Memories, Hopes, & Conversations….

As a student of leadership, I have been significantly impacted by the Appreciative Inquiry model—a process rooted in valuing the strengths (in contrast to weaknesses/problems) of an organization as it seeks to change and transform. While much has been written on the AI approach from the marketplace perspective, little exists for those of us who have a passion for the local church. Enter *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* by Mark Lau Branson. In this book, you will find a fresh, hope-filled, and practical pathway to shepherding the process of change in your church.

Title: ***Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change***

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Copyright Date: **2012**

Book Description:

Memories, Hopes, and Conversations is a powerful resource that introduces readers to Appreciative Inquiry—a transformational organizational change process that focuses on the strengths of a group. The second edition has been revised and expanded throughout, featuring important new materials on leadership and missional frameworks, as well as five chapters from pastors describing the transformational experiences of their churches and neighbors using Appreciative Inquiry. The book offers a dynamic overview of the Appreciative Inquiry process, real stories of change in action, and a wealth of practical resources for churches to pursue this journey of appreciation, imagination, and change.

Book Quotes:

The goal of "Appreciative Inquiry" is to change the conversation—to stimulate the thinking and the imagination of congregations—through a process that focuses upon the honorable, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable. (ix)

The thesis of Appreciative Inquiry is that an organization, such as a church, can be recreated by its conversations. 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. A church's leaders make decisions about what to talk about, what questions to ask, what metaphors to use—and every such initiative shapes the present and the future. I believe Appreciative Inquiry offers a remarkable way to hone those conversations and questions. (xiii)

Sample Appreciative Inquiry Questions:

1. Reflect on your entire time at (church). Remember a time when you felt most alive, most motivated and excited about your involvement. Describe the circumstances and your involvement. Who was involved? How did you feel? What was happening?

2. Don't be humble—this is important information: What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our church—your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?
3. What are the most important things our church has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference? How did it affect you?
4. What have been the most important spiritual experiences, lessons in belief, or steps of faith that have occurred for you at our church? Describe what and how they happened. What was most helpful?
5. What are the essential, central characteristics or ways of life that make our church unique? What is most important about our church?
6. Make three wishes for the future of our church. (12)

Rather, Appreciative Inquiry provides an organization-wide mode for initiating and discerning narratives and practices that are generative (creative and life giving). The AI guides and nourishes ("re-constructs") the organization along the line of its best stories. Here is one of my favorite descriptions:

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. (19)

Many forms of organizational development assume that the job of leaders is to find the problems and fix them. (21)

When this "problem-solving" approach dominates, most discussions are about problems and inadequacies. This is what is called a "deficit model." (21)

Appreciative Inquiry assumes that all organizations have significant life forces, and these forces are available in stories and imaginations. Further, by bringing these resources into the organization's conversations and planning, major changes can be implemented. In other words, by discovering the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of an organization, participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most hopeful images of the future. (23)

Appreciative Inquiry Assumptions

1. In every organization, some things work well.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Asking questions influences the group.
4. People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
5. If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.
6. It is important to value differences.
7. The language we use creates our reality.
8. Organizations are heliotropic.
9. Outcomes should be useful.
10. All steps are collaborative. (24)

The "reality" of an organization is defined by whatever participants think about, talk about, work on, dream about, or plan. (25)

The unknown easily creates fears. When an organization approaches change by talking about everything that is wrong and all of the innovations that are to be adopted, participants express their fears in resistance. Confidence and trust can be built when questions create direct links with the organization's best and most appreciated narratives. (25)

Organizations embed their purposes and goals in their structures, and there is a strong tendency for the structures to continue even after they cease being effective means of embodying the organization's goals. (26)

There are five basic, required processes for Appreciative Inquiry.

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.
2. Inquire into stories of life-giving forces.
3. Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry.
4. Create shared images for a preferred future.
5. Find innovative ways to create that future. (28)

Appreciative Inquiry seeks to develop not merely a short-term process for change but new, long-term congregational habits, habits arising from an attitude of focusing on the positive. The biblical framework for Appreciative Inquiry can be summed up with the word *gratitude*. (43)

Change always requires information, and that need to gather and interpret data forces the first, critical decision: Would we focus on obstacles, dysfunctions, and deficits, or would we focus on generative qualities, successful events, and positive narratives? In Appreciative Inquiry the first process is "choose the positive as the focus of inquiry." (66)

Four action steps or phases: Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, Innovate. (67)

In Appreciative Inquiry processes, a provocative proposal is an imaginative statement about the future, crafted as if it were already experiential and generative. (86)

Provocative Proposals

1. Are stated in the affirmative, as if already happening.
2. Point to real desired possibilities.
3. Are based on the data.
4. Create new relationships, including intergenerational partnerships.
5. Bridge the best of "what is" toward "what might be."
6. Require sanctified imaginations, stretching the status quo by pushing boundaries.
7. Necessitate new learning.
8. Challenge organizational assumptions and routines. (87)

Steps Toward Provocative Proposals

1. Focus on an area of the church's life and mission.
2. Locate peak examples.

3. Analyze factors that contributed to the faithfulness/goodness of the church's life and mission in that specific area.
4. Extrapolate from the "best of what is/was" to envision "what might be."
5. Construct a proposition of what is possible, expressed as if it were already true. (89)

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.

For those who would like to become acquainted further with the **Appreciative Inquiry** model, here is a helpful article: http://positivitystrategist.com/appreciative-inquiry-overview/