

Sankofa Bird -
RETURN AND GET IT

SANKOFA is expressed in the Akan language as "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki."

Literally translated it means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot".

Sankofa Report

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor

September, 2006

Introduction

With the departure of our long time senior minister in August, 2005, the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation began a two year transition period of reflection, goal setting and ministerial quest. In January, 2006 Rev Barbara Child, our Interim Senior Minister and the First UU Transition Team decided to initiate an “Appreciative Inquiry” project to engage the congregation in dialog to clarify our missions as a congregation and to clarify our needs for new ministry. We named the project the “Sankofa Project” after the mythical African Sankofa Bird that is said to fly forward while facing backward – It symbolizes our process of gathering the best of what our past has to teach us and carrying what we learn into the future.

This project let us involve a wide range of members (and friends) of the First UU congregation in an Appreciative Inquiry conversation that would collect information to be used for two major purposes: 1- To clearly articulate the goals and visions of the congregation and begin translating the vision into new programs or enhancements to existing programs; 2- To add information to the profile of our congregation to be submitted as part of the ministerial search. Setting our goals helps clarify the type of ministry needed as we move into the future.

Our primary resource for the Appreciative Inquiry process was the book *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations; Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*, Mark Lau Branson, Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia, 2004 (see www.alban.org).

This report describes the process we used to gather and interpret the Appreciative Inquiry data. This represents the first half of an Appreciative Inquiry process, culminating in a picture of what we want our congregation to look like in the future. The whole First UU congregation, from the Board of Trustees to individual members will now use this information to set specific goals and to identify the resources and the ministerial and lay leadership needed for implementation. One of the goals of this process is to incorporate techniques of Appreciative Inquiry into all of our day to day decision making activities.

Appreciative Inquiry Overview

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a process that helps organizations identify their strengths and clarify their vision. While we used an Appreciative Inquiry book specifically written about Church organizations, AI is a general tool for Organizational Development.

> In the words of its primary originator, Dr. David L. Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University, AI asks us to pay special attention to "the best of the past and present" -- in order to "ignite the collective imagination of what might be."
>
> *(from www.appreciative-inquiry.com , James Gregory Lord Cleveland, Ohio USA, consultant)*

“In Organizational development (OD), appreciative inquiry (AI) is a process for engaging people across the system in renewal, change and focused performance. The basic idea is to build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't. A proven benefit of the approach is its reliance on the acknowledgement of contribution at the individual level, which leads to trust and organizational alignment. Since the method creates meaning by drawing from stories of concrete successes and lends itself to cross-industrial social activities, it is enjoyable and natural to many managers, who are thought to be naturally social people focused on the bottom line. Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University. It is now a commonly accepted practice in the evaluation of organizational development strategy and implementation of organizational effectiveness tactics.
Appreciative Inquiry uses a 4-stage process focusing on:

> **DISCOVER:** The identification of organizational processes that work well.
> **DREAM:** The envisioning of processes that would work well in the future.
> **DESIGN:** Planning and prioritizing processes that would work well.
> **DELIVER** (or **CREATE**): The implementation (execution) of the proposed design”
>
> -- *From Wikipedia*

“In the years since the original theory and vision for "Appreciative Inquiry Into Organizational Life" was articulated by two professors at the Weatherhead School of Management (see David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, 1987) there have been literally hundreds of people involved in co-creating new concepts and practices for doing AI, and for bringing the spirit and methodology of AI into organizations all over the world. Commenting on her assessment of AI's uniqueness, a senior executive at one company recently said: "I know what Ai is about...it is about creating a positive revolution in change". And in words that echo the same thing, University of Michigan Professor Robert Quinn, in his acclaimed book Change the World writes: " Appreciative Inquiry is currently revolutionizing the field of organizational development."

> *-- from http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/ a web site from Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management.*

If you want to build a ship, then don't drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.

-- Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The First UU Sankofa Interview Questions

Our Appreciative Inquiry project followed guidelines in the Branson book mentioned in the introduction section of this report and borrowed heavily from his process.

The process revolves around pairs of people conducting conversational "interviews". The primary tool for this project, then, was a list of four questions to be used by pairs of congregants and staff who interviewed each other. The questions are designed to bring into focus what each person thinks is most important about the congregation, what we most appreciate, why we choose to be part of First UU. Our questions were:

1. Think back through your entire experience with the First UU congregation, when were you most alive, most motivated and excited about your involvement? What made it exciting? Who else was involved? What happened? Describe what you felt.
2. Don't be humble… This is important information. What are the most valuable ways that you contribute to our congregation— your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?
3. As you consider the UU congregation, what do you value most about First UU? What activities or ingredients or ways of life here are most important? What are the best features of this congregation?
4. Make three wishes for the future of this congregation.

Each question appeared on a color coded 5x8 file card. For each interview, one person asked the questions and wrote down the answers. Then the pair switched roles and interviewer became interviewee. Each interview was allowed 20 minutes (40 minutes for a pair).

The interviews triggered memories, led to ongoing conversations, raised energy and gave us data with more depth than the more standard sort of multiple choice survey the Search Committee had conducted and tabulated earlier.

Benefits of Appreciative Inquiry

Branson's book lists the following benefits a congregation can hope to achieve using the AI process during a ministerial search.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR THE CONGREGATION

1. Leaders talk about substantive, life-giving issues.
2. Many congregants participate in thoughtful, affirming interviews.
3. Many read and give assent to a series of provocative proposals.
4. Newsletter updates on process promote curiosity and anticipation around the edges of the congregation.
5. New energy and enthusiasm develops.
6. People find courage to try new things.
7. Search Committee produces exciting search packet accurately portraying congregation as knowing itself well, having a vision and sense of purpose, ready to pursue new ministry.
8. The asking of appreciative questions and formulation of provocative proposals becomes a normal way of doing business.

Step #1– Testing the Concepts

The first step in initiating the Sankofa project was to decide on the four questions and test them on ourselves (the Transition Team). After conducting the interviews, we were all very enthusiastic about the potential for this approach and began planning the next steps and a timeline.

Step #2 - Interviews with Congregational Leadership

In February, the Transition Team facilitated 40 Interviews with Board Members, Program Council Members and Search Committee Members. There was much positive feedback from these sessions.

Evaluation of responses: Four Transition Team members each took one question and summarized the 40 responses to their question. The summaries were combined and distributed for evaluation and discussion.

Step #3 - Forming the 'Sankofa Squad'

In February we formed the "Sankofa Squad", comprised of the whole Transition Team plus representatives from the Board, Program Council and Search Committee. This team of 12 people implemented the rest of the project.

The Sankofa Squad first reviewed the initial 40 interviews, tweaked the questions a little and set a goal for expanding the interviews to reach a goal of over 300 members. We also wanted to be sure to reach a range of ages, interest groups and perspectives in the congregation.

We finally concluded that the most efficient way to reach our goal would be to actually conduct the interviews during a Sunday service and April 30th was chosen as Sankofa Sunday. We tracked the names of people who took part so that we could make sure we reached our goals on surveying a range of types of people.

Step #4 - Sankofa Sunday

On April 30, 2006 both services were devoted to Sankofa interviews for everyone who attended the service (separate adapted questions were given to visitors). The Sankofa Squad facilitated the interviews and collected the responses.

340 people signed in

- 270 were on the member/friend lists we had printed up ahead of time
- 66 identified themselves as guests / visitors (although some had attended many times)
- 4 were associate members (youth members)

Of the 270 people on our lists:

- 232 were members
- 27 friends
- 4 spouses of members
- 7 listed as RE families (not members, but children in RE)

56 of the 270 are listed in the directory as having children of RE age, but we did not investigate to see if the children are registered in RE.

The Sunday also included New Member welcome, so we know there were new members present. Casual observation said there were also many long term members and a variety of ages represented.

Following the Sankofa Sunday, we facilitated interviews between all of the First UU staff members (during a staff meeting) and from some of the Middle School and High School youth (during an overnight at the church).

We also invited RE teachers to sign up for interviews at a special time in case some had wanted to take part but had missed the Sankofa service due to teaching responsibilities. No one signed up.

We decided that we had reached our goal of a broad population of responses from approximately 350 people total.

Distilling the Interview Responses

During May, four Transition Team members took one question each and summarized all of the responses, trying to capture unique perspectives and all deep feelings expressed in the interviews. The initial 40 leadership interviews were added to the larger data set.

[Visitor responses were summarized separately and can be made available to groups interested in hearing what visitors had to say about their experiences with religious organizations.]

The responses were distributed for review to all Board members, Program Council members and Search committee members who were all invited to take part in the analysis sessions.

Analysis

Analysis was carried out in four sessions with each session attended by as many as possible of members of the Board of Trustees, Program Council, Search Committee and Transition Team. Participants were:

5/31/06: Barbara Child, Betsy Francis-Connelly, Marion Holt, Becky Hoort, Rick Johnson, Lisa Lemble, Fran Lyman, Terry Madden, Tim Richards, Marshall Shearer, Sandy Simon, Nancy Sims [part of meeting: Bill Canning, Jim Lee, Craig Butcher]

6/8/06: Craig Butcher, Barbara Child, Bruce Gibb, Marion Holt, Becky Hoort, Gretchen Jackson, Rick Johnson, Fran Lyman, Terry Madden, Margaret Pekarek, Carol Shultheis, Sandy Simon, Nancy Sims, Spencer Thomas

6/15/06: Craig Butcher, Bill Canning, Barbara Child, Bruce Gibb, Marion Holt, Becky Hoort, Gretchen Jackson, Fran Lyman, Terry Madden, Margaret Pekarek , Marshall Shearer, Sandy Simon, Spencer Thomas, Joe Walls

7/6/06: Don Anderson, Bruce Gibb, Marion Holt, Gretchen Jackson, Fran Lyman, Tim Richards, Sandy Simon, Spencer Thomas

5/31/06 7-9pm	**Step one** of inquiry analysis (as described by Branson) - We broke up into 4 small groups to review the summarized responses from approximately 300 Appreciative Inquiry interviews with First UU staff and congregants. Each group was asked to focus on the first three questions and call out approximately five "themes" running through the interviews. The themes identified are listed in the notes from that meeting.
6/8/06 7-9pm	**Step two** – We reviewed the previously identified "themes" and broke up into new small groups to distill the themes. Then we agreed on 5 themes to develop into more fleshed out thematic descriptions based on the interview data. Volunteers took the information home, wrote the thematic descriptions and distributed the thematic description prior to the 6/15 meeting. The writers were: Terry Madden- Social Action; Spencer Thomas- Spiritual Quest; Sandy Simon – Resources; Fran Lyman – Community; Nancy Sims – Culture. The thematic descriptions are available in a separate document.
6/15/06 7-9pm	**Step three -** After a reading and brief review of the thematic descriptions, we broke into theme groups – Each of us chose which themes we would like to work with for developing Provocative Proposals. We worked with the thematic descriptions, the "three wishes" data, and a system diagram of First UU. The groups worked via phone/email to write up the provocative proposals and submit them by theme. The groups were: *Social Action* Terry Madden, Fran Lyman, Marion Holt *Spiritual Development* Spencer Thomas, Bob Hospadarak, Marshall Shearer, Becky Hoort *Resources* Bill Canning, Gretchen Jackson, Margaret Pekarek *Community* Sandy Simon, Joe Walls *Culture* Bruce Gibb, Craig Butcher
7/6/06 7-9 pm	**Step four -** All participants reviewed all sections of the Provocative Proposals and suggested revisions and ways to unify and present the document. Sandy Simon then took all sections of the proposals, added an introduction and combined all pieces into one integrated document that went out for revision to the group.
Nov 12, 2006 – Report to the Congregation	On Sunday, November 12th the ideas coming from the Sankofa project will be presented to the congregation and this report and the Provocative Proposals document will be made available to everyone in a very visible effort to involve every person in the congregation in the design and implementation phases.

Project Results – Provocative Proposals

The final Provocative Proposal document was sent out July 17, 2006 for final review. An update to that document and this report are the final products of the Sankofa project.

As active participants in the Sankofa project, the Search Committee had all of the Sankofa material other than this report at the end of July for use in writing the Congregational Record and for incorporating into data about the type of ministry we are hoping to find.

What happens next?

The Sankofa Squad carried out the first two steps of the AI process: **DISCOVER** and **DREAM** (see page 2). The Board and Program Council should be the primary drivers of the rest of the process, the AI steps: **DESIGN** and **DELIVER**.

In the Fall of 2006 we hope to:

Communicate: Make sure the themes and proposals are available at the Involvement Table and other ways considered effective for informing the congregation.

Encourage the Board to arrange a Sunday service where themes/ proposals are presented to the congregation and perhaps break into groups to discuss how each person can help to implement the proposals, and how the many small groups as well as leadership groups can participate.

Encourage the Board & PC to find a way to make sure that all small groups discuss how to participate in the discussion / actions coming out of the Sankofa project.

Encourage the Board and PC to establish a regular review of where we stand on reaching goals, and for incorporating this sort of inquiry process into future decision making.

Submitted by the 2005-2007 Transition Team:

Bruce Gibb, Marion Holt, Becky Hoort, Sandy Simon, Nancy Sims, Joe Walls

Attachments:

First UU Sankofa Project: Provocative Proposals

First UU Sankofa Project: Thematic Descriptions