

## **Introducing Appreciative Enquiry in organisations: Case Study: Church Mission Society**

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*In the past few years, CMS has been engaging in conversations about how we can see ourselves as a 'community' working together for God, rather than as 'workforce'. This has had some interesting outcomes. I will just touch on one such initiative - **developing an Appreciative Spirit in CMS.***

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It's a tradition of the House of Commons at Westminster that front bench politicians are required to speak from behind a red line drawn on the floor, calculated to keep them at a distance beyond a sword's length from their opponents. This strange tradition is yet another example of the adversarial basis of politics in the UK. Prime Ministers' Question Time has achieved a huge following among television audiences worldwide. Apparently people love to witness the spectacle of leaders tearing into each other. Are the Church's decision-making processes that much better? If so, why is the mere mention of the General Synod or Parochial Church Councils enough to set eyes rolling? In fact, in some Christian circles, the very word 'meeting' has a similar effect. Portrayals of PCC meetings in the British comedy sitcom Vicar of Dibley would not be so funny if they weren't so painfully true.

### **Appreciative Enquiry (AE)**

Although as Christians we would like it to be different, we often find ourselves caught up with these negative and destructive ways of relating and talking. So is there a way that we can break out of the negative cycle?

If our perception of the world around us is constructed through communication, then it stands to reason that language is a key aspect for managing change. What kind of stories are we creating about Christian organisations by the way we communicate? At best, people might say that we seem to be whinging all the time, at worst, we're might be seriously hindering the work of mission.

CMS has recently put together a Mission Strategy. Not earth shattering news by any means. Indeed you would probably be concerned if we didn't have a long-term plan and a strategy of how to achieve this. What is unique about our Mission Strategy is what we have learnt about interacting relationally and as a community in the process of devising it.

We noticed that in the past, strategic planning processes had tended to be abrasive. More often than not these processes left us with a raft of bruised and battered people. Was there a better way? In our search for a more relational way of doing things, we were introduced to a process called 'appreciative enquiry' (AE). We were hopeful that this was an approach that could help make our planning process an affirming one. The AE literature described it as a method of "exploring and creating life-enhancing possibilities through constructive and collaborative dialogue".

AE requires a move out of deficit language into an appreciation of what works well in an organisation – with the belief that you get more of what you pay attention to. It seeks the best of “what is” in order to provide a shared platform for imagining “what might be”. For example, rather than asking “What is wrong with your team, what are its weaknesses?” We might enquire, “Describe a time when you were proud to be a member of your team”, or, “What do you value most about being a member of this team?”

Using AE we found ourselves rejecting the traditional management method of ‘problem-solving’ through identifying weaknesses. The emphasis of this approach is on what is wrong, on the negative - which by the way had only served, in the past, to make us even more eloquent and articulate about what’s wrong with CMS. This also breeds a culture of blame.

To say that “our organisation is a problem to be solved” perpetuates the notion that our organisation is only problematic. You are immediately enmeshed in a downward spiral of ‘problem-talk’ and ‘whinging’.

In contrast, Appreciative Enquiry concentrates not on what is wrong, but on what works. The idea is that you get more of what you pay attention to.

In recent years, we have engaged people in a series of conversations about moments when they felt energised and encouraged by successes they’ve had. Because these experiences actually happened to them, people knew how to talk about and explain their successes. It was a question of drawing out this ‘expertise’. The stirring up of these memories has the effect of creating energy and excitement.

Through such conversations, we are learning about the grace (and power) that can come from developing an ‘appreciative spirit’. We’d always espoused the virtues of diversity and valuing each other but this methodology allowed us to do it in practical ways, often with surprising results. During an Appreciating Diversity Workshop, a senior member of staff was heard saying “this is the first time in 20 years that a colleague and I are talking with the specific purpose of appreciating each other and each other’s work!”

However, there were a number of distinctly uncomfortable conversations when people had to contend with differences. In such instances, we have learnt not to ‘fix’ the meaning of appreciation as simply engaging in ‘positive talk’ but also to enquire into (and appreciate) ‘fragilities’. Enquiring into areas of fragility can lead groups into taking corporate responsibility for the issue at hand. This can be a powerful catalyst for creating desired change.

### **Mind Your Language!**

An important aspect of developing an appreciative spirit is learning to move out of using deficit language into an appreciation of what works well by reframing words, issues or situations.

We have been amazed by the potency of ‘reframing’. For example, as some might have it, is CMS “woolly” and “indistinct”? Definitely not, we are “reassuringly diverse”, “refreshingly balanced”, ‘realistically complex’, and proud of it!

Consider, also how the context of power, control and accountability can be instantly changed by reframing say, an appraisal interview, by inviting the people concerned to an ‘**INTER**-views’ session.

For years some staff have viewed ‘commissioning services’ as something that you ‘do’ to mission partners. If you were the latter, it is something that is ‘done’ to you. The re-framing of this service into a ‘**CO**-missioning’ session has revived the important notion that this is a joint and collaborative venture in every sense of the word. We are all in mission together.

## The 4 'D' Cycle

We are learning that by first identifying the best of "what is", we are able to create a positive frame for working together on "what might be". 'People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forwards parts of the past (the known)

The whole process involves going through a 4'D' cycle of conversations, that is,

'Discover'	appreciating and valuing the <i>best of what is</i> ;
'Dream'	envisioning <i>what might be</i> ;
'Design'	dialoguing <i>what should be</i> ;
'Deliver'	innovating <i>what will be</i> .

An appreciative spirit is an art that needs to be learnt, developed and practiced. When done well, it can contribute towards an organisation's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and release positive potential.

At one Governance meeting, participants were asked to write down what they would like CMS to become, and to identify what they could personally do, in their particular context, to bring this about. As they took turns to read their cards and post them on the wall, the room was suddenly charged with life, energy and possibilities. Two things were happening. First, people found themselves coalescing and connecting around common visions and goals. Secondly, each individual discovered they had a tangible, achievable contribution to make - as part of a 'Movement of People in Mission'. Incidentally, this was the start of several conversations that eventually led to CMS having a completely new governance system today.

## Appreciating the Fragile

We are now trying to adopt appreciative enquiry in every sphere of CMS life. However, we have learnt from our experience that the meaning of appreciation must not be simply reduced to the encouragement of "positive talk" and the discouragement of negative feedback. Rather, genuine ownership of visions, goals and tasks amongst a diverse group of people is more likely to be the outcome when appreciative processes are carried out in the context of, and draw from, the complex, emotional and emergent nature of social interaction and communication in organisations.

## Appreciative Leadership

About 5 years ago, the Senior Management Team in CMS thought long and hard about why perceptions of a hierarchical management continue to persist despite various attempts to change this. There was a feeling of despair and 'stuck-ness'.

Some time later, moved by a conversation about the need to value people the then General Secretary called a meeting with all staff. She told those gathered that everyone had a responsibility to make this happen. She then publicly apologised for the times when she had consciously or unconsciously not valued anyone and invited people to join her in trying to change the culture. This took people by surprise and created a real buzz. Listening to the conversations that followed, it dawned on me that this was a moment of relational action that will facilitate the achievement of organisational goals far better than any written mission statement.

It was a seminal moment in which a dominant 'deficit story' or 'conversation' was edited. Leaders have a vital role in co-constructing such practical making of history/ies. The Hollywood film *Sliding Doors* illustrated how different versions of reality can be created by different actions. This is also true of conversations. In which case, Christian leaders will do well to learn more about how to identify and edit organisational conversations. Appreciating Enquiry is a useful organisational tool for doing this.

Leaders also have the important task of enacting the appreciative spirit and creating a safe environment for appreciative enquiry to thrive. This involves appreciating the contribution of all, paying attention to the quality of our conversations. It is developing a 'Barnabus' ministry of encouragement.

The challenge for CMS is to move to the next level - transferring what we have learnt about appreciative enquiry into the way we go about achieving our Mission Strategy, which after all, is a relational quest.

We are praying that as we discover new ways of being CMS, God will continue to use us to work for a world transformed by His love.

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