

## **Dennis Campbell: Congregations as Learning Communities**

*The Alban Institute, 2000, 61 pages*

This book is firmly based on the thinking of *The Fifth Discipline*, and so much of the material is familiar from there. What it does, however, is to set it in a church context, and describe how to use three tools for building a learning organisation: appreciative enquiry, culture analysis, and scenario planning.

### **1. Learning Communities and Oversight**

The approaches and tools we use in ministry run a life cycle of popularity. Whether an approach remains in long-term practice depends on whether it is rooted in Christian theology.

Personal Mastery is like the Benedictine vow of conversion of life: obedience to the lifelong process of being transformed as one follows Christ.

Oversight is about systems thinking – seeing the whole picture – not just a churchy word for traditional management.

Problem of people on committees who represent one group, and think that they are on the committee to make sure they get the best they can for that group. It's rare that someone on a leadership committee understands that as a member of that committee they are overseeing the whole of the church's work.

### **2. Tools for Systems Thinking**

This chapter summarised the feedback loops idea from *The Fifth Discipline* in a churchy context.

### **3. Appreciative Inquiry**

People tend to look for problems that need fixing. Appreciative inquiry makes the change process into a positive and creative one by identifying things that are good so as to build on them.

The enquiry should be appreciative (believing that there are always good things to be found), it should lead to information which is useful for action, it should be provocative so that people learn from it, it should be collaborative in that the enquirers are also part of the system.

Strategic efforts often fail because they dream up ideal structures or programmes from scratch. Appreciative inquiry builds on what people already care about.

### **4. Congregational Culture Analysis**

One reason change fails is that it does not get rooted in the culture, so old behaviours re-emerge.

Identifying a congregation's culture is done on three levels: artifacts (things you can see), espoused values (things you say, eg vision statement), and shared assumptions (things that are taken for granted).

It needs to be done with the main 'culture carriers' who've been part of the congregation for a long time, and with newer people who have a more objective viewpoint.

Method for doing this at a retreat/conference is outlined.

### **5. Scenario Planning**

You need about 12 people from a variety of backgrounds to design the scenarios.

1. Identify the focal issue or decision to be made
2. Identify key factors in the environment that would inform such a decision, eg what will be seen as success or failure?

3. Identify driving forces of change which will affect the decision, eg demographic
4. Rank driving forces: some are certain and will feature in all scenarios, eg that the baby-boom generation will age. Others are uncertain.
5. Select the scenario logics: axes between the potential extremes of uncertain driving forces: for example, what sort of worship future generations will be attracted to might have one axis ranging from privatistic to corporate, and another ranging from entertainment worship to liturgical/contemplative: when these are put at right angles, the quadrants form four possible scenarios.
6. In four small groups, flesh out the scenarios: people will dismiss general predictions, but will attend to vivid, detailed stories.
7. Examine the implications of possible decisions: testing the original question against the scenarios.
8. Identify leading indicators and signposts: what will be the clues which will show you which direction things are actually taking? This will help with further strategic thinking in the future.

The follows an example of this process being used in the case of a city-centre church deciding whether or not it ought to follow migration trends and relocate to a suburb.

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