



**TUUCW Appreciative Inquiry Process:
Creating a Healthy and Resilient Culture**

Spring – Fall 2023

Executive Summary and Recommendation

In February 2023, The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Westport began an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process with the goal of bringing the congregation together after becoming disconnected from each other during Covid and experiencing a significant conflict related to a requested purchase of an organ. The goal of the AI process was to create a shared vision for the future, develop a process to help the membership make better, more transparent decisions and manage conflict more productively, and to develop an action plan to achieve these goals. The process included the appointment of a Core Team to lead the process, over 100 one-on-one interviews of congregants, two half-day summits and the development of an action plan with specific recommendations to move the congregation forward.

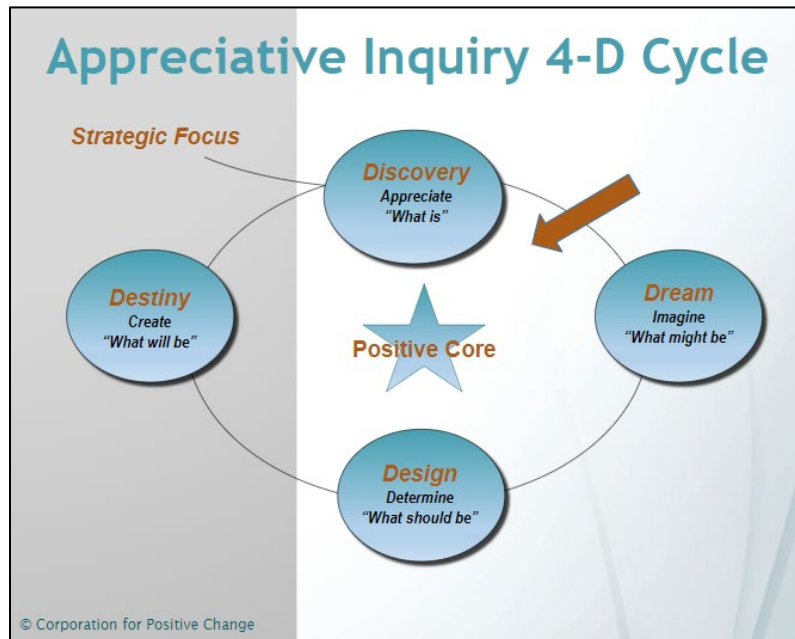
The AI Core Team believes that the application of the AI approach to our culture as a community of faith is of utmost importance as we continue our journey through uncertain times. Our initial action plan focused on six specific areas of interest: Decision-Making, Connection/Healing/Resilience, Communication, Worship, Spiritual Development and Social Justice. Many ideas were offered through the AI process and informed our initial recommendations. However, our action plan evolved over the summer as we were fortunate to hire a new contract minister (Reverend Alan Taylor) who has asked us to help him address the most immediate issues identified during our process, which include Decision-Making, Conflict Resolution and Connection. Thus, our immediate next steps will concentrate our efforts in those three areas. We will do this work in alignment with our UU Principles and our Covenant of Right Relations, which reflects our standards of behavior for how we will live together in community, as we affirm and promote dignity, justice, and compassion.

Introduction

In February 2023, The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Westport began an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process with the goal of bringing the congregation together after becoming disconnected from each other during Covid and experiencing a significant conflict related to a requested purchase of an organ. The goal of the AI process was to create a shared vision for the future, develop a process to help the membership make better, more transparent decisions and manage conflict more productively, and to develop an action plan to achieve these goals. Appreciative Inquiry has a strong track record in faith communities, including the Gathered Here process conducted by UUA nationally, as well as in our own congregation in 2011. It embraces a positive, generative philosophy, building on our individual and collective strengths to reconnect with each other and our beloved community. Our process was led by a diverse Core Team, chaired by Tom Hearne and Jim Francek, and supported by Barbara Lewis, a consultant from the Rocky Mountain Center for Positive Change.

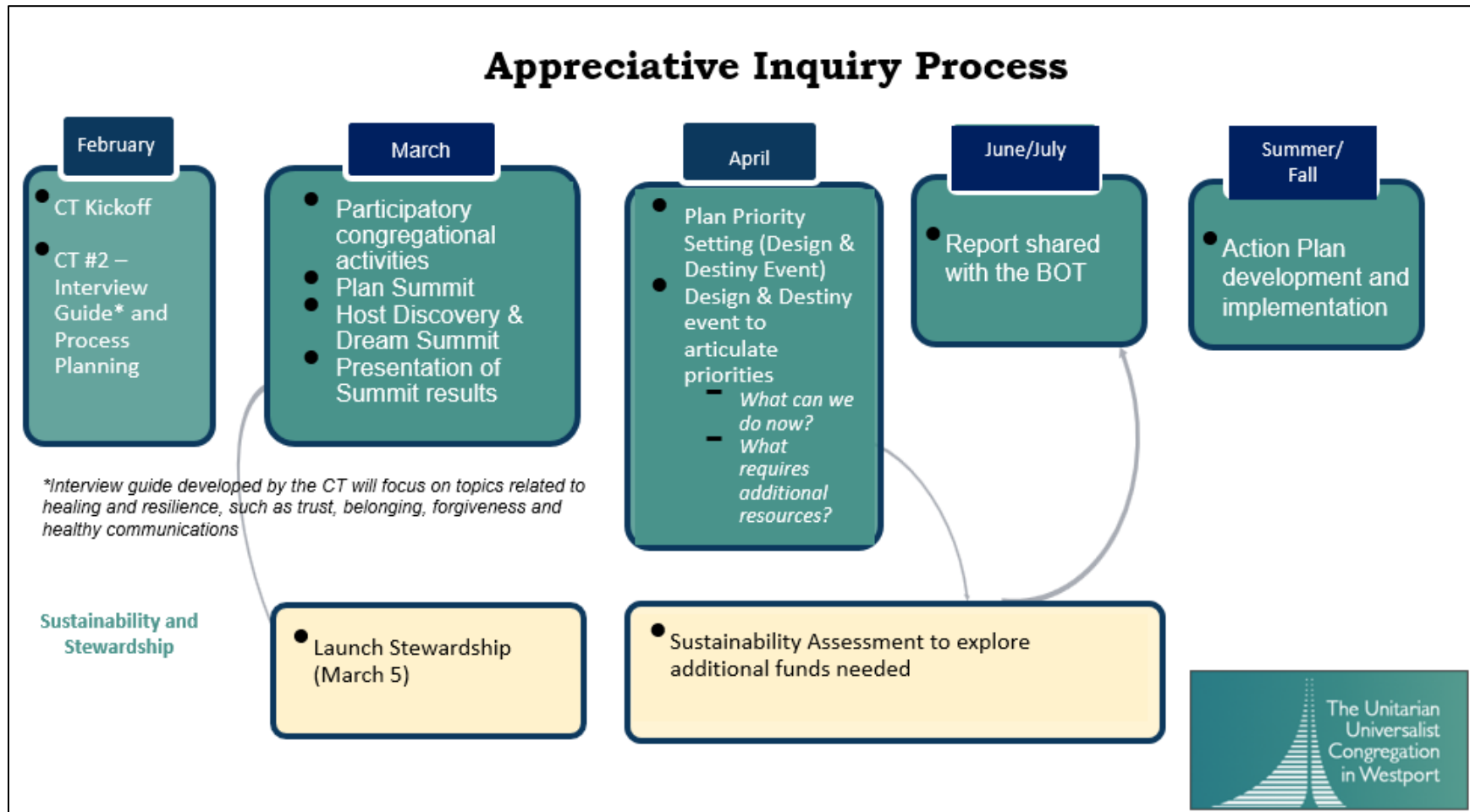
Background on the Appreciate Inquiry Process

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves the systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves the art and practice of asking positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten potential. When applied to conflicted situations, AI moves the conversation to a positive mode thus working towards a positive resolution. A graphic of the AI process is shown below.



The AI Process at TUUCW

The AI process at TUUCW took place from February to June 2023. The specific process we followed is shown below and overviews of the key steps and outcomes are detailed on the next few pages.



Member Interviews: The AI process began by doing one-on-one interviews with members of the congregation. The goal of the interviews was to learn why people had joined the TUUCW, what they valued most about the congregation, how it had made a positive difference in their lives, and what their hopes were for the future of the congregation. Stories about how the congregation has helped individual members were also collected. These interviews were done before and after the first Summit as well as during the Summit itself. In total, over 100 members were interviewed; they shared their personal stories and dreams for the future of TUUCW. This information provided insights that helped the Core Team develop the Positive Core of TUUCW (shown below), which is a reminder of the strengths, resources, and capabilities that together create capacity and make it possible to achieve the hopes, dreams, and goals of the congregation.

Positive Core of TUUCW

- We have space and support to explore our individual spirituality
- We enjoy a sanctuary that generates sacred transformation and inspiration
- We support youth on their path to self-discovery
- We work to ensure social justice in the community
- We have different forms of ministry
- We have power when we work together
- We provide community and support to each other

Discovery and Dream – Summit 1: On Saturday, March 18, the Discovery and Dream Summit was held at the congregation. The goal of this summit was to re-energize and reconnect our community by sharing each other’s stories, experiences, and dreams for moving our congregation forward with compassion, strength, and resilience. More than 45 people attended, and from that work, the Core Team developed a Vision Statement (shown below) that painted a desired future state for the congregation.

TUUCW AI Vision Statement:

“We see the good in yoUU!”

We are a welcoming, safe community that values and accepts you as you are. We commit to creating a healthy, resilient community that supports each other in making meaning through life's challenges. Our communications are respectful, honest, and transparent. We offer robust programming for all ages, from spiritual, musical, and educational activities, to social justice actions and community outreach. We offer calm in the midst of a world in turmoil, and personal connections to support you through life’s ups and downs.

Benchmarking: After the first Summit, the Core Team did some peer benchmarking of other UU congregations to learn from them what was working well and how they were addressing challenges. This work resulted in the development of some new ideas that were shared at the second summit..

Resignation of our Senior Minister: *Unfortunately, between the first and second Summits, our Senior Minister of 8 years unexpectedly announced his departure from our congregation. This announcement disrupted our congregation and the AI process and altered our planned outcomes to focus on more immediate issues such as community-building, decision-making, and conflict resolution. However, we continued our work and went ahead with the second summit.*

Design and Destiny – Summit 2: On Saturday, April 22, the Design and Destiny Summit was held. The goal of this summit was to create a plan for bringing our aspirations into reality, such as gaining clarity on how to create a healthy and thriving culture and creating a framework to implement specific plans as we moved forward into a bright future for our UU congregation. More than 40 people attended the summit, which successfully generated many good ideas for future action and resulted in six (6) design statements that paint a positive picture for the future of TUUCW.

Design Statements

Decision-making: *We create our future by embracing important decisions. For each decision, we explore the issues, create a process that is inclusive and transparent, and use democratic techniques that promote consensus.*

Connection: *We are a sincerely welcoming, diverse and safe community where connection happens throughout our programs and 'coming home' is what you feel when you arrive.*

Spiritual Development: *Our congregation actively seeks to better understand all cultures, faiths and ages. We challenge each other to develop & maintain spiritual practices that are rooted in our UU principles of tolerance and the search for truth.*

Communication: *Our communications deliver the right information at the right time in a format that recognizes that we all react to different communication methods. Our communications engage and inspire members and prospective members alike to build a strong connection to our congregation, our mission, and to each other.*

Design Statements (cont.)

Worship: *Worship at TUUCW is seen as a participatory, flexible, diverse and meaningful weekly experience for all ages. We interact in many ways, through song, movement, prayer, call and response, and enjoy a balance between spiritual, engaging sermons with funny, moving stories and multimedia presentations.*

Social Justice: *In our congregation, social justice AND social action feed our spiritual wholeness. We are able to grow and move forward into the multicultural beloved community we aspire to be. We openly and actively encourage self-examination of our privilege (whiteness, wealth, health, ability, education, etc.) to break down systemic, structural injustices inherent in institutions, including our own.*

Action Plan and Next Steps: After the second summit, the Core Team reviewed all the ideas and suggestions from the second summit and identified six specific areas of interest for future work (Decision-Making, Connection/Healing/Resilience, Communication, Worship, Spiritual Development and Social Justice). In June, we developed an initial action plan to address these topic areas based on the many ideas that came from the AI process. However, our action plan evolved over the summer as we were fortunate to hire a new contract minister (Reverend Alan Taylor) who has asked us to help him address the most immediate issues identified during our process, which include Decision-Making, Conflict Resolution and Connection. Our next steps are below.

- 1) Decision-Making:** As discussed during the AI process, our congregational decision-making process is not always clear and transparent, and our communication process about key decisions needs to be enhanced. To enhance this process, in partnership with Reverend Alan and the Board of Trustees, we will form a Decision-Making Transparency Task Force that will identify how decisions are made today - what group/person makes which decisions, the process they use to make decisions and how decisions are communicated - and will make recommendations to enhance this process in the future.
- 2) Conflict Resolution:** The AI process also uncovered that we need a better way to manage conflict and disagreement within our community. We want to be better at celebrating differences and resolving conflicts with love and respect. To address this, in partnership with Reverend Alan and the Committee on Ministry, we will be developing a more formal process to address conflict resolution, which will include training a team of conflict facilitators/coaches.
- 3) Connection:** The third issue that was identified was connection. There was a strong desire to enhance our connections with each other through our programs and activities so that new and current members feel welcome in our spiritual "home." To address this, we will support Reverend Alan in convening a Cultivating Connections Task Force to develop recommendations about how we can better foster connections amongst each other at TUUCW.

Appendix

Core Team Members

1. Jim Francek, Co-Lead
2. Tom Hearne, Co-Lead
3. David Boyd
4. Dayle Brownstein
5. Daniel Cano
6. Ruth Fontilla
7. Carol Hamilton
8. Lyn Kobsa
9. Heather Lau
10. Fred Marshall
11. Eileen O'Reilly
12. Naree Viner
13. Jerusha Vogel

THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION IN WESTPORT
COVENANT OF RIGHT RELATIONS
Adopted June 10, 2017

PREAMBLE

The purpose of a Covenant of Right Relations is to have a common understanding of our standards of behavior as we live together in community. A covenant is not a set of rules, but rather an aspirational promise for mutual support.

Disagreements are normal within a democratic community and every person must be given the opportunity to present opinions and concede with grace when necessary, in order to promote progress. Every church member is encouraged to engage in an honest and nonjudgmental discourse and respectful use of compromise to promote the greater good of the church community. When we are not in Right Relations, we must move toward understanding and recommitment.

The Unitarian Church in Westport strives to be an inclusive community, affirming our differences in beliefs, opinions and life experiences. This Right Relations covenant exists to bolster the Principles and Purposes of the UUA which is also a “covenant to affirm and promote” dignity, justice, and compassion in all of our congregations.

This congregation hereby adopts the Covenant of Right Relations and pledges to:

- Strive to create a safe place where all can express themselves freely.
- Speak honestly, mindful of the feelings of others.
- Listen with respect and consideration.
- Respect confidentiality and refrain from gossip.
- Accept personal responsibility for our words and actions.
- Display faith and trust in others.
- Honor differences of opinion and viewpoints.
- Stay engaged in order to work through differences.
- Uphold group decisions regardless of personal positions.
- Graciously seek peace and genuine reconciliation.
- Encourage the personal and spiritual growth of others.
- Honor and support the mission of our congregation.