

Planning, visioning, preparing

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Leadership takes place as we create environments for surfacing questions, and as a community forms stories in response that are generative of energy and renewed commitment in relation to those questions.

This is one of the central ways that we can see Parker Palmer's ideas at work in the church.

Today we're going to try to embody that epistemology around the challenge of educational leadership in a congregational setting. Part of what we have to do, as leaders, is not simply continue good programs and ideas from the past, but discern which of those ideas and programs could and should continue, and which we need to let go – all the while trying to make the process of this discernment deeply reflective and theological in character. The process itself needs to be a learning process.

Many communities are learning to do this through a process of “appreciative inquiry,” which is a research methodology now used across multiple arenas, and in cultures around the globe. Tonight we're going to use such a process to start thinking about baptism, and baptismal preparation.

There are many concepts and ideas that wind their way through such a process in a given congregation, but somewhere at the heart of that swirl are ideas that have to do with how we understand baptism and the “discipleship of all believers,” what we mean by faith formation or Christian education, how we embody lifelong learning, how we shape practices of faith, etc.

Clearly these ideas are neither static, nor easily defined, they can hold a lot of meaning for people, and how each term is defined, or how they are kept in creative tension, can differ from one person or one congregation to the next.

This evening we're exploring how we work with the dynamic tension of these terms. We're interested in helping a community elicit how they think about these terms, and what they might mean when they're generating positive energy. We do this because there are certainly times when a community is asked to surface a list of things going wrong, or interpretations that set up problems, but that kind of energy is not necessarily as helpful for navigating change in a community with deep divisions, as is a more generative process. So tonight, what we're after are the best *positive* examples and narratives that you've got.

We're going to start with some silent writing time, and then work to share what we're coming up with. We'll start with questions from an **overview** frame first, then we'll move to elicit specific ideas about discrete **value**, then I'll ask you to choose from what you're sharing something that you would identify (at least at this moment, in this conversation) as most **important**. And finally, I'll invite you to generate some **wishes** or dreams that point towards where a congregation might go in developing a plan for learning around baptism.

OVERVIEW (5 minutes)

So, start with writing/drawing silently for a few minutes. Think about an experience you've had that is a positive one having to do with baptism. Jot down a few notes about that story, that experience, and then think about what baptism meant for you in that moment, and what is continues to mean for you – as connected to that story.

VALUE (20 minutes)

Now turn to one other person and share your story, making sure to talk about how baptism fits into it. Make sure that you understand how you're using the term "baptism," and that you understand how your partner is using it. Help each other to recognize any similarities and differences.

After each of you have shared your story, see if you can identify the elements that made the story so positive, that made it a good memory in relation to baptism.

Each of you may understand baptism in different ways, and you may come up with different reasons why the story you shared was positive. Try to list three elements that were connected to the positive memories.

Don't judge or evaluate what you're coming up with, simply share the stories and be curious about what you can learn from them.

You might think about what made the experience of baptism work so well. What elements contributed to the generative elements of the experience? What happened to make it work? Who was involved? What about the context made it possible? Why do you think it was generative?

You might think about the meaning of baptism that was conveyed in your story. What contributed to the meaning? What elements of the experience hung in your memory, and why?

At the end of this time you should each have three generative elements of an experience associated with baptism. Make sure that you jot down some notes, so that you can share them.

MOST IMPORTANT (40 minutes)

Now, find another pair of people, so that you end up in a quartet. In this small group of four people, share – briefly—the gist of your stories, and share the three generative elements you identified within them.

Explore these elements for a while: what do they have in common? What differentiates them from each other? Are there some elements that only seem possible when specific experiences were present? Are there some elements that seem to emerge no matter which stories are being told?

See if you can draw a venn diagram on the paper that's available for drawing. Is there a picture that can help your group share with the wider group, how these generative elements relate to each other? Or how they are disconnected from each other?

Remember that these elements emerged for each of you in relation to a specific story. Now that you're this far into the exercise, are there other stories that have emerged for you around baptism? Are there other terms you would want to talk about? If you have time, share some of them in the quartet.

Of all the elements you've just identified in relation to these stories of baptism, what would you say is the single most important thing, the single most important factor, coming out of this

discussion? Is there a single value that seems to be emerging for you, personally, in these discussions? Is there anything that has emerged for your small group?

Create a post-it sheet that emerges from your small group that shares with the rest of us what you've been learning.

WISHES (5 minutes)

And finally, we're going to return to silent writing. In this section of time, I'd like you to think about some positive dreams or wishes for the future. While there will be other opportunities to note things you'd like to see changed, or to identify problems in the congregation or context, in this section of the process, I'd like you to imagine, for just a moment, three wishes you have for how the congregation you're thinking of could support deepening an understanding of baptism.

What are your three wishes?

Note: the key here is to invite imaginative engagement with a positive future. If you find yourself coming up with complaints instead, try to think about what it would look like if your complaint were reversed – if, that is, instead of pointing to a lack, you were pointing to a rich abundance of the thing the complaint identifies as lacking.

If you're finding it hard to stay focused on the positive, keep in mind that in the Bible even complaints are embedded in gratefulness (think about the Psalms). So we are trying to stay focused at this point in our process, on gratitude, on what God is bringing forth in our midst.

Write up your three wishes in a legible way on a colored post-it note, and place it in the space I've identified for them in our classroom.

COMMUNAL SHARING

Now take your break for the evening. At some point before we return to class, walk around and see what is written on the wishes wall, and look at the pictures/venn diagrams that have been drawn.

MOVING FORWARD

Given the definition and value eliciting we've just done, now we're ready to start to think about where these ideas currently exist in your context, what pieces you might need to contradict to get to these ideas, and what supports for these ideas exist there.

What questions emerged for you? What are the pieces – theological, educational, communal -- that you need to do some research on? These are pieces you should bring to the "choice books" that you're reading this term.

[Much of this process is based in the work of Mark Lau Branson, which is described in his book *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Alban Institute, 2004).]