



AI Practitioner



Inclusive Spaces: Using Appreciative Processes to Transform Social Structures

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Giving Voice, Uniting Vision for Continuing Excellence in Catholic Education

ABSTRACT

In order to deal with school closures, declining enrolments, and budget issues, St. Louis Northeast County Deanery proactively created a two-day gathering for 225 people from eleven parishes and the surrounding community that engaged their hearts and minds in envisioning the best of Catholic elementary education.

As Appreciative Inquiry practitioners, we had an opportunity to facilitate a summit in a faith-based culture. This is our story.

Context of parish and school closures

After a difficult Archdiocesan-led reorganization that closed fourteen parishes and five schools in St. Louis Northeast County Deanery in Missouri, USA between 2003 and 2005, leaders recognized the need to be proactive about their future. Under Monsignor Jack Schuler, the Deanery Lay Pastoral Council (DPC) was formed in 2005 to find ways for the remaining eleven parishes to work more closely together. DPC was composed of two lay representatives from each parish.

Recognizing the demographic and financial challenges facing their schools, DPC began meeting with pastors and principals to work together on Catholic education. DPC chairman of the education subcommittee – attorney and community leader Chuck James – together with two other laypeople attended the 2008 Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education (SPICE) conference at Boston College, which “identifies, validates and systematically diffuses innovative Catholic elementary and secondary programs that work.”

Appreciative Inquiry implementation

At SPICE the St. Louis team learned about Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and perceived its usefulness in bridging the communities and charting a future direction for Catholic education. They committed to an AI summit as the vehicle to actively involve all constituencies in contributing their voices to a united vision that would shape the continuation of excellence in their elementary schools, as well as provide the basis for an October 2009 recommendation to the Archbishop.



The two authors facilitated several preparatory meetings between September 2008 and the February 2009 summit, which also provided community building opportunities for the various constituencies. Significant efforts were invested to align these entities: the interim bishop, school superintendent, priests, principals and other educational leaders. This was especially important because the dominant culture is hierarchical and we were aligning with a part of the church culture that was seeking more laity involvement in decision-making. Members of all parishes attended various training sessions, and there was ongoing customizing of the unfolding summit process with the planning team as they reviewed demographic, historical, financial and interview data that laity had gathered through conducting 600 interviews. Each of the eleven parishes invited 20 people to attend the summit, using the selection guidelines to involve the pastor, principal and two laity, and to select a diverse cross-section of ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, gender and age.



Celebrating the Eucharist at the end of the summit

The two-day February summit was attended by 225 people: 200 parishioners representing eleven parishes, plus pastors, educational leaders, students, interested private sector citizens and community influencers. The theme for the summit, "Giving Voice, Uniting Vision: Continuing Excellence in Catholic Education," galvanized the hopes, dreams and desires of the Deanery laity, in tandem with the church, school and community leadership. Over 60% of summit participants chose to serve on Summit Engagement Teams to continue working on issues such as communication, marketing, school structure and resource sharing. Summit participant packets included the parish analyses from all of the pre-summit interviews. Bishop Robert Hermann celebrated the Eucharist at the end of the summit.

Summit achievements

The summit charted a direction for Catholic education, including the implementation of a Federation structure that enables schools to work more closely together to ensure their strength well into future. The meaty dialogue, fun and other wide-ranging activities generated deep feelings of inclusion and respect across the Deanery. Post-summit work meant that the goal to have an operational plan by October 2009 was achieved.

That Fall, pastors asked the school superintendent for assistance in developing a federation model, and in 2010 a formal agreement in support of The Federation of Catholic Schools in the Northeast Deanery was completed.

The new archbishop, Robert Carlson, expressed his support for the Federation and its efforts: "I am absolutely committed that our schools are strong and alive not just for this generation, but for those of the future ... Know how creative I find your plan, how encouraged I am by it, and how much I want to be a part of it."

Participants' learnings

The Summit process has brought about considerable reflection and learning that enabled broadening their images for the future. Regarding power, for example, the Deanery publication, Good News, noted: "The creative tension between the deep tradition of hierarchy and that of a broader base of emerging leaders involving collaboration among pastors, principals, and laity continues to bring new challenges and insights."

'I am absolutely committed that our schools are strong and alive not just for this generation, but for those of the future.' Archbishop Robert Carlson

There was a heightened awareness that noteworthy changes in established hierarchies require extraordinary consciousness, commitment, and inevitable sacrifice.

In a similar vein, Monsignor Schuler stated that two key leaders “encouraged a change from the status quo.” He gave much of the credit to the laity of the Northeast County Deanery for undertaking this creative initiative: “They worked hard to keep the issue the priority...I think they should get a lot of credit for keeping this on the board. It was their energy, especially the leadership provided by Chuck James and Bob McGartland.” There was a heightened awareness that noteworthy changes in established hierarchies require extraordinary consciousness, commitment, and inevitable sacrifice.

Feedback from summit participants was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, and for many the event seemed to be “a dream come true.” Among the statements: “It forced me to examine my faith and the challenges to the Deanery that must be met. It provided opportunities to network with dedicated, like-minded people of faith to design and implement solutions,” and “I learned that the Archdiocese will support us in our plans. I learned there was not an agenda. I learned there are great loving, talented people among us who want to save the Northeast Deanery.”

Galvanizing the hopes, dreams and desires of the stakeholders



Positivity was also captured in Good News regarding the observed progress due to the initiative. “There is an overall shift from independence to signs of interdependence,” and, as Deacon Jim Griffard noted, “The summit was an act of transformational leadership...The summit provided a paradigm shift, a movement in the model for a living church.”

Cara Koen, currently Federation Director of Advancement and a parent of three who signed on to be a team leader for one of the Summit Engagement Teams, captured the sentiments of many participants:

“Appreciative Inquiry was a valuable process to engage many people (stakeholders) in focusing on the strengths and value of Catholic education for our community ... it was difficult, if not impossible, to shift the conversation completely away from the ‘challenges’ ... and there was the difficulty of getting eleven parishes – who had been accustomed to operating independently – to see themselves as an ‘organization.’

“...the Federation has given us a formal framework for collaboration within the Deanery, and through this there have been tangible ‘fruits’ to indicate success.”

‘The summit provided a paradigm shift, a movement in the model for a living church.’
Deacon Jim Griffard