

# POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CONGREGATIONS

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

Next to a busy two-lane road amid the rolling hills of south-central Indiana sits a small country church. Over the years, this congregation has experienced its share of highs and lows. Among the highs were significant growth in membership and building a new sanctuary. The congregation then suffered a startling decrease in membership. The loss of two-thirds of its members created a lingering cloud of malaise throughout the congregation.

While the pastor and staff navigated the challenges with grace and perseverance, they spent a lot of time reacting to every snag, setback and need. This took time away from the work of life-giving ministry. Clearly, it was time to regroup and refocus; not only as leadership but also as an entire congregation.

The pastor planned a congregational retreat. Several years earlier, the congregation conducted a successful retreat in a nearby state park involving key church leaders. With its simplicity and beautiful surroundings, the park provided a perfect setting to worship God, nurture good conversation and strengthen the bonds of fellowship. In a bold move, the pastor booked the entire park inn for two days. He announced the retreat to the congregation. Everyone was invited. He described the event as something entirely different from years past. Members needed only to bring themselves, he announced, and a covered dish to share. Without hesitation, an astounding 85% of the congregation registered.

Purposefully, the retreat had a different agenda, tone and character from previous ones. There was no outside facilitator, no preset agenda, no discussion of the budget, and no SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.

Rather than dwell on the congregation's problems and weaknesses, the group spent two days exploring the positive qualities of the congregation and its members.



Everyone, the pastor explained, had an equal voice. The group heard, honored and considered every contribution. Listening became more important than speaking.

The pastor encouraged members to talk from the heart about their hopes and dreams for their congregation. Members shared, discussed and celebrated stories about personal faith and experiences of community.

Instead of concentrating on negative forces at work in the congregation, the pastor encouraged everyone to focus on the gifts and blessings already present among the membership. They then used these positive assets to fuel a vision for the future.

The retreat was rich with affirming language, emotions and images of the





future. The pastor facilitated the weekend using positive change resources. These resources not only transformed the perspective and language of the staff, they also mobilized all the

members to think and act differently regarding its future. No longer would they complain or react negatively to difficult issues. Rather, the value of asking thoughtful and positive questions, listening with care, and affirming good work permeated the community. The stories became the “data” out of which dreams and plans for the future flowed. Throughout the two-day retreat, there was an atmosphere of deep faith punctuated with renewed friendships and laughter. For the pastoral staff, there was rediscovery of the joy of ministry and pastoral leadership.

Every topic raised at the retreat was important. The group brought forward and heard all ideas – even those that church decision makers had not considered, such as a playground. They redefined ministries in a way that included lay leadership. At the end of the retreat, there emerged greater clarity and energy for the future along with deep appreciation for the gifts and talents of individual members. As a result, the congregation reinstated small rituals, such as hanging of the greens and serving donuts on Sunday. Anxiety about the future disappeared, and the members pointed with pride how their church rediscovered its collective voice and co-created a future filled with hope and possibility.

### WHAT ARE POSITIVE CHANGE RESOURCES?

When the Center for Congregations first introduced its emphasis on Flourishing Congregations in 2007, the staff began directing congregations to positive change concepts and resources. More than 900 congregational leaders from 261 congregations in the state of Indiana have participated in learning about processes that change the way they view, talk about, and feel about their congregations. They learned the power of positive images, words and emotions and were equipped with helpful new tools to use in their congregations. They discovered new energy and passion for their congregations’ futures.

The true story that opens this piece demonstrates the power of positive change tools. It shows that the process of positive change<sup>1</sup> is about the search for the best in people, their organizations and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, positive change involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective and most constructively capable in economic, ecological and human terms. It involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential.

The process known as positive change often uses one or more of the following systematic approaches: Appreciative Inquiry, the World Café process and Asset Mapping. Each of these is predicated on the belief that negative and deficit-based thinking and acting within a congregation results in a downward spiral that blunts and distorts all that is truly best and truly blessed within the congregation. All of the processes focus on positive approaches and analysis.

As the story above illustrates, when a congregation engages in a process of positive change:



- members find their individual voices among the collective voices and know that they have a place at the table and something valuable to contribute;
- pastors and other leaders have an opportunity to examine their leadership styles and learn to embrace a capacity to build relationships and mobilize their congregation to think and act together, using both creativity and renewed energy for mission and ministry.

As the small congregation in southern Indiana discovered, positive change works especially well when the pastor and leaders consciously take on the traits, habits and mindset of positive change. This means:

- waiting patiently for answers to emerge;
- maintaining a positive attitude;
- engaging members in important conversations;
- encouraging all to speak in positive terms.

Focusing on the positive is more than “happy talk.” Positive change starts by asking a single, powerful, positive question, “What gives life when our congregation functions at its best?” That question, with its affirmative approach, sets the conditions for the goodness and strengths of an organization to emerge and serve as the underpinning for the answers or solutions to its challenges. For example, when you ask a positive question in response to a negative statement, it shifts direction and opens the door to new thinking and considering bright, non-negative possibilities. Leaders then build relationships by connecting people with good ideas.

That motivates congregational leaders to think and act using creativity and positive power. This gives rise to renewed energy for mission and ministry that results in a striking difference in a congregation’s view of itself, its view of how problems can be addressed, and its view of the world around it.

Positive change is not a one-time quick fix. It is an on-going process. When used throughout the life of a congregation, it becomes transformational in how that congregation speaks and imagines its current and future courses. Positive change shows leaders a fresh way of believing in, recognizing and continually valuing the inherent goodness of the organization and its members. An appreciative leadership style models an optimistic way of being and living together, because positive change is based on essential beliefs about human nature:

- People individually and collectively have unique gifts, skills and contributions to bring to life;
- Organizations are human social systems, sources of unlimited relational capacity, created and lived in language;
- We hold socially created images of the future. Once articulated, these serve to guide individual and collective actions.

Positive change is markedly different from the more traditional approaches to change. These involve the identification of weaknesses, threats and problems, conducting an analysis and prescribing a solution. In those processes, the primary focus is on what is wrong or broken. Unintentionally, however, by paying attention to problems, we emphasize and amplify them.<sup>2</sup> Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, is the opposite of “problem-solving.” It focuses on the positive aspects of our lives and institutions and leverages them to correct the negative. Through human communication, inquiry and dialogue, people shift their attention and action away from problem analysis to lifting up worthy ideals and productive possibilities for the future.<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of these positive change processes is the importance of telling stories about the organization when





it functions at its best. People within the organization tell these stories, reflect upon them, and collectively discuss them to discover the “positive core” of an organization. The result is momentum forward, filled with hope. The worthy ideals and productive possibilities of an organization are lifted up and become the focus, rather than the problems and weaknesses.

### POSITIVE CHANGE RESOURCES THAT WORK

Many congregations, like the faith community in our opening story, have tried traditional approaches to strategic planning. Leaders formed committees, hired consultants, wrote mission statements and conducted a SWOT analysis, all resulting in ambitious goals. While this approach is productive in the early stages, many times the plans go nowhere. Staff and volunteers become “stuck” on how to carry out plans and priorities while, at the same time, orchestrating daily life in a congregation. Leadership and volunteer transitions also may result in a change of priorities or direction.

Many congregational leaders realize that a fresh approach to planning is needed, an approach that emphasizes a new way of life and meaning to a congregation, a future that indeed flourishes. Positive change resources have the potential to work well in a congregation because they complement the special qualities of congregations as people of faith who are doing God’s work on earth. In essence, the resources focus on hope instead of despair.

Positive change resources operate on some basic principles and assumptions important to their success:

- Inviting the entire system (the congregation) into the process opens the door for equal participation, broad collaboration and the importance of

honoring individual contributions in shaping a congregation’s future;

- Recognizing that human systems grow and change in the direction of what they study, much like a plant responds to water and sun;
- Engaging in conversations about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams is transformational;
- Reminding ourselves that in every congregation, something works very well.

Through using positive change tools, pastors, lay leaders and congregation members learn the art of asking powerfully positive questions that produce new knowledge and open the door to new possibilities. For example, instead of focusing on “deficit budgets,” they ask, “How can we more deeply embrace the biblical view of stewardship as a way of life in our congregation?” Instead of centering on “a lack of youth involvement,” the question is framed, “How can we invite youth to participate in our congregation in ways that are both meaningful to them, help them grow in faith and enrich our life together?”

### ANOTHER CONGREGATION’S EXPERIENCE

After the pastoral staff of a downtown parish of about 650 families learned about positive change resources, they began intentionally incorporating good questions in their daily ministry to the congregation. When the pastoral associate visited the homebound, she would ask for “a favorite memory of the parish.” That question produced personal stories that provided a connection to the parish for the homebound in a new way. Discovering these “favorite memories” deepened the meaning of parish life for members and reminded them of what was valued and cherished.

At the same time, the pastor began each parish council meeting by asking, “What can our parish be best at?” During a daylong staff meeting, the pastor asked the



staff, “How do we build more leaders in our congregation?” There was no immediate answer. Instead, the staff engaged in discussion and careful thinking and made a commitment to continue to ask good questions and stay with them.

Positive change poses that asking the right question is more important than having the right answer. A question that focuses on possibilities rather than problems yields innovative ideas and solutions, and it deflects defensive responses. A question focused on possibility helps a community see a larger picture beyond itself and creates energy and confidence. By asking, “What’s the possibility we see in this situation?” we find that:

- what we ask determines what we find;
- what we find determines how we talk;
- how we talk determines how we imagine together;
- how we imagine together determines what we achieve.<sup>4</sup>

### RESOURCES THAT ENCOURAGE POSITIVE CHANGE

The Center for Congregations found three positive change tools that work especially well in congregational settings — Appreciative Inquiry, the World Café process and Asset Mapping.

Appreciative Inquiry, developed by Dr. David Cooperrider, is the study and exploration of what gives life to a human system when it functions at its best. A central piece of Appreciative Inquiry is the personal story of best moments, best memories and experiences of belonging. These stories, when collected, produce a rich portrait of how a community views itself.

A congregation’s foundation is, in part, the many personal stories that give meaning and shape to its community life. Oftentimes, these stories go untold. When members enjoy the opportunity to share stories, they

are both personal and profound. Moving narratives may chronicle how the congregation reaches out to a family during the death of a loved one. They tell of a young family relocating to the community, where they were welcomed and assimilated into the congregation. Another story shares a congregation’s significant efforts to help victims of a tornado.

Consider how one congregation used Appreciative Inquiry to elicit these spiritual stories. As a foundation to their planning process, the pastoral staff and parish council spent more than six months conducting one-on-one interviews with parishioners. They transcribed, edited and printed the stories, then distributed the book parish-wide. The stories, along with the hopes and dreams for the future, fueled the planning process conducted by the pastor and parish council.

The primary vehicle for uncovering these stories was the Appreciative Inquiry interview. Appreciative Inquiry interviews are personal (one-on-one) and ask questions like, “Recall an experience in the congregation when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most enthusiastic about the congregation” or “Tell me about a time when you most deeply felt a sense of belonging in the congregation.”

Members of congregations who have participated in such interviews report things such things as, “This was the most incredible conversation I have ever experienced.” One member said, “Power is in the stories. In the past, we were too busy blaming, complaining and procrastinating. The sharing of stories was great.” Another member said, “We learned to talk to each other in a new way.”

World Café is another powerful positive change tool. Its focus is meaningful conversations and the premise that the knowledge and wisdom needed by a





group to move forward is already present and accessible in the group.

A World Café is grounded in the important principles of diversity, invitation, listening, movement, good questions and energy.

This model can help address a number of issues. The simplicity of World Café inspired an Indiana pastor and staff. They appreciated how this process creates a comfortable and caring environment where people can share and hear each other's contribution to a series of questions. They designed a "giving café," modeled after the World Café. In true café style, the pastor and staff served ice cream sundaes to participants seated at small tables.

Participants ate ice cream as they responded to a series of questions aimed at helping them become more comfortable talking about ministry and money. The questions included:

- What gives you life? Share a story about an experience with our congregation that was life-giving.
- How do you envision our congregation expanding—spiritually, physically, and programmatically?
- Why is giving to our congregation worthy of your best effort?
- What could happen that would enable you to feel fully engaged and energized in this situation?



After experiencing a World Café, one participant stated, "It is a wonderful tool for sharing stories, expressing ideas, and developing relationships.

Personally, I learned I have the motivations, enthusiasm and love to develop a spiritual community." A World Café works because the whole congregation participates.<sup>5</sup>

The associate pastor reported that the process is "...changing our attitude; we're focusing on the positive."

The third positive change tool used effectively by congregations is Asset Mapping. It moves congregations from a mindset of deficiency (what we don't have) to one of abundance (what we do have). Asset Mapping, developed by Luther Snow,<sup>6</sup> is a process that not only generates a multiplicity of assets from a number of perspectives (economic, physical, personal, community, and more) but also helps congregations emphasize their assets (usually those that are taken for granted) and use them in new and innovative ways. Armed with stacks of sticky notes, congregational teams of four to six people generate lists of assets. A series of questions guide the teams in the process of generating their assets (one per post-it note). Within minutes, a room can be filled with neon colored notes proudly displaying congregational assets of all varieties.

One member of a congregation using Asset Mapping said the process helped his congregation generate an innovative approach to youth involvement in parish life. "It started with a single Post-it note," he declared. When they presented the idea to the congregational board for approval, the enthusiasm and energy was contagious.

A small, mainline congregation, focused on two of its assets – the church building and its prominent location in town. The building coupled with its prime location in the community enabled the congregation to host the American Guild of Organists on an annual basis. Additionally, groups used the church building more and more for non-church community events.



When people proposed a community-wide barbecue, it became clear the building was not large enough to accommodate such an event. One of the church members suggested that the community

use the building, along with the street. The barbecue is now an annual event for the entire local community. A congregant reports, “This was a self-esteem boost. The Asset Mapping process helped us rejoice about our congregation. There was a celebratory mood.”

The pastor in our beginning story who booked the state park retreat connected with the idea of positive change. From the outset, this pastor and his staff recognized the importance of exploring the positive. Their experience taught them how their congregation could quickly take on a mindset of deficit thinking and negativity. The retreat offered an opportunity to gather the members and reflect on their blessings from God in the midst of their pressing issues. The retreat used a combination of Appreciative Inquiry, World Café and Asset Mapping. These processes engaged the congregation in a new way and created new pathways for thinking about the future and congregational ministries. With a sense of gratitude for the present and for upcoming possibilities, the congregation now sees its future through a new lens. As one member put it, “Everything old is new again.”

### GETTING STARTED WITH POSITIVE CHANGE

How does a pastor or congregational leader start using positive change resources? It is a good idea to start small. Rather than beginning with a large scale event using World Café or Asset Mapping, take a little step – open a staff or board meeting with a single question,

such as “What is one good thing that has happened in your life since the last time we met?” Within minutes, meaningful personal stories will emerge. This will lead the group to a deeper level of relationship through simple sharing. Another approach is to turn a negative into a positive. The next time you hear a complaint or negative question, respond with a positive question, such as, “What is your hope for this situation that you describe?”

Using these tools in a small group setting helps teams to become more familiar with the processes of positive change. In so doing, one congregational team recognized that they could change focus from “what we lack” to discussions about “how we have been blessed.” The team agreed that it was good to remember God’s blessings in the past, present and the future.

This congregational team decided to organize a series of conversations over a six-week period using positive change resources. Instead of using the term “positive change,” the team referred to Philippians 4:8, “Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.” The team was on a six-week journey with God in the lead. The following is a sample of what they did:

1. God’s Presence and Blessings in the Past (using Appreciative Inquiry) at a “Linger Lunch” between services: Those in attendance spent an hour enjoying lunch, then spent an hour and a half in discussion, using the Appreciative Inquiry interview questions.
2. God’s Blessings Today (using Asset Mapping): Leaders introduced members to the process during the morning service and distributed sticky notes as they left the sanctuary



to post in the fellowship hall. They conducted this process using six topics over three weeks.

3. God's Leading into the Future (using World Café): This event was conducted at a Sunday evening barbeque.

Several special surprises emerged during the six weeks. Intergenerational contacts were abundant throughout the process. Young people of the congregation are now asking for more combined interaction and identified ways to connect with the elderly of the congregation. Teens reading in nursing homes, community craft club, music ministry and a community garden are a few of their suggestions. Young children were involved in the process using story-telling and complementary activities. The pastor's sermons helped weave the process into worship and scripture. The group summarized their conversations on large chart paper and left them hanging in the fellowship hall, giving everyone a chance to view and comment on the themes.

In the end, many members recognized the positive energy created by the process. They saw that the activities should lead naturally into the council's plans for a congregation-wide revision of the mission and vision statements at the next retreat.

### OTHER WAYS TO USE POSITIVE CHANGE RESOURCES

There are many ways to use positive change activities in a congregation. Leaders can incorporate one or more of the following into congregational life:

- Using Appreciative Inquiry for an upcoming leadership transition;
- Conducting a visioning process that will occur simultaneously in members' homes using the interview process of Appreciative Inquiry;
- Intentionally reflecting on new ways to think positively about what

is right with the congregation and build from there;

- Evaluating the effectiveness of church ministries using Appreciative Inquiry;
- Encouraging intergenerational dialogue using the World Café process;
- Conducting a yearly World Café before the congregational board plans programs and ministries for the year;
- Conducting a fellowship meeting using Asset Mapping to discover collective gifts and assets;
- Using Asset Mapping for a church-wide retreat.

### POSITIVE CHANGE AND A CHANGING LEADERSHIP STYLE

Positive change and its resources are more than a process. They generate a fresh way to understand, see and re-imagine flourishing futures.

As Mark Lau Branson, author of *Memories, Hopes and Conversations*, states, "It is a way of continually forming an interpretive community that can thereby perceive, think and create with the most life-giving resources. It assumes that real interpretive work—the discovery of meaning and forming of local meanings—is the work of the congregation. Locally, we tell and re-tell our own church's story and our personal spiritual autobiographies. All of these texts enter a congregation's discourse about identity (who we are) and agency (what we are to do). Appreciative Inquiry [and other positive change methods] provides a means of forming congregational conversations that reshape the interpretive work so that we pay attention to the most generative and hopeful texts, practices, and narratives."<sup>7</sup>

Leading a congregation using positive change tools directly impacts leadership and leadership styles. Positive change only works as leaders refuse to allow negative deficit-based thinking and acting to persist in a congregation. The capacity of the leader to take on the



traits, habits and mindset of positive change are essential. Asking a positive question in response to a discordant statement blunts the tendency for a downward spiral of negative talk. Positive change shifts direction and opens the door to new thinking and seeing bright possibilities. Leaders then embrace a capacity to build relationships and to mobilize a congregation to think and act using both its creativity and affirming power. Positive change tools give rise to renewed energy for mission and ministry that result in a striking difference in members' views of the congregation and the world around it.

Positive change starts with asking a single, powerful, positive question: "What gives life when our congregation functions at its best?"

Every congregation contributes to a sacred presence in its surrounding community. Through using positive change tools to study and uncover the circumstances that give life, congregations can leverage strengths to grow and flourish. In doing so, congregations will help transform communities into a places of hope, love and possibility.

## ENDNOTES

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

<sup>2</sup> Vogt, Eric E., Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action* (Mill Valley, CA: Whole Systems Associates Pegasus Communications Inc., 2003). Article can be found at <http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/aopq.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Whitney, Diana, and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2003), page 2.

<sup>4</sup> Hammond, Sue, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing, 1998), pages 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> The World Café creates a "culture of dialogue" by inviting a community to come together for conversations that matter to them. The process enables a large group to participate in evolving rounds of conversation with four other people while remaining connected to the larger group.

<sup>6</sup> Snow, Luther, *The Power of Asset Mapping* (Herndon, VA: the Alban Institute, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Branson, Mark Lau, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).

## RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

For resources on this subject, you're invited to check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>. Suggested CRG search terms: appreciative inquiry, asset mapping, world café, positive change.

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**Positive Change for Congregations** is part of the Special Report series. It offers information, stories and resources from the Flourishing Congregations initiative. The Center for Congregations hopes that you find this information useful in your work.

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