Homelessness in God’s House: Uncovering Bright Spots in Parish-Based Social Ministries using Appreciative Inquiry

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Introduction

The United Nations designated 1987 as the international year of shelter for the homeless. The global organization determined it was time to acknowledge and address that one-fifth of the world population lived without adequate housing. In response, the Pontifical Commission Iustitia et Pax led by Cardinal Etchegaray prepared the document entitled *What have you done to your homeless brother? The Church and the housing problem*. It promulgated the Church’s “humanitarian and evangelical commitment” to the homeless as an “expression of a preferential love for the poor” (Pontifical Commission ‘Iustitia et Pax’ 1987, 29). Thirty-two years later, one wonders if this expression of special love has been ignored or if it is too expansive to address at the parish level. The most recent federal reports estimate that 553,000 people across the nation are without homes, and 76,500 of these are in New York City alone (Henry et al. 2017). Care for the homeless requires a significant allocation and distribution of funds, staff, volunteers, and other resources. Staff and volunteer burnout are often all too apparent in what can be a taxing ministry. How, then, can the Church move deeper into Her care of people experiencing homelessness?

The Catholic social tradition (CST) offers a wealth of teachings for the care of those who experience poverty. Discovering authentic ways to live the CST, in a particular context and culture, is more challenging. This paper explores Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a strengths-based methodology to identify effective and affective social ministerial practices. It then discusses some reoccurring themes uncovered in AI interviews. It highlights how collaboration, visionary leadership, and ongoing learning was common among thriving parish-based homeless ministries in New York City.

Homelessness in God’s House and CST

Christian and Jewish scriptures contain rich images of home. The Jewish people longed for God to have a permanent house of worship. The early church met in homes and was encouraged to see their earthly time as a pilgrimage to a heavenly home. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh (2008) highlight that the Christian theological tradition provides wisdom and insight into contemporary discussions of home and homelessness. The pilgrim motif calls Christians to not permit concepts of home to become a veiled idol of materialism or security. On the other hand, Church communities can draw insight from their faith as they strive to model new forms of belonging, affiliation, and hospitality in an increasingly isolated society.

Catholic social teaching underscores home as essential to human flourishing. *Rerum Novarum* detailed the need to provide housing and other necessities to those at risk of exploitation, such as the working class (1891, 34). *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1964) admonished governments to ensure housing and other basic material needs are met for those across all socio-economic spheres to guarantee a reasonable standard of living (127, 64). The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) connected housing to the dignity of the human person, stating that “subhuman living conditions...poison civilization” (27). The USCCB’s document *Economic Justice for All* in 1986 outlined the case for economic justice and its connection to the community of faith. "Our service efforts cannot substitute for...just public policies, but they can help us practice what we preach about human life and human dignity" (USCCB 1986, 26). The gravity and urgency of the Christian commitment to this issue are clear. "No one may claim the name of Christian and be comfortable in the face of hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world." (USCCB 1986, 27).
The letter to the United Nations in 1987 *What have you done for your homeless brother?* affirmed these teachings. It declared that secure and safe housing is a fundamental human right (Pontifical Commission ‘Iustitia et Pax’ 1987, 16, 20). It invited the Church to shift from imparting blame on individuals (16), so She could better collaborate with state initiatives (28). She was called to fight structural causes of poverty (28) and recognize the many factors increasing homelessness, including the unjust distribution of income, non-living wages, underemployment, and racial discrimination (14, 19). *Laudato Si’* reaffirmed these teachings, stating that human dignity is connected to having a place to call home (2015, 152). Catholic social teaching is clear that addressing homelessness is essential for a dignified human experience. The question remains on how local faith communities can bring these teachings to fruition.

The book *Not by faith alone: social services, social justice, and faith-based organizations in the United States* provides a framework to distinguish between programs that focus on charity, service, or justice (Adkins, Occhipinti, and Hefferan 2010, 16-19). Admittedly, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* discusses justice and charity as intertwined (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, 184, 583). However, the framework in Table 1.3 below provides parishes a way to map where their services fall on a continuum of service.

![Table 1.3 - Continuum from Charity through Justice](Table Source: Adkins, Occhipinti, and Hefferan 2010, 17-adapted from Harper 1999, 302-3)
The CST calls believers to address immediate needs and structural causes of poverty. “We need to build local communities of faith where our social teaching is central, not fringe; where social ministry is integral, not optional; where it is the work of every believer, not just the mission of a few committed people and committees” (USCCB 1994). This charity-service-justice continuum can assist parishes in identifying in what areas they might further develop to more fully live the CST commitment to charity and justice. As congregations seek to engage in holistic and sustainable social ministries, appreciative inquiry can be a way to navigate the gifts, capacity, and passion of the local church.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Framework

Deborah Tannen (1998), in The Argument Culture, highlights how criticism is deeply embedded in Western culture. A way to show intellect is to criticize. There are plenty of areas, sectors, trends, and organizations to criticize, especially at the intersection of faith and social ill. However, criticism does not provide a clear direction for improvement. Critique merely suggests doing the opposite of ineffective practice(s). In contrast, appreciative inquiry is an approach that is designed to highlight and reveal the replicable strengths of these same areas, sectors, trends, and organizations. AI offers an opportunity to celebrate what homeless ministries are doing well, instead of fixating on what is flawed.

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (2005) as a change management tool for organizations. They describe AI as

the systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. In AI, intervention gives way to inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design….AI assumes that every organization and community has many untapped and rich accounts of the positive. (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, 8)

AI does not fit neatly into traditional research method categories and has been used in qualitative and quantitative studies alike (Reed 2007, 45-46). Some argue it should be seen as a social reconstructionist theory or critical theory and is ideal for the methodologies of ethnography, case study, narrative, and action research (Reed 2007, 55-66). Glynis Cousin argued that AI is a unique way of analyzing data to drive educational learning initiatives with a mindset of innovation (2009, 168). Scientific study has demonstrated that what people think can impact how they feel and act; as seen in the placebo effect or the Pygmalion effect in which higher expectations of students led to higher performance, regardless of the student’s original test scores (Cousin 2009, 170-172). Cousin underscores how the AI method builds from a constructivist understanding that the questions posed can shape the research results (Cousin 2009, 170-172). As such, the wording of interviews has the potential to impact responses and follow-up actions. When the researcher begins from a positive orientation, it can highlight what is working well.

The 4-D AI framework of David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney (2005) (discovery, dream, design, deliver) starts with the past, examines the present, and challenges the participant to dream – but does not end there. It concludes by considering how future program design can sustainably thrive in the long-term. This 4-D framework is employed through a transformational approach to interviewing. A transformational approach is less focused on detachment, with the hope of transformation for all involved. The interviewing experience provides “interactional
moments that leave marks on people’s lives [and] have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person” (Denzin 2001, 35). With a transformational view, the interview can provide an opportunity for educative moments for interviewer and interviewee. Utilizing the AI approach, interviews began by expressing the topic being explored in a way that expands people’s thinking beyond what is currently happening (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010, 147). The interview begins with an emphasis on history. It then asks participants to recall memories that engaged their emotions and their thinking. Questions then shift to how they applied that learning to current situations. Finally, questions invite them to explore their dreams for the future (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010, 148).

A frequent concern of the AI method is that it lacks a critical eye toward the topic at hand. However, research has frequently demonstrated that the process highlights challenges throughout the 4-D process without becoming fixated on the problems (Coghlan, Preskill, and Catsambas 2003, 6). While AI can reveal challenges within a strengths-based approach, there is an inherent risk of skimming over real issues like inequality, racism, and violence by “colluding with the powerful people who want the unexamined to remain so” (Rogers and Fraser 2003, 77). The purpose of this methodology “is not to identify unknown problems but to identify strengths (both those that are known and unknown) and build courage to attend to known problems” (Rogers and Fraser 2003, 77). The effectiveness of a strengths-based approach is not useful when troubled areas are unknown and need to be uncovered for greater organizational health (Rogers and Fraser 2003, 77).

Knowing the strengths and limitations of this methodology, one may be hesitant to apply this approach to the study of church social ministries. However, this practice has been used to evaluate churches, social programs, or educational systems. Susan Paddock (2003) describes how AI has been used extensively in various Catholic parishes, dioceses, and organizations and is consistent with Jesus’ example of seeking and appreciating the positive in others. A journal by the American Evaluation Association revealed how AI had been successfully used to evaluate programs that have cultural, religious, and educational differences (Coghlan, Preskill, and Catsambas 2003). The appreciative interview protocol has been found to produce richer data, particularly in emotionally taxing environments (Elliott 1999). AI has also been shown to offer more solutions compared to a problem-solving approach (Paranjpey 2017). This method has been used at an interfaith homeless organization (Thomas 2016) and for inter-religious dialogue (Reed 2007, 25). It has also been a useful tool for those experiencing homelessness – resulting in higher personal motivation, increased emotional awareness, and better personal relationships (Quinney and Richardson 2014). When using AI in conjunction with traditional interview models, AI was found to produce more in-depth descriptions and analysis from stakeholders (Hanson Smart and Mann 2003, 71-72). This asset-based approach is pertinent for evaluating high-stress programs situated within the unique religious and cultural contexts of parish social ministry.

The appreciative inquiry interview approach was used in New York City to understand the role of religious education in social ministries that focused on care for those struggling with homelessness. Interviews were conducted across parishes in NYC who devote significant staffing and financial resources to a social ministry specifically serving people experiencing homelessness. The transcripts were then coded and analyzed. The findings would likely differ if using AI as a change-management process in which the focus would be on one parish and would interview all staff and volunteers from that particular parish. The effectiveness of that approach within the Catholic Church can be viewed in Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church.
In this research, nine Christian churches, of various denominations, were interviewed to understand better the way social ministries were thriving in a difficult environment. There were strengths and weaknesses of using the AI method in this interview context.

**Appreciative Inquiry Strengths**

The interviews revealed what Denzin described as the transformative nature of the exchange. Sixty percent of participants verbally articulated during the meeting that our discussion caused them to think about their program structures and rationale behind their operation in ways they had not previously considered. By beginning with "what attracted you to this ministry?" leaders were invited to recall their original passion and interest in serving those experiencing homelessness. One interview included two staff members from the same parish. As they each shared, there was audible and visual excitement in discovering the motivations that animated their colleague's daily work.

The questions posed during the AI process can help parishes identify where their strengths exist. Building on their local talents, the community can press forward to expand how they practice the Catholic social tradition. For example, interviews conducted in New York highlighted that many parishes were thinking about and shaping their programs around the idea of radical hospitality. Programs were reformed as volunteers, staff, and guests came to appreciate and practice this commitment to hospitality. Staff reframed program rules in a more affirmative orientation. Guests staying at a church overnight came to understand their role as hosts at home and began contributing to the shelter operation. Volunteer interactions were restructured to build deeper relationships by serving dinner to the same table each week instead of soup kitchen style. As these relationships deepened, it created space for other questions to emerge. One of these was regarding the larger aid structures led by the city government. Parishes that had developed an interest and focus on hospitality began to consider the larger structures in NYC that are working to address the challenge of homelessness. They are starting to ask: What would it look like for radical hospitality to be part of the city shelter intake system? How can we advocate for more hospitable practices within city assistance structures? By identifying the strengths of the parish, communities can begin to examine how they get involved in the structural systems. Appreciative Inquiry, though not critical, can lead to questions that seek future innovation at the local parish and beyond.

**AI Challenges**

During the interviews, staff member was asked to dream what their social ministry would be like in ten or more years. There were many creative and exciting visions for the future articulated during this process. However, a few interviews revealed local obstacles. Two participants shared that poor compensation made it challenging to view themselves in their role in ten years. Their low pay, coupled with long work hours, to run various programs throughout the parish made sustainability a felt concern. Others shared how low parishioner participation in the social ministry or aging congregations shaped their approaches for implementing ideas and innovations going forward. The shrinking parish population at one location had encouraged them to seek outside sources for funding to ensure sustainability. These challenges provided productive information that can assist in reflecting on the structures of programs and finding sustainable solutions. AI did not start from the negative but began from the perspective of possibility and adaptation. The question remains as to if the challenges faced were discussed as
creative challenges to be overcome due to the AI format or if the adaptive mindset was already present within the staff leadership.

Some ministerial issues encountered during the interview process might fall under the category of unknown challenges. One interview revealed there had been a lack of critical reflection as to the effectiveness of their thirty-year homeless ministry. The ministry seemed to continue out of routine despite reduced participation and interest by guests and volunteers. The AI process was not designed to dig deeper into this issue during the interview. While one can hope the conversation sparked curiosity to explore the rationale and guiding values of their ministry, a more critical lens would be useful for going deeper to determine if the ministry should continue in its current form. This lack of critical reflection appeared connected to staff capacity. Of the interviews conducted across denominations, there was a noticeable difference between parishes who employed full-time staff to attend to social ministry considerations versus churches who relied primarily on volunteers and staff holding multiple roles within the parish. Those with at least one person dedicated full-time to the homeless social ministry demonstrated the capacity to evaluate current ministries and plan for the future. While the AI process offers volunteers a reflective time that can be a source of encouragement and recommitment to a cause, further development of CST ideals may stall without the staffing structure to move the mission forward. Churches looking to affect policy, economics, and structures in a local context will need to examine if they are willing to provide the resources necessary for sustaining a program over the long-term.

**Bright Spots in NYC Parishes**

The nine parishes represented in this study came from a variety of backgrounds. However, all represent a solid commitment to serving those experiencing homelessness for thirty years or more. Some reoccurring themes were identified across those interviewed. These themes are not exhaustive, prescriptive for other ministries, or representative of all faith-based approaches present throughout New York City. These refrains offer gleanings that can arise through the appreciative inquiry interview process. Some similarities are likely common across secular and faith-based urban social services. These include: lack of money to fund innovative initiatives, challenges finding and keeping volunteers, and negotiating physical space for social programs in buildings that are multi-purpose by necessity. Beyond these obvious pragmatic considerations, three themes arose: collaboration, visionary leadership, and ongoing learning.

**Collaboration**

Every parish interviewed discussed how collaboration was a crucial part of their history serving those struggling with homelessness. For example, some churches initially got involved when a nearby church of a different denomination requested their assistance with a growing homeless ministry. In another example, two parishes partnered when one church was struggling to keep their shelter open due to space constraints in their parish center. Through a friendship with a staff member at another parish, they discovered there was interest in opening a shelter but a lack of resources. By partnering they were able to expand the shelter beds available, offer better facilities to their guests, and bring the expertise of the original volunteers into the new operation. The Emergency Shelter Network is an example of cooperating with city agencies. This network provides intake and ongoing case management support through publicly funded drop-in centers which then transports guests each night to houses of worship around the city. This network has enabled over 400 beds to be available through winter months (ESN-NYC n.d.).
Visionary Leadership

Parishes with long-standing social ministries exhibited visionary leadership. At times this leadership was expressed by the head Pastor supporting and encouraging the congregation to participate and other times it was the passion of the staff member hired to grow that particular social ministry. Their larger vision enabled them to adapt and reconfigure as the gifts of the parish and the needs of those struggling with homelessness changed. Often leaders saw themselves as responsible for slowly, carefully, and consistently stretching the congregation to go deeper in their commitment to the poor.

Leaders adapted and shaped programs based on their theological convictions. Across denominations, leaders were emphatic that their belief in imago Dei - that every person bears the image of God- shaped everything they did. One location manifested this in focusing on quality over quantity of services. They shifted their programs from offering used clothing to providing new clothing and wiping clean every soup cup before distributing so that it communicated each guest's Divine worth. The imago Dei principle brought an emphasis on Sabbath and rest. Social ministries saw Sabbath as a pastoral gift to those they serve, as counter-cultural to a focus on meritocracy, and a way of fighting isolation and loneliness. Ministries intentionally tried to slow down, take time to learn names, and be open to readjusting their programmatic offering to be consistent with this belief.

Multidirectional Learning

Another theme found in the interviews was one of continuous and multidirectional learning. Leaders sought for their programs to provide ongoing education for staff, volunteers and guests in formal and informal ways. They understood the holistic development of the person came through self-expression, decision-making skills, and listening. The staff articulated that times of growth came when they created space to receive feedback from guests. As they shifted programs to increase ownership, accountability, and choice among guests, they noticed it creating energy for ongoing innovation and expansion. These ministries seemed to model what Paulo Freire describes as “liberating education” that “consists in acts of cognition, not transfers [sic] of information” (2000, 79). Parish ministries understood that offering the support, encouragement, and tools for guests' spiritual, emotional and physical journey was part of holistic care. Many of these social ministries were working to increase their engagement in the public/political sphere; however they brought a humble desire to first learn from those they served. They wanted to advocate for structural solutions alongside their guests. This thirst for continuous learning and adaptation appeared to be consistent across ministries that had adapted and grown despite challenges they had faced within the parish over the last thirty years.

Conclusion

Appreciative inquiry provides one way to evaluate, inspire and encourage current social ministries. Parishes in NYC offer a glimpse into using AI to identify bright spots and areas for improvement. AI can begin to expand and deepen the parish commitment to the Catholic social tradition through this transformational interviewing approach. For those wishing to use AI to find the "positive core" of their social ministry, the Appreciative Inquiry Handbook provides a detailed step-by-step guide in constructing questions, facilitating interviews, and analyzing data (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008).

Catholic social teaching provides a rich source of inspiration and guidance for these parish social ministries. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “a consistent theme of Catholic
social teaching is the option or love of preference for the poor. Today, this preference has to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense numbers of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and those without hope” (John Paul II 1987, 42). Parishes begin by starting small and being deliberate in practicing these teachings at the local level, always seeking how their local community can engage and address larger structures of inequality in society. The Catholic social tradition is embodied when people bravely practice it within their particular context, using their specific giftings. The assets, ideas, and innovations within the parish can enliven the Catholic social tradition. Appreciative inquiry is one vehicle for finding these bright spots.
Works Cited


