

***What Do Methodists Need to “Serve the Present Age” and “Fulfill Our Calling?”:
Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry***

The bias of nature is set the wrong way: Education is designed to set it right. This, by the grace of God, is to turn the bias from self-well, pride, anger, revenge, and the love of the world, to resignation, lowliness, meekness, and the love of God.¹

John Wesley used the terms “education” or “religious education.” Today, we express the same understanding in the terms “Christian formation” and “spiritual formation.” All of these terms essentially mean “making and maturing disciples for Jesus Christ.” What new approaches to “Christian formation” and “making and maturing disciples for Jesus Christ” are there to aid churches today to “serve the present age” and “fulfill our calling” as disciples?

Two different approaches that could be utilized in Christian formation in the twenty-first century are: Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry. How can congregations adopt these two perspectives and find ways to carry out the mission of the church and respond relevantly to our present age of diversity, secularization, and organizational angst? This paper explores the possibilities of utilizing Transformational Education techniques and Appreciative Inquiry dynamics to aid congregations in their informed response to our present age.

Both John and Charles Wesley felt that the Christian formation could be brought about through spiritual disciplines. Through their practices of private and public devotion and discipline, they came to a deeper kind of self-knowledge through self-giving love. Through their personal experiences and spiritual disciplines, they developed a methodology that enabled others to learn how to be a disciple and mature in the faith. While the Wesleyan methodology is still sound,

¹ John Wesley, “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children,” Volume 13, p. 476, as recorded in *The Works of John Wesley* [CD-ROM] (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1995), first accessed on May 27, 2007.

today's multi-cultural secular society seeks new forms of discipline, education, and experiential learning, in order to meet the demands of an ever-increasingly skeptical society.

I believe Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry are tools congregations may use to further explore Christian formation and self-awareness through corporate acts of discipline, devotion and sacrificial giving, to meet the needs of today's society. As the church responds to new developments in human history, culture, and global economics, Christian formation as envisioned through Transformational Learning designs and Appreciative Inquiry perspectives, may offer insights into how to reach future generations with the Gospel.

First, some definitions are in order. Transformational Education is an educational model which examines the contextual understanding of a particular issue, critically reflects on assumptions surrounding that issue, and validates the meaning of that issue by assessing reasons that lie behind the issue. The context may be biographical, historical, or cultural and the assessment can address what persons know and believe, value and feel.² The issue of Christian formation can be addressed in these terms – biographical (i.e., What has happened to the person to transform his or her attitudes, beliefs, and values as a Christian?), historical (i.e., What events from history can be cited as examples of societal or cultural paradigm shifts in understanding the Christian faith?), and cultural (i.e., How does the shifting interpersonal culture interpret the Christian faith and its relevance for future generations?).

In Transformational learning practice, Laurent A. Parks Daloz identifies four conditions of transformation: “the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and

² Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Learning As Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3-4.

opportunities for committed action.”³ In Christian formation, all four conditions must be met in order for persons to be transformed and become committed believers.

The second approach, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is defined as “an organizational development process or philosophy that engages individuals within an organizational system in its renewal, change and focused performance.”⁴ An article in Wikipedia states, “Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in a person, a situation, or an organization. In so doing, it enhances a system’s capacity for collaboration and change.”⁵ The four stage inquiry process is comprised of questions that relate to these areas: discover (identify organizational processes that work well), dream (envision processes that would work well in the future), design (plan and prioritize processes that would work well), and deliver (implement the proposed design).⁶ While AI focuses on organizations (like religious institutions), the inquiry process can aid individuals in finding new ways to understand the faith and mature them as disciples. This is Christian formation which is a process of deep spiritual searching, asking difficult questions, and evaluating options before committing to the Christian faith.

Both Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry are recent steps in the study of human behavior and culture. Both perspectives came out of different backgrounds:

Transformational Education out of education and sociology and Appreciative Inquiry out of

³ Laurent A. Parks Daloz, “Transformative Learning for the Common Good,” as printed in *Learning As Transformation* edited by Jack Mezirow and Associates, 112.

⁴ This article is licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License. It uses material from the *Wikipedia* article, “Appreciative Inquiry,” first accessed on July 7, 2007.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

business management, sociology and psychology. Congregations can learn from a variety of disciplines. Christian lives are not formed in isolation and thus the intersection of theology, psychology, sociology and education is vital for new insights into Christian formation.

Defining the Process: To see how Transformational Learning Designs and Appreciative Inquiry processes might work within Christian congregations, we must first define the areas of concern that exist in our present circumstances within local congregations. As a pastor of a small, rural, mid-Ohio church, some concerns I have experienced in my congregation are:

1. An unwillingness to change, i.e. “We’ve always done it this way; It was good enough for my grandparents, it should be good enough for my grandchildren.”
2. Financial burdens that reflect a lack of jobs and opportunities in the area. The financial crisis in the church is a predictor of the economic well-being of the surrounding communities. The burdens will continue to increase as younger persons and families move to areas where jobs and opportunities are available.
3. Lack of knowledge concerning what is and is not available in society, i.e., the congregation does not understand computers and the rapid technology advancements, child care safety issues, various outreach opportunities including mission work camps, handicap accessibility concerns, or social issues like domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and mental and emotional health concerns.
4. Isolationism in an increasingly global society. How we as Americans waste natural resources directly affects other nations and the world around us. Congregations are often centered on their own problems, “How are we going to serve the funeral dinner?” versus “What can we do today to positively impact the world as we serve this funeral dinner?” Using and recycling products that are environmentally friendly is one way to think outside the norm and beyond the local concern.
5. Inconsistencies in what we say we believe and what we do. Our values as Christians are not reflected in our actions as consumers, educators, or congregations. More people outside the church are questioning our commitments and beliefs, based on what they see us value as an organization and as individuals. Hypocrisy is everywhere, but our society is now demanding explanations for believer’s inconsistent behavior.
6. Addressing problems in such a way as to “cover up” the real issue and take care of the immediate need instead of looking for long term solutions and the reasons behind the problem or need. Programs are important in the life of the church, but we cannot address the problem of domestic violence with a “program,” and not look at the rise in violence in our church families and the underlying causes and effects in our society.

These are some of many concerns that define local congregations and their needs. Many

studies have been completed, like that of Loren B. Mead in *Transforming Congregations for the*

Future. Major efforts have been made to educate and inform congregational leaders and members concerning making and maturing disciples for Jesus Christ. Bookshelves are full of congregational “self-help books” designed to show a congregation how to grow and maintain a core of Christian disciples truly committed to the work of sharing the Gospel. Churches are borrowing concepts from a variety of disciplines in order to lead change in the organization. “Quest for Quality,” begun by W. Edwards Deming, is one such approach which was adapted by the United Methodist Church in 1993. All these efforts have been positive and at times, positively affect mission and ministry in exciting new ways. There will be more in the future. Both Appreciative Inquiry and Transformational Learning theories are now taught in United Methodist related seminaries. Unfortunately, while general boards and agencies and seminaries may utilize these approaches, the effects on how local churches work with these newer ideas, is nil. In order to be transformed as religious organizations, individual participants and members must be transformed in their personal lives. This will take maximum effort at all levels of Christian denominations. In order to transform the world for Jesus Christ, we must first allow Jesus Christ to transform our religious organizations and ourselves as Christian leaders. We must gain self-knowledge as Wesleyan and Methodist Christians, in order to identify our calling in society today. I believe Transformational Learning and Appreciative Inquiry approaches can aid in defining who we are as gifted and called believers within the Methodist system.

Transformational Education: Transformational learning theory is a model of education that not only informs, but challenges the learner’s previous assumptions and actions or inaction in a specified field of inquiry. The learner is faced with a problem or crisis or injustice. Through self-examination and the identification of feelings, the learner recognizes that “one’s discontent and

the process of transformation are shared.”⁷ This leads the learner to explore “options for new roles, relationships, and actions.”⁸ In this moment of transformation, new plans, approaches, and skills will be adapted by the learner in order to develop and implement the self-knowledge acquired in the overall process. Therefore, the model of ministry which utilizes Transformational Learning practice would be one that would –

1. Be lived out in a faith community, made up of small groups which would maintain responsibility and accountability structures. **(A mentoring community).**
2. Be asked to design practical expressions of caring for and aiding others to underscore the reality of the faith. **(Opportunities for committed action and the presence of the other).**
3. Conduct historical and current surveys of the local faith community and its surrounding culture. The more Christians understand their historic and cultural context, the greater their impact will be. **(Building a mentoring community and opportunities for reflective discourse).**
4. Confront assumptions about change and reflect on the need for transformation, personally and within the community of faith. **(Reflective discourse).**
5. Begin the process of Transformational learning by providing opportunities to enrich positive relationships within the community of faith and the society around it. **(Reflective discourse and the presence of the other).**

This model of ministry is *not* a “program” but rather a way to influence transformation in individuals and faith communities. This life transformation is Wesleyan at its core. John Wesley affirmed a theological link between ethical behavior and acts of justice with commitment to the Christian faith. Leon O. Hynson finds significance in:

. . . the way in which Wesley linked the theology of faith, justification, and sanctification together with the life of service and love to [human] kind. In other words, his theology and his ethics are inseparable; they are united in a precise organic relationship.⁹

When Transformational Education theory is applied to the Christian faith, relational ministry

⁷ Mezirow and Associates, *Learning As Transformation*, 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 33. [Brackets, mine]

will provide the basis for serving the present age and fulfilling our call to “make and mature disciples for Jesus Christ.” This is a way to produce holiness of *heart and life*, which is instrumental to sharing the love of God and transforming both individuals and society in a positive way. Spiritual formation necessarily involves transformation. To purposefully adapt the guidelines for Transformational Education in congregations, would be a way to insure that the members of that congregation would produce practical good works and continue as committed disciples for Jesus Christ.

Appreciative Inquiry: Appreciative Inquiry explores the positive experiences within organizations and develops ways to build upon the strengths of each individual, group and relationship within the organization. In *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney state, “Every organization was created as a solution designed in its own time to meet a challenge or satisfy a need of society.”¹⁰ This is true for the Christian church and especially true for the Methodist movement under John and Charles Wesley. The Methodists were born out of a time of societal unrest and divisive class struggles. The religious institutions of the 1700's were ill equipped to guide society and provide religious instruction to all. John and Charles Wesley felt called to serve their present age and meet the societal need for a way to worship that everyone, regardless of class, race, or religious background, could practice and fully participate in as Christian believers. The Wesley’s calling included ministry to the whole human being as well as all of society. As Methodists today, we are called to meet the same challenges and satisfy a real need in society. Appreciative Inquiry can be a part of that process of rediscovering our calling and meeting the needs of our society today.

¹⁰ David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (San Francisco, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005), 1.

According to Mark Lau Branson, AI “provides an organization-wide mode for initiating and discerning narratives and practices that are generative (creative and life giving). Then AI guides and nourishes(‘reconstructs’) the organization along the line of its best stories.”¹¹ Branson has done a remarkable job in adapting the Appreciative Inquiry process for local church use. His book, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, offers congregations a way to discover, dream, design, and deliver proposals based on the Appreciative Inquiry process. In one Appendix, Branson summarizes his “Five Basic Processes of 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.¹²

How can both Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry be used together in a local congregation to fulfill our calling to make and mature disciples for Jesus Christ while serving the present concerns of our society? I believe both approaches compliment each other and can be motivational tools for congregational change.

The Vision – Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry Combined: Congregations can most benefit by combining the “other-centered” Transformational Education theory and the positive-future focused Appreciative Inquiry steps, as they seek to understand the historical, cultural, and individual roles in the process of Christian formation. What would a combined approach include? Adapting both Transformational Education and Appreciative Inquiry, the

¹¹ Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute), 2004), 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 140.

model of ministry I propose would –

1. **Mentoring:** Include small groups which would maintain accountability structures and form a mentoring community.
2. **Memories:** Discover the strengths and positive qualities of the individuals, groups, and religious organization through sharing faith stories and relating positive influences within the small group structures.
3. **Mythical Imagination:** Define myths that preclude transformation and those that enable positive experiences. Describe what creative means can be used to build up the organization and provide a desirable future.
4. **Malleability:** The desire to transform and the knowledge that transformation is not only possible but practical and positive, is a key to the success of this step. Identifying ways that individuals, groups, and religious institutions, both past and present, have transformed, will enable the positive insights to be adapted for future use.
5. **Mission Outreach:** The challenge in this model is to move from an “inward” concern to an outward-centered mission. The most important aspect of ministry from Transformational Education is the “presence of the other,” not just in theory but in face-to-face, hands-on, experiential ministry. Without outer directed mission, the emphasis would continue to grow inward and not be accessible for future generations.

A sample of this model, based on the issue of domestic violence, might be composed of these elements:

1. **Mentoring:** Divide those interested from the congregation into small accountability groups which would examine the complex nature of domestic violence and its impact on those who survive, their families, and the faith community. In these small groups, there would be Bible Study, dialogues with survivors, and an advocacy process designed within each group. These groups would come together once a month to encourage one another, provide mentoring opportunities, and report their discoveries.
2. **Memories:** Share faith stories with survivors of domestic violence, looking for ways in which the faith community responded in appropriate ways to meet the needs of the entire family (including the abuser).
3. **Mythical Imagination:** Describe underlying myths concerning domestic violence (i.e., “No one in **our** church would ever be an abuser.” “We don’t know **any** victims of domestic violence.”) Define and create ideal scenarios of congregational intervention, helpful means to meet the real needs of survivors and their families, and educational tools to inform the congregation and general public about domestic violence and its causes and ways to help those affected by abuse.
4. **Malleability:** Conduct a congregational survey about ways the congregation had responded to other social justice issues and ways they feel they could respond to the issue of domestic violence. In the small groups, discuss the results and form teams to plan actions appropriate to the congregation’s responses. Evaluate process and progress and share success stories along the way.
5. **Mission Outreach:** Advocating for action and not only education is an important part

of the process that challenges the entire congregation in a variety of situations and degrees of involvement. Offering opportunities to volunteer at a local Domestic Violence shelter, or Victim/Witness Program is one way to understand “the presence of the other,” and provide needed ministry and outreach. Encourage the congregation individually and corporately to contribute regularly to local, state, and national organizations which provide shelter, programming and assistance to survivors and their families. Develop resources for financial help, referral services, counseling, clothing, food, and child care for those who need emergency assistance in cases of domestic violence. Provide space in the church building for survivors’ support groups and abusers’ accountability groups, and training sessions for community workers, showing the congregation’s hospitality. Update the church library, web site, and media resource library to include new materials on domestic violence and ways to help families caught in the cycle of violence. Commemorate “Domestic Violence Awareness” month (in October) every year with sermons, special speakers, mission work camps to victims’ homes or the local shelter. These are just a few ideas to help the congregation get actively involved in mission outreach and be oriented “outwardly” rather than have an “inward” focus.

Application for Faith Formation: This process has been designed to attract people who are “unchurched,” to the church by providing meaningful committed action in a faith based environment. The irony is that most growing up in our emerging culture are critical of anything that looks like “organized religion.”¹³ Once unchurched people do enter the doors of our churches, they often leave because they don’t feel welcomed, needed, or their own needs go unmet. The congregations I have served have worked diligently on ways to invite, show hospitality, provide opportunities for involvement in committed action, find out and meet physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those attending services. More often, the people who need to hear the Gospel message do not come to worship at all, thus they never meet Christians who are committed to the faith. Part of this model has the design taking the congregation members out into the community and inviting the community into the church building. Transformation can not begin if people do not respond to the Gospel message. By initiating models of ministry, like the

¹³ Dan Kimball, Mark Driscoll, and Leith Anderson, “Shape-Shifting Leadership: Three Kinds of Leadership for Three Different Situations,” as printed in the on-line version of *Leadership Journal*, copyright, Christianity Today, International, 2006. Accessed July 27, 2007.

five “M” approach presented within this paper, people who are on the fence about Christianity can see Christians being transformed by interacting with non-Christians to provide needed ministries and sort out the congregation’s identity as a faith community. I believe it is then that transformation and faith formation can occur. How do we “mold” persons in the faith? How do we “serve the present age” and thereby fulfill our calling as Christians? Adapting models of ministry from other disciplines and being in conversation with our culture surrounding us, is a piece of the answer to those questions. Unless we try new models of ministry, we will not fulfill our calling or serve our present age.

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