# Appreciative inquiry (a mission catalyst tool)

By Darren Cronshaw

A very useful approach to seeking to understand and transform congregational life is ‘appreciative inquiry’. This is an approach to understanding an organisation and its culture by asking questions about where it functions at its best. Rather than looking for weaknesses that need to be fixed, it enquires into its positives that can be built on. It helps to ask where a group feels like they perform at their best and what parts of their history they are most proud of. It can also help a group to come to moments of realisation about their strengths and areas of potential growth. Strengths based questions give energy to possibilities. These sort of questions produce amazing insights into churches. Here are some of the appreciative inquiry-inspired questions I have used:

* When you think about how your church has related to your community and the world, what do you think has been most important?
* When you are at your best, how do you express God’s love and mercy and justice to others?
* What does your church do, in terms of mission, which other churches might be able to learn from?
* Where has your congregation been at its most innovative?
* Where has your congregation been most innovative, particularly related to mission, and what has been most significant, most helpful in reaching out beyond the church?
* When has your church been at its best in imagining new directions and introducing change?[[1]](#footnote-1)

These questions prompt constructive conversation. They are also subversive because they get people thinking and talking about the most important and valued parts of a church’s history and mission. I learned appreciative inquiry from Mark Lou Branson who applied it to his congregation and teaches it as a congregational transformation tool.[[2]](#footnote-2) You can ask appreciative questions about anything you want to investigate – worship, small groups, pastoral care, church meetings, hospitality – but when you want to imagine new missional directions it can be most helpful to ask questions focused on mission and imagining new directions.

Think of an issue that your congregation is wrestling with. Test out the appreciative enquiry/strengths based approach by framing and asking questions on that issue.

(Feedback your learnings to the BUV Mission Catalyst team. We would love to hear from you)

*Another Approach to Appreciative Inquiry*

**What is Jesus brewing?**

My co-writer Kim Hammond and I, Darren, appreciated our friend Darryn Altclass and his adapted use of subversive appreciative inquiry questions.[[3]](#footnote-3) When he was raising funds for community development projects as part of his missional community network called “Third Place Communities” in Tasmania, Darryn made T-Shirts to sell with the wording printed on them ‘What would Jesus brew?’ At one level the T-Shirts urged people to think about what caffeine or alcoholic beverages Jesus might drink with friends. At another level he was asking people to think about what Jesus was brewing and fostering in their local community. It is an appreciative inquiry question to ask ‘What is Jesus brewing here?’ It relates to a deeply theological understanding of *missio Dei* – the mission of God – that God is already working in mission in our communities. Our task is to ask and discern where God is at work so we can join in with what God is brewing.

Appreciative inquiry questions are a terrific tool for any of us functioning as mission catalysts. As Hirsch and Altclass suggest, ‘A catalyst inspires people to connect and talk about things that matter. In a ministry sense, catalysts facilitate discussion and dreaming around participating in God's missionary endeavour.'[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Darren Cronshaw, *The Shaping of Things Now: Emerging Church Mission and Innovation in 21st Century Melbourne* (Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag, 2009), 252-257. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Lou Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kim Hammond and Darren Cronshaw, *Sentness: 6 Postures of Missional Christians* (Downers Grive, IL: IVP, forthcoming 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Hirsch, with Darryn Altclass, *The Forgotten Ways Handbook: A Practical Guide for Developing Missional Churches* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)