# **Appreciate** yourselves

How can you become the church you dream of? By talking about what you already do well, according to the creators of the Appreciating Church programme

In 2009, Jane Weedon had been the minster of her church in Welwyn Garden City for two years, and she had a problem. Despite her best efforts, she could not get the congregation to talk about the future of the church. They were happy to talk about their past, before huge changes in local industry reduced their numbers, but were reluctant to look to the future, as if afraid that they didn't have one.

Then she read a book by Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations* and was inspired. The book takes the principles of appreciative inquiry (AI) – which aims to transform organisations through more positive conversation – and applies them to church life. Used in international development and public sector organisations across the world since it was developed in the 1980s, AI helps groups to see their strengths and build on them, rather than focusing on problems. It starts by finding the right question to open a conversation, looks for the positive core of the organisation, and uses what people know they can do well to tackle what they want to do better. The book outlines how these principles can be used in churches, and Jane introduced them in Welwyn.

Jane called the process 'Collecting the Stones', inspired by the Bible story of Joshua setting up 12 stones at the point where the Israelites entered the Promised Land, to keep the story alive. The plan was to investigate and develop the church's vision for the future. Elders were trained in AI, and they came up with questions to ask every member of the church – good questions which got members enthused about possibilities and dreams, rather than focusing on problems. Cafe discussion mornings followed, exploring the themes that emerged from the questions, and so the church ended up with a series of

## 'How do we release that energy in our churches?'

'provocative proposals' about their future.

One of these themes, for example, was welcome. Church members identified that welcome was something they wanted to do better, and so, using what they knew they could already do, they ran a course exploring how to be more welcoming and open. That then led to discussions about extending the idea to include hospitality. How about replacing the welcome team with a hospitality team? What difference would it make if, instead of just putting a hymnbook in someone's hand when they arrive at church, we take responsibility for being hospitable?

Looking back, Jane reflects: 'Appreciative inquiry has greatly affected my ministry – from one-to-one conversations to big meetings. The energy flows once people start to recall the things that have been good for them and see how God's used them in the past and might continue to use them in the future.'

As a result of such experiences, a group of Churches, with financial backing from the United Reformed and Methodist Churches have created Appreciating Church, a practical programme with theological underpinning, to help congregations use AI. They worked on this with the advice and support of Tim Slack, the founder of the AI consultancy Appreciating People (and whose father Kenneth was a founding leader of the URC).

One of the developers of Appreciating Church, Fiona Thomas, is the URC Secretary for Education and Learning. She explains: 'AI starts by recognising that human beings want to do well. What we focus on grows, so if we focus on what's going wrong, we put that in the middle of all we do. With AI, you use your strengths to take you forward, and Appreciating Church is about applying that realisation to church life.

'It's also about learning to ask the right questions. The first question is fateful, taking you in a life-giving direction or a life-sapping direction. Imagine sitting with lecturers and asking them about the latest university policy change – they'll be miserable and talk about budget cuts and bureaucracy. Ask what's hot in their academic subject and they'll get excited, and that gives them energy to deal with the difficulties. So how do we release that energy in our churches?'

Fiona points out that AI is not simply about looking on the bright side. 'Of course difficulties and challenges exist and need to be addressed. AI builds up resilience to cope with them and see them in different way. It doesn't ignore problems, but it looks at what you can do about them, not what you can't do.'

Jane Weedon led a planning day at her church this year, and started by showing members what they had written about their dreams for the future back in 2010. 'They were really, really shocked', she says, 'to realise how much of those things we had accomplished in that time. If someone had come in and told them: "We are going to do all these things," they would have resisted it, but because it came from their own conversation developed naturally, it has just gained a life of its own and taken off.' ●

*ⓘ For more information about the Appreciating Church programme, visit www.appreciating.church. For more information about Appreciating People, visit www.appreciatingpeople.co.uk*

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