

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry (“AI”) is a way of using structured conversations and interviews to help a group build its future around what the group does best. AI is a way of seeing our life together as a church so that we focus on what’s going right—so there can be more of it. It’s more than just “positive thinking,” and it can take effort to reorient ourselves from traditional focuses on “fixing problems.” Using simple questions such as, “Tell a story of a time you felt most motivated and inspired,” and “What gifts does our church give best?”, AI conversations bring us in touch with the experiences that have most deeply nourished our spirits.

Where’s this coming from?

AI has been used to guide growth and “transformational change” for more than a decade in churches and companies. Prior to coming to First Church, Rev. David Keyes guided the UU Congregation of Atlanta through an AI process that preceded its ministry search and helped re-energize the congregation and “change the emotional climate.” The Transition Team at First Church, after learning about AI from reading and conversations with David and members in Atlanta, and conducting a brief “practice session,” has concluded that AI offers us a potentially exciting path into our future, too.

Where does this lead? AI will be an important step toward a new settled ministry. Also, AI offers renewal, a way of growing our trust, understanding, enthusiasm and shared purpose.

How does AI work?

Before “doing AI,” there are assumptions to understand. Here are some main highlights:

1. In every organization, some things (often many things!) work well.
2. How (and whether) a question is asked affects the life of the group.
3. Organizations turn toward what they focus on, and this either generates or saps energy.
4. We thrive when we carry forward the best in our histories.
5. Language creates our realities.

With these understandings, and more, the Transition Team will do the following:

- A. Prepare a set of three or four questions that will guide the member-to-member interviews.
- B. Facilitate interviews (30 - 45 min) among members, followed by discernment of unique and common themes in a small group right afterward, the notes from which will be collected.
- C. Looking for scope and depth (patterns) in the resulting notes, formulate a set of “Provocative Proposals”—each grounded in what we know we do well.

When will this happen?

In September, the Board convened the Transition Team and charged it with helping lead the church toward settled ministry. The TT spent October learning about AI. Church leadership interviews will begin in December, followed by member-to-member interviews in January and February. Examination of notes will follow through March, and the presentation of “Provocative Proposals” will be in May. This will allow a ministerial search committee to convene in the summer.

How can I learn more about Appreciative Inquiry?

It’s easy: You might start by Googling it. Then, there are two leading books on AI: *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, by Sue Annis Hammond, and *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*, by Mark Lau Branson. The Transition Team is arranging for both to be in the library and on the book cart.

Who is the Transition Team?

Rita Saylor (chair)
Carolyn Leap

Carol Burrus
Barbara Nelson

Dick Doughty
Al Sevcik

Emily Wagner
Rev. David Keyes

—Let us know if you have questions we might answer or explore together.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. —Philippians 4:8