepare a report for feedback to the pastor and a briefer report for the governing board and congregation, noting especially the congregation's part and the pastor's part in moving in the direction of the Spirit's leading.

TIMES WHEN THE APPRECIATIVE APPROACH USING FOCUS GROUPS SHOULD BE MODIFIED OR NOT USED

- If it's thought that there may be serious dissatisfaction with the pastor by an unknown number of people;
- If group leaders are not available with the capacity or willingness to reframe questions or to stop a person who is sharing inappropriately (See Appendix A, p. 7: "Ways to intervene");
- If the congregation has significant numbers of people who likely will not speak for themselves due to cultural expectations, habit, personality, age or other factors.
- If a passive/aggressive style is a significant factor in the congregation, it may be difficult to elicit the full range of views that are actually there. Or, if the congregation is used to reviews as a place to "dump" grievances about the pastor, it may be necessary to introduce another approach more gradually.

In some such situations, focus groups could be combined with a written questionnaire adapted from D.3 or D.4 in this packet.

"NEGATIVE FEEDBACK" AND THE APPRECIATIVE WAY

When Pastor Congregation Relations Committees (PCRC) are introduced to this way of conducting pastoral reviews, the question they most frequently ask is: "But what about the negative feedback that pastors need to hear so they know how people feel about certain things and so they can improve?"

Here are some thoughts:

1. The appreciative approach builds the trust and connection that is needed in order for the pastor and congregation to be able to deal with the difficult things. One pastor put it like this: "When that trust is there, and I have a sense of what people appreciate about me and my ministry, it's easier for me to

hear and work with the challenges and concerns." Without a basis of trust, negative concerns tend to shut the conversation down, and the pastor may no longer be able to hear and work with them or may feel unfairly critiqued and defensive.

2. This resource now includes a question that asks directly about areas of growth for the pastor, maintaining a forward-looking direction. Also, the questions for the pastor's own reflection are deliberately parallel to the questions asked in the focus groups, so the PCRC can compare the pastor's understanding of his/her role, priorities, and growth areas with the congregation's, and have a fruitful conversation about expectations.
3. This approach encourages respondents to give the kind of feedback that will help pastors know what is expected of them. For instance, a comment such as "I hate the way the pastor does parent/child dedications" does not help a pastor know how to improve. But if that comment is followed up by a thoughtful response to the question: "What would a meaningful parent/child dedication look like for you?" then the pastor has something to work with.
4. When all the data is in, the appreciative approach invites the PCRC and congregation to ask: "How can we build on the pastor's strengths to live out our mission together?" and "Which of our pastor's weaknesses is it important to work on, and which areas can be addressed in other ways so as to benefit as much as possible from his/her strengths?"

EMERGING LEARNINGS FROM THE APPRECIATIVE APPROACH

As Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) has worked with this approach over a three-year period, some observations and learnings have emerged:

1. Numerous congregations experienced the appreciative focus groups as "a breath of fresh air." Participants enjoyed themselves, learned new things about their pastor from other people's stories, and found the process energizing.
2. Several pastors noted how confirming (and energizing) it was to hear others identify their best gifts in ministry!
3. Several pastors noted that they received a clearer sense of where the congregation wants them to focus their energies for the next term than by any other way they had been previously evaluated.
4. **There are pros and cons to having the pastor present in the focus groups.** If the pastor is present, s/he needs to be prepared to hear raw data which would otherwise be filtered by a review committee. If present, the pastor is not there to "explain" or "defend" his/her actions, but rather to hear stories and perceptions about his/her ministry first-hand. Hearing positive stories and other appreciations can be very energizing for the pastor. However, in some situations, the pastor's presence may inhibit the group. Some congregations have deliberately provided both focus groups where the pastor will be present and groups which he/she will not attend.
5. Most churches which combined a "traditional" written questionnaire with appreciative focus groups noted that the feedback from both methods corroborated each other. In the rare instance where there is a noticeable difference in the tenor of the feedback from the two methods, the review committee needs to consider carefully why this is so.
6. The general principle that a congregation should deal with any serious known difficulties or conflicts surrounding the pastor-congregation relationship before embarking on a pastoral review applies with this approach as well.
7. This approach puts together quite naturally a focus on both the pastor and the congregation.
8. This approach is indeed formative rather than summative — it is oriented towards the future, seeking clearer vision and goals for the ongoing ministry of the congregation and pastor together.

9. These questions have been successfully adapted for reviewing a pastoral couple, or for doing reviews of pastoral team members concurrently or in close succession. Several congregations based a planning retreat on the feedback to question #5 on page 2.

—Contributed by Muriel Bechtel, MCEC Area Church Minister and Sue C. Steiner, Pastoral Review Consultant Revised Winter 2010

APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP LEADERS

Remember that your role is to facilitate the sharing by members of the group, not to venture your own or other people's opinions or to tell your own or other people's stories!

At the beginning of the session:

- Open in prayer. Remind persons of our reason for gathering and our process for this storytelling session and beyond.
- Distribute extra copies of the congregation's vision statement, the pastor's job description, and the questions for this session.
- If the pastor being reviewed is present, explain his/her role (usually to listen only, or perhaps to respond to the same questions after others have spoken – not to explain or defend his/her role or actions).

As the session is underway:

- Do some version of "going around the circle" with the stories. Enable each person to get their story told without interruptions by others. Invite respectful listening. Some persons may pass at first, but then think of a story after others have spoken.
- After everyone who wishes has responded to a question, go on to the next one. We are not here to "compare" stories or to try to reach consensus.
- Ask clarifying questions to draw a person out if need be. "I really like the way Pastor A preaches" could be followed up with "What is meaningful for you about her preaching?"
- Keep time sensitively but firmly, reining in folks who wish to speak repeatedly to the same question.

Ways to intervene as necessary:

- Reframe negative comments. The statement "I can't stand the way Pastor A leads the prayer time" could be followed up with: "What makes the prayer time meaningful for you?"
- Be alert to people speaking for others: "My cousin said that Pastor A only visited him once when he was in the hospital." Invite people to tell their own stories. Stop a person from speaking for others if necessary. (Suggest that those with information to share who are not part of a focus group submit it in writing).
- If someone shares their perspective about something which is not the pastor's responsibility (ie, something related to the worship committee), ask the recorder to write it down and pass it on to the appropriate body: "We've heard that and pass it on."
- If a person is sharing information that should be kept confidential, stop them and ask them to write it down and hand it in; similarly if a person starts sharing a long story of a negative experience with the pastor.
- Feel free to give people essential information they seem not to have. For instance, if a person complains that the pastor is available only three nights a week, it's fine to remind them that this is part of the congregation's covenant of understanding with the pastor. Offer to pass this person's perspective on to the PCRC if they wish, and have the recorder write it down.

In closing:

- Thank the members of the focus group and close the session in prayer.

APPENDIX B: MORE ON THE APPRECIATIVE WAY

Here, for further reference, are some of the basic assumptions of the Appreciative Way, adapted from *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, Sue Hammond, 1996:

- In every society, organization or group, something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality (i.e., if we focus on what works, that is likely to increase; if we focus on what's wrong, we risk entering into what Rob Voyle calls "a negative spiral of enfeeblement").
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past with them.
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past. We need to avoid denying the "dark" side of our past, but we also need to be reminded of what is best.
- The language we use [including the kinds of questions we ask] shapes and affects our reality.
- It is important to value differences.
- At any given moment, people are doing the best they know how to do.

Rob Voyle adds a few more assumptions in suggesting how to work in what he calls The Appreciative Way:

- Amplify what is working.
- Create and celebrate small successes.
- Praise the past and correct for the future.

RESOURCES FROM CLERGY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (Rob and Kim Voyle) Website:

<http://www.clergyleadership.com>

Book: *Core Elements of the Appreciative Way*. Clergy Leadership Institute, 2006.

Available from the website or 24965 NW Pederson Rd., Hillsboro, OR. 97124. 503-647-2382.

OTHER BOOK AND WEB RESOURCES

Branson, Mark Lau. *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Alban Institute, 2004.

Hammond, Sue. *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*. Thin Book Publishing, 1996.

Hudson, Jill. *Evaluating Ministry*. Alban Institute, 1992.

McMahill, David R. *Completing the Circle: Reviewing Ministries in the Congregation*. Alban Institute, 2003.

Website for the Appreciative Inquiry Commons, <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/>

Especially the section, AI in the Religious Sector.

2017