

NAMING THE PRESENT—ACTIVITY

When we're beginning any kind of assessment, it's important to have a posture of gratitude. That's why this exercise is called *appreciative inquiry*. A significant step in discernment about the present has to do with being honest, so it's important to be honest about what's good as well as what's not good.

Clearly there are losses and fears that accompany diminishing numbers, aging demographics, and decreased loyalty/trust toward institutions such as the local church. Honesty about those dynamics is one part of data that informs discernment. But beyond identifying what you don't have, there's a deep need to identify and name what you do have. A faith-full starting point asks that you begin from a confession—not of scarcity, but of provision. Whatever you discern, and whatever may truly be lamentable, a thread of thankfulness should weave its way through your discerning.

Time needed for activity

60 - 90 minutes

Group size

Any number of current members and regular visitors

Steps for Activity*

1. Review together the basic approach of appreciative inquiry—beginning with a focus on what God has given, rather than a focus on what is missing. The website [Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry](#) has helpful information you can use in this step.
2. Note the patterns within Scripture that teach us to begin with thanksgiving—for example, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; and the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. While there's much concern about these churches, these letters of Paul and of Jesus begin with thanksgiving. Consistently. One might also note the way the Ten Commandments are introduced in Exodus 20, by declaring that the law-giving Sovereign Lord is the Savior and Life-Giver: a call to gratitude.
3. Divide people into small groups of six to eight persons. Have everyone in each group answer the following questions:
 - a. Focusing on the congregation:
 - What are the most important contributions the church has made to your life? When did this happen? Who made a difference? How did it affect you?
 - What are the most valuable ways you contribute to this church (this is important, so don't hide behind humility!)—in terms of personality, perspective, skills, gifts? If you find this hard to answer, try another angle: "What might someone else say are the most valuable ways you contribute to this church?"
 - When have you grown as a follower of Jesus within this church? How did this happen? What made a difference? Who was most helpful?
 - What is it that makes this church unique?
 - How do you see God's presence making itself known in your present reality?

- b. Focusing on the community around your church:
 - How might you describe or define the community in which God has placed your church? (Is it a particular neighborhood, a city block, a town, a region?)
 - What do you love about the community around your church?
 - Beyond the work of your church, what kingdom work do you see being addressed in this community?
 - What kingdom work are you personally trying to attend to in the community, and how is it going?
 - What kingdom work still needs attention in your community?
4. After everyone has shared, ask each person to respond to one last question:
 - “having listened to everyone else in your group share, what do you think God wants us to keep in mind as we discern what to do next?”
5. After gathering back into the larger group, have representatives of the small groups share themes they heard in their conversations.
6. Close the session by giving thanks for whom God made you to be and where God placed you. A song of praise could be included as you wrap up.

Facilitator's Questions

After the activity, allow time for discussion around some questions like these:

1. How would you describe the overall tone of this appreciative inquiry exercise?
2. In what ways have you given weight to both the sense of gratitude for the past and the need for honesty about the present?
3. Did anything come up that may require further processing or exploration? Explain.
4. Are there any examples of gratitude that can help with enriching your understanding of what may be next? Give some examples and explain.