

Grace Lutheran Church
Hartford, Connecticut
October 19, 2004

Appreciative Inquiry Summary

(Setting the Vision for Today and Beginning to Plan for the Future)

Starting on September 25th, 2004 Grace Lutheran Church of Hartford, Connecticut engaged in a Visioning Process known as Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry is simple based on a 4- D model

1. **Discovery:** Discovery starts with the premise that every congregation or organization has things that it is doing well. Simply put you discover what is good about the congregation and preserve those things that bring life to it.
2. **Dream:** Imagine what might be. What are our hopes and dreams about this congregation? What do you imagine the future of this congregation will be?
3. **Design:** Determining what will be by incorporating what we have discovered, together with our dreams of the future, so we can begin to design the plan. The design phase provides an opportunity for large numbers of people to come together to shape the congregation.
4. **Delivery:** After we design the plan, we need to transform it into positive action.

Over the course of a week, 4 Appreciative Inquiry sessions were held on:

- Saturday, September 25th
- Sunday, September 26th
- Monday, September 27th
- Thursday, September 30th

These sessions were scheduled for 2 hours though all lasted closer to 2 ½ hours. 53 members of the congregation attended at least one session.

Participants were asked to respond to 6 questions:

- **How or when did you know that Grace Church was the place for you and your family? Was there an event or moment where you knew “Grace was the place”?**

- **When were you most proud to be a member of Grace? What has been the “highpoint” of your time here at Grace?**
- **(Without being too humble) What strengths and qualities do you bring to Grace?**
- **What do you see as the top 3 qualities of Grace Church?**
- **Grace and the Future – Dreaming of 2014. If you went to sleep tonight and woke up and it was the year 2014. You walk into Grace Lutheran Church with a sense of pride that Grace has become the church you dreamed it could be. How has Grace changed and what is Grace doing?**
- **What are the steps we can take to reach our Dreams/ Goals?**
 - a. **What are the small steps?**
 - b. **What are the bigger bolder steps we can take?**

This Appreciative Inquiry summary has several uses for the congregation:

1. This Visioning process has helped Grace Lutheran Church to re-discover the unique spirit of this congregation. Life long members and new members’ all told very personal stories about the journey to find a home here at Grace. The stories were emotional, spiritual and powerful. Now that we have put into words what Grace Lutheran Church means to us, we can then **preserve its rich history of faith and fellowship.**
2. We can also use this summary as we move forward in the Call Process. **Who better than the members of Grace to tell the story of Grace Lutheran Church.** With this Visioning Process we can now move forward to tell prospective Pastors the story using the words of the congregation. We hope to use this tool as we interview to find a pastor who shares our hopes and dreams.
3. This summary talks about the hopes and dreams for the future and also discusses the small steps as well as the bigger bolder steps to get the congregation to where it wants to be. Inherent in this process is the fact that we will need to **continue to look towards the future and act on these steps.** Though the bigger /bolder steps can seem scary, the smaller steps are things that we can take action on now.

- **How or when did you know that Grace Church was the place for you and your family? Was there an event or moment where you knew "Grace was the place"?**

Many people told very personal stories about their first visit to Grace and how Grace was either very different from previous churches they attended or it was "**like being home**". Frequent responses focused on initial encounters with members of Grace as being "**welcoming**" and that it "felt like home". A number of individuals mentioned characteristics of the church in terms of the warmth of the welcome and the active participation of the members during the service. Many people agreed that every one in the pews sings and sings enthusiastically. One person stated that you are "**not just a number**" at Grace Lutheran Church.

The most memorable quote was "**We felt like exiles and that Grace took us in**". This sentiment was echoed by other members who may have left other Lutheran Churches, their country of origin, or come to Grace from other Christian denominations. This quote resonated with many.

Another memorable quote was that Grace was **open to mixed marriages**. This quote was attributed to a Catholic/Lutheran marriage where only one member of the married couples attended worship services. It appears that this type of openness was unique in that time period. This concept of openness was then expanded in that Grace is also open and inviting to "Single people to attend". "**Grace is not just for married or families, we are open to all**".

- **When were you most proud to be a member of Grace? What was the "highpoint" of your time here at Grace?**

Members shared various events that they believe were "the highlights" of their time at Grace. There were many references to the worship service. "There was one particularly beautiful Easter Service that moved me". There were other similar responses of things such as Grace being "spiritual", "open to the word", having "real spiritual growth", there was "real prayer...finding strength through prayer", "we can take it to the altar and leave it there "(God's Grace) and prayer groups .

Others focused on the people of the church who have reached out to them. They reflected on the "outpouring of love & concern", the hospitality, "**this is a community of caring**" with the "**acceptance of who we are**". This sentiment came through clearly in the stories that members shared.

People also spoke of the Grace's decision "to grow and build despite limited resources" as a highlight. As another participant put it "**when Grace made the**

commitment to renovate the building to make it more accessible for all was the highlight of their experience here at Grace.

There was also an important comment by one member who said **“I felt comfortable in asking questions about faith** “as a child. Others related stories about children’s connection to Grace. Examples included children who have said to their parents “Why didn’t you wake me up for church“, or another child who said to their parent “why don’t you join this church”. This indicates that youth have made strong connections to this church.

➤ **(Without being too humble) What strengths and qualities do you bring to Grace?**

This was without a doubt the most difficult question for all of the groups. People’s reluctance to talk about themselves speaks to the humbleness of Grace members. We have many people who do and give so much of their time and energy to the church and seek nothing in return.

A frequent theme was the concept that many have a **“willingness to pitch in”**. Over and over again people reported that what ever talents they have **“the willingness to help out”** was the most valued trait. An important story related to a member’s willingness to work being connected to people “being open to the spirit “and their “desire to see Christ in others”.

➤ **What do you see as the top 3 qualities of Grace?**

People had a lot to say about what they saw as Grace’s top 3 qualities but there were four key qualities that clearly came through.

1. Grace is a Welcoming Place: This concept came through in story after story of peoples’ experiences here at Grace. There were several stories of how others outside of Grace who visited were extremely impressed by the welcome that they were greeted with.

2. Fellowship/ Worship: There was strong emphasis on the way we worship at Grace. People felt that a great quality of Grace is **“the variety of ways that we worship”**. We show **“expressions of faith in many ways”**. This point was illustrated in the variety of musical traditions we use in our service. We have sung an array of musical styles from traditional Lutheran hymns to contemporary gospel. Using all of the rich traditions of Christian music was seen as a great quality of Grace. One member commented that **“you never feel empty after worship”**. Others felt that the power of prayer in this church is “real, sincere and genuine”. As was stated previously, the congregation participates and does so with “a lot of enthusiasm”.

3. Diversity: The diversity of the members of Grace Lutheran Church is on one hand obvious in terms of racial or ethnic diversity, but we are also diverse in almost all areas. Our congregation is diverse in terms of age, socio-economics, educational achievement, and in our journey of faith that brought us together. This diversity was seen as a very important quality for Grace and for many **the reason** they joined this special place.

4. Acceptance of all: Though the diversity of the congregation is a great quality, Grace's "acceptance of all" was by far the most important in the eyes of many. Members in various ways pointed out in their stories that this acceptance of all comes through in the sense of "inclusiveness". One member called Grace a "**haven**"...**where people live out their faith**". This acceptance of others while being "**non-judgmental**" is seen as the quality that makes Grace a unique and special congregation.

- **Grace and the Future –Dreaming of 2014 - what will it be like? If you went to sleep tonight and woke up and it was the year 2014. You walk into Grace Lutheran Church with a sense of pride that Grace has become the church you dreamed it could be. How has Grace changed and what is Grace doing?**

This question did provoke a lot of discussion. People envisioned that Grace would be full every Sunday with many young families with children. Grace has grown through its outreach into the local community and the local universities. For people who are "looking for and hungry for God's word", Grace would be the place for them. For college students who are away from their "home church" Grace could become their "home away from home church". Grace will be well known in the community for the various ways that we help others. The church would be in constant use and Grace will have an "**International Dynamic Social Ministry Program**".

With all of the changes in the future, many members stressed the importance of Grace Lutheran Church continuing and preserving the core of what makes it special, i.e. Grace's diversity and acceptance of all. We need to "**stay loyal to the proclamation of the Good News-the Grace of God**".

The quote that really summed up the vision of the future of Grace was: **"We will be circles of empowered people to act on gifts of the spirit with the Church and in the community."**

➤ **What are the steps we can take to reach our goals?**

What are the small Steps?

There were some provocative comments and suggestions that should be explored further. A lot of these comments focused on the need for all of us to be involved in the ongoing health and growth of Grace. A few of the more interesting steps included:

- 1) All members would carry a “**business cards**” about Grace Lutheran Church to pass out to people who might have an interest in visiting Grace or those who maybe looking for a church.
- 2) **Increase our visibility.** We need to **market ourselves.** We are the best kept secret in Hartford. People need to know who we are and what we do.
- 3) Develop **Church Directory** with photos of congregational members.
- 4) A follow up discussion about the use of technology and how Grace can use it more effectively
- 5) **Exterior Posting.** One member told a story of a man who came to service one day to see if the people inside the church matched the message that was displayed in the front of the church.
- 6) **A manual** – How are things done here at Grace? This manual would be helpful to new members to get the history and understanding of how Grace Lutheran Church works.
- 7) Evangelism follow-ups. Visit and follow-up with members who may have stopped coming to worship.

There was a strong focus on never losing focus of prayer, faith, and continuing to have person to person relationships.

What are the bigger bolder steps we can take?

Some of the suggestions that were put forth in the smaller steps found their way into this category also. The concept of there being 3 general types of people who attend church:

- A. Those that always do
- B. Those who will do if asked
- C. Those who just come to church to worship

1. The point was made that **it is important to ask and to continue to invite people to be involved.**
2. **Communication** was seen as an area to improve in terms of the community, the congregation as a whole, church committees and the church office.

3. **Welcome letters**” be sent out to new members, visitors and all who sign the “guest book”
4. Creation of a Book **about Grace Lutheran Congregation**, as an introduction for new people to discover who we are.
5. That we sponsor **interdenominational music sharing** (Jazz/ spirituals etc) and other concerts
6. Developing advertising-marketing opportunities
7. **Grant writing** to get some of the money that is out there that can be captured and utilized here at Grace Church.

Conclusions

During the course of this Appreciative Inquiry Process we have re-discovered what makes Grace Lutheran Church special. We have dreamed and imagined our hopes for Grace’s future.

We have started to design the map to Grace’s future and are now ready to take some of the small steps with the courage to take on some of bigger and bolder steps.

As we move into this future, we look for a Pastor who shares our hopes and dreams and will Shepard us into God’s Word.

Cephus Nolen, Jr.
Church Council President
Grace Lutheran Church
Hartford, CT