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"Nothing astonishes men so much as common sense"
–Ralph Waldo Emerson

Wisdom of the World

Tertullian's oft-quoted question "What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?" presents a clear distinction, or opposition, between pagan philosophy and Christian revelation. This dichotomy has led some to hastily reject the insights of management theorists and practitioners in Christian ministry, although I recognize the concern of those who fear we are in danger of burying the gospel message in a misguided pragmatic pursuit of success and achievement, based upon the premise that the end justifies the means.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus relates a parable, in which a dishonest manager, accused by his master of irresponsibly wasting what he had been given to look after, acted in a shrewd, though fraudulent, manner to preserve his own interests (see Luke 16:1-13). In his comment on the parable, Jesus commends the steward not for his fraud nor for his self-centred goals, but specifically for his wisdom and perspicacity: "For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (Luke 6:8). The point of the parable is that those who have been given responsibility in the kingdom of God should be alert to all the resources that may be available to them in the fulfilment of what they are given to do. Whilst Jesus goes on to connect

the parable to friendships and the stewardship of money, it is helpful to consider his teaching in the context of opportunities to draw from the wisdom of the world in the affairs of the kingdom of God. May not "the world" have much to teach the "children of light" with regard to intelligence and astuteness?

In fact, the parable suggests that there is more to be said about pragmatism than a simple "ends-means" argument. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines pragmatism as "a practical approach to problems and affairs," whilst the American philosophical movement of the same name—originating at the end of the nineteenth century, and with which Charles Peirce and William James are most famously associated—argues that pragmatism, in its narrow sense, means that practical consequences give us the best insight into the truth of a particular notion. Let's take a closer look at William James, an American philosopher who has had a significant impact upon our understanding of pragmatism. Drawing upon his celebrated metaphysical riddle of the man going round the squirrel going round the tree—if a man circles round and round a tree, and a squirrel moves as fast in order to remain on the opposite side of the tree from him, does the man go round the squirrel or not?—James challenges his audience at a lecture series in 1906 to consider the practical meaning of "going round the squirrel." For James, pragmatism demands that we define our language and our terminology clearly, and this is achieved by thinking clearly about the *practical consequences* of alternative ideas. Rather than defining pragmatism in the pejorative sense of a willingness to compromise principles in the search for a solution to a particular problem or issue—the "what-works" scenario—James argues that a pragmatist "turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power."[1]

Practical Consequences

Pragmatism has value precisely because it invites us to think clearly about *practical consequences*: it proposes that a thing is meaningful if it leads to certain practical outcomes that have value, that make a measurable difference, in concrete human experience. Applied to Christian pastoral

1. James, *Pragmatism*, 28.

ministry, therefore, pragmatism is not to be automatically disparaged: it suggests that there may well be approaches and methodologies that have value within a theistic worldview. I regularly encounter Christians who have an immediate negative knee-jerk reaction whenever the language of pragmatism enters the conversation. Such a response—understandable in the light of contemporary managerial practices in some Christian church circles—is, however, another example of myopic thinking. As Brian Harris observes, pragmatic leaders "decide on the basis of what they think is most likely to succeed at the time—and clearly this is a dimension of decision-making that cannot be ignored. It is hard to motivate a group of people to do something that you think is unlikely to succeed."[2]

Throughout this book I have been championing the language of "both-and" over "either-or." I have also argued that a *reliance* upon methodology at the expense of mystery is both myopic and ultimately fruitless in the context of the gospel of grace: but that does not mean that methodologies should be dismissed as if they had nothing to offer in the outworking of the gospel in the diverse contexts in which the church finds itself. A management planning model, for example, may be a particularly useful framework for efficient utilization of available resources in order to accomplish desired church goals. Methodology is not to be thrown out of the window because it is capable of being corrupted: God calls his people to wise and efficient stewardship of resources.

The distinction to be made here is between *relying* on what the world has to offer and *plundering* from the world's inventory. An episode from the Old Testament may help us here. When God called Moses to lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, he added that he would "make the Egyptians favorably disposed towards this people so that when you leave you will not go empty handed" (Exod 3:21). So the Hebrews were enabled by God's grace to plunder, or spoil, the Egyptians of silver and gold and clothing, articles that they would find useful for their journey to the promised land. Likewise, the Christian community may find valuable resources available to them from the world of business management to facilitate their ministry in the world, resources that are not exclusive to those who do not participate explicitly in the life of the church. Plundering is radically different from being seduced by the promises of success offered by extreme proponents of pragmatism. The ultimate idolatry in this regard for those who are charged with pastoral leadership is the

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2. Harris, *Tortoise Usually Wins*, 35.

espousal of a managerial approach to pastoral ministry that *supplants* the call to participate in the gracious, liberating ministry of the Spirit in mobilizing the community of faith in its witness in and to the world. Methods designed to enhance the health and growth of the church— whatever their source—are therefore not wrong or inappropriate *per se* in the practice of Christian ministry: they have their place alongside a theology of participation in all that God is doing by his Spirit.

William James described himself as a supernaturalist, believing that there is more to reality than the physical, material world around us. His own religious beliefs inclined towards a form of pluralistic "open theism" (see chapter 3), and his pragmatic philosophy led him to subscribe to a belief in a metaphysical spiritual reality that gives rise to practical effects in the sensory world of human experience. His pragmatism is thus idea-generating rather than solution-focused, with an evident practical cash-value. Epistemologically, practical outcomes were, for James, a way into understanding the *truth* of a thing. Understandably, and rightly, Christians will be wary of a philosophical doctrine that sits light on the revelatory truth of the gospel, and to argue that the origin of truth lies in the concrete difference it makes to our lives is clearly subversive. However, one of the great triumphs of the pragmatic method lies in its celebration of "the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretence of finality in truth."[3] Here, it is the claim to certainty and finality with regard to truth that unsettles James; granted, his notion of truth as that which is ultimately validated by experience is problematic in its rejection of *a priori* metaphysical truth, but we should welcome his invitation to embrace pragmatism as a way of personal transformation: "Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work."[4]

Common Sense

Another way of presenting pragmatism as described above is to speak of the currency of "common sense." The virtue of common sense, hinted at above through the conceptual lens of pragmatism and later in this chapter through the methodological lens of Appreciative Inquiry, carries with it a number of meanings. Its more popular interpretation has to do with

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3. James, *Pragmatism*, 28.
4. Ibid., 28.

what is deemed to be sound judgment based upon an awareness of a situation that does not demand any special sort of knowledge. The essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed that nothing astonishes men so much as common sense. However, the phrase also conveys the idea of a basic perception that most people are expected to have naturally, even if they cannot explain it—in other words, it refers to a sense that is common to most people. This idea also draws in part from the Aristotelian notion that common sense—*sensus communis*—is the integration of all five senses in an overarching perception that simply "makes sense."

One particular area of congregational life that cries out for a common-sense application of prudent practice has to do with the faithful stewardship of resources, an activity requiring careful planning.[5] The idea of planning is not foreign to God. God has a plan for his creation, a plan that is unfolding through history until that time comes when all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together under one head, who is Christ (Eph 1:10). He had a plan for the exiles in Babylon: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). More specifically, God may reveal his plans to his servants in the face of opposition and difficulty, as Jehoshaphat discovered when he prayed to the Lord—"We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chr 20:12)—and God's plan gave victory to the Israelites. It is the privilege and responsibility of those in pastoral ministry to discern what is in God's heart as they seek to lead the church as his delegated "managers." Man may propose, but ultimately it is God who disposes: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Prov 19:21). Christian management starts with the recognition that God has plans that need to be prayerfully discerned. It is in the execution of these plans that those in pastoral ministry can most usefully draw from the experience and wisdom of the business world, the arena with which organizational planning is most commonly associated.

Good management theory recommends the adoption of clearly defined objectives. Clear-cut goals present, for all involved in pastoral ministry, great opportunities for focused prayer, enabling a congregation to be specific in its understanding of and commitment to God's purposes. Good planning also requires that a faith-community recognize its own strengths and weaknesses in the light of God's vision for its future. As a

5. The following paragraphs on planning and Appreciative Inquiry draw from earlier material in Buxton, *Celebrating Life*, chapter 7.

result, the resources and changes needed to realize the fulfilment of that vision will be more readily discerned. Knowing what exactly is going on *within* the community of faith as well as *externally* within the ministry environment—often referred to as auditing—demands both honesty and perseverance. Business executives ruthlessly assess their internal resources of finance, human personnel, and technology, and their external environment in the form of competitive threats and market opportunities. Likewise, there is value in wisely and carefully discerning the inner strengths and weaknesses of a congregation, as well as appreciating the specific context within which pastoral ministry takes place.

Appreciative Inquiry

A constructive model to help a congregation discover how to prepare for its future by appreciating its strengths is a process called, appropriately, Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is an approach that focuses on "the generative and creative images that can be held up, valued, and used as a basis for moving towards the future."[6] In his application of AI to the First Presbyterian Church (historically an ethnically Japanese church), located in Altadena, California, Mark Lau Branson treats the church as an organic, interpretive community, discovering how to draw on its own inner strengths, defined as significant "life forces" that are available in stories and imaginations.[7] As the congregation explores these life forces, new habits and ways of living arise out of the conversations that take place, offering positive scenarios for the future.

Branson argues that Appreciative Inquiry is "more than just a planning method—it is a way of seeing and creating."[8] It "begins with the conviction that organizations are mysteries to be embraced rather than problems to be solved."[9] AI describes a process of congregational reshaping that is grounded in the ongoing life of its members. However, it is not a random exercise. Though it relies critically upon people's self-understanding and memories, it follows a sequence of four steps—Initiate, Inquire, Imagine, and Innovate—within the framework of a clear commitment to positive narratives and images. Branson's study is an excellent

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6. Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 30.

7. Branson, *Memories, Hopes.*

8. Ibid., 203.

9. Harris, *Tortoise Usually Wins*, 89.

example of how a specific approach that has its origins in the discipline of organizational development[10] can be tailored to a local church, or indeed to any Christian organization.

Since, as we have argued, Christians should not have a knee-jerk reaction against pragmatism, but ever seek to protect or redeem it from ungodly influences, the next step following the auditing process is to explore both prayerfully *and* pragmatically the various options available to fulfil God's vision in the light of what has been discovered. Business executives are accustomed to distinguishing between strategy and tactics, a differentiation picked up in the church growth literature. Strategic planning is broad, whereas tactical planning addresses the details. For example, if a local congregation is convinced of a God-given vision to engage more authentically with the elderly in the community, then it may explore a number of alternative strategies: the provision of a drop-in centre on the church premises; a visiting program involving members of the congregation; special services geared to older folk; a special "Alpha" initiative amongst the elderly; prayer-partnership programs; ministry opportunities in homes for the elderly; the list is endless. These are the strategies that need to be brought before God in prayer as well as before the congregation with regard to practicality.

Of course, the possibility that the Spirit may lead the congregation into new, unexpected opportunities for ministry must never be discounted. In his discussion of Appreciative Inquiry, Branson cites the relevance of insights from chaos theory, a term in the natural sciences that refers not to total disorder, but to unaccountable natural processes in which extraordinarily complex patterns arise unpredictably out of turbulence. He notes:

> In churches, we often attempt to set up some order and purpose only to be repeatedly surprised. A sermon has unintended consequences, one program unexpectedly undercuts another program, or new energy arises when we sense only dissipation. As churches begin to use long-range planning, based on some kind of predictability, we often spend more time adjusting the plan than we did creating it originally. . . . AI theorists hold that by embracing the chaos—gaining new perceptions, imagining new futures—we have a better chance at nurturing the life-giving forces that are available to us.[11]

10. See the "AI Commons" at http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/.
11. Branson, *Memories, Hopes*, 234. For a fuller perspective on the contributions

For Branson, applying an Appreciative Inquiry approach to church leadership involves "order at the edge of chaos." He challenges the conventional "business" model for church management, with its reliance upon linear, hierarchical, cause-and-effect systems behavior. Conventional management systems are *not* the stuff of church life, he argues:

> [T]his leads to management by separate functions, applying certain forces, measuring resources and output, maintaining power structures, and making changes by altering a power or a force. . . . In this interpretive approach, the goal of church ministry is to find the staff and develop the programs that can fill the required pews. Business language fits this framework: products and services, marketing and sales, managers and marketers."[12]

What Branson is eschewing here is not management approaches *per se*, but those models that derive from a traditional, *mechanistic* model of business. His application of AI involves processes and sequences that resonate with sound and efficient ways of operating, seeking to obtain the most hopeful scenarios for the future. At the same, time, however, the AI process is thoroughly relational in its orientation, consistent with much contemporary rethinking about management practices. Once the specific strategy or strategies have been discerned, the particular details can be worked out in relation to congregational strengths and weaknesses. This is the "nuts-and-bolts" part of planning, in which every faith-community finds itself involved at different times. At all stages everyone should be offered the opportunity to participate in God's vision for the church in its witness in and to the world. Congregational ownership of the vision, in all its myriad expressions, inevitably encourages the sort of commitment and unity that is sadly lacking in many churches today. The specific example of Appreciative Inquiry discussed above is one approach drawn from the field of management that seeks to promote the best and highest future for the faith community.

The example of planning described above, with specific reference to the Appreciative Inquiry approach to organizational change, is a good example of a "common-sense" approach to congregational management, without ever losing sight of the role of the Spirit in leading the whole process. It is not a question of the leading of the Spirit *or* the leadership

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of quantum theory, complexity and chaos theory for management, see Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science.*

12. Branson, *Memories, Hopes*, 31.

of those who have been given the responsibility of managing the AI process: it is "both-and." Human beings have been blessed by God with many gifts, including the faculties of reason and discernment, and overseeing the AI approach to organizational change demands both the application of human aptitude and the discernment of divine direction.

Future Scenarios

Typically, the application of Appreciative Inquiry in a local church will result in the development of a series of future scenarios, presented in the form of "this is what the church will look like if the outcomes of the AI approach were applied over the next few years." The process usually commences with a meeting of members of the leadership team in order to become familiar with Appreciative Inquiry, and to allay fears about its secular origins. It is important at the outset that they acknowledge that the Spirit speaks to God's people in many ways—through the proclamation of his Word, through prayer, as spiritual gifts are exercised, and through other spiritual means. What is sometimes forgotten, however, representing a central insight in AI, is that the Spirit often chooses to reveal himself *through his people* as they recall all that he has done in their lives. To recall the specific acts of God in our lives, and to value them with gratitude is to affirm the reality of "I am the Lord your God . . . ." The reality of God's self-revelation is affirmed *in the context of our human experiences*, in the remembrance of the concrete acts of God in human lives, not as an abstract proposition. In other words, Appreciative Inquiry—used thoughtfully and carefully—does not attempt to replace the person and work of Christ through the Spirit with human stories: rather, it may be a powerful means of affirming Christ's presence amongst us. As church leaders spend time together in thought and prayer, they are encouraged to believe that as Christians share their stories of God's grace at work in their lives, Christ will become known in new and fresh ways in their midst, offering hope and possibility. This, of course, reflects the experience of God's people in the Old Testament—as the Israelites rehearsed the narratives of God's saving actions among them, they discovered fresh hope for the future, especially in the midst of uncertainty and adversity.

As people in a congregation are encouraged to share about what they value most as they reflect on God's presence amongst them over past years, narratives of appreciation rise to the surface. Some of the

stories—testimonies of God's goodness—may be personal: healing, strength in adversity, forgiveness, reconciliation. Other stories will be memories of how God has moved amongst the congregation. In addition, the Appreciative Inquiry process invites the faith community to share their hopes and dreams for the church. Thankfulness for God's life amongst his people—past, present, and future—serves to encourage us to look forward with faith and hope to all that he plans to do in the future, both within the life of the church and within the community that we are called to serve. At all times those who are involved in facilitating the Appreciative Inquiry process need both wisdom and sensitivity: wisdom in faithfully interpreting and recording the narratives that are shared, and sensitivity to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. What is important at all times is the need to hear *the people's* stories of Christ's presence and blessing, to hear how God's Word has come alive for them, to discover what they value most about the church as a community of God's people seeking to be his witnesses in the community. As a result of the narration, recording and collation of many memories, hopes, and stories of God at work in a particular local church and in the community surrounding it, a number of key scenarios will emerge, offering positive images for God's future amongst his people at the church.

In one particular congregation known to me they took the following form, shaped (as mentioned earlier) in terms of present experience: living God's truth, celebrating God's life, welcoming change, connecting creatively, applying the Word, responding to the Spirit, and equipping the leaders. Taken together, these proposals represented signposts of what a particular faith community aspired to be and do under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and they were necessarily fleshed out more fully in order to help the congregation determine the specific steps needed to move forward into God's future. Here is an abridged version of those proposals:

1. *Living God's truth*. We are a growing congregation of God's people, young and old, diverse in culture and social background, who seek not just to hear the truth proclaimed, but to live that truth in our common life together and in the way that life is given expression in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, and in the local community.

2. *Celebrating God's life*. We are a community of faith that recognizes the presence of the kingdom outside the borders of the church, and that God is active in his world by his Spirit; we therefore give regular

opportunities for members of the congregation to share about the things that God is doing in the local community as well as further afield, including overseas.

3. *Welcoming change.* We are a congregation that is open to change, not for its own sake, but in order to reflect the reality that we live in a changing world. Whenever we gather together as God's people we are continually open to the Holy Spirit to inspire us to give creative and imaginative expression to God's life in us, recognizing that we all have gifts and talents to offer.

4. *Connecting creatively.* Because we are a kingdom people, we are continually seeking new ways of communicating God's unchanging Word that resonate with our changing culture, engaging with the local community in ways that respond to significant needs, building bridges and giving fresh expression to what it means to "be church" in the community.

5. *Applying the Word.* As a congregation of people who love and value the Scriptures as God's truth, seeking to live that truth in our daily lives, we are discovering new ways, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to take the taught Word and to apply it to our own lives.

6. *Responding to the Spirit.* Whilst the sermon remains central in our teaching and learning, we also value opportunities for new ways of "being church," open to the Spirit to guide us, not only in the way we structure our times together, but also in the rich and surprising ways that he is at work spontaneously amongst us.

7. *Equipping the leaders.* Our leadership structures are flexible and organic in order to help us to respond effectively to the direction in which the Holy Spirit is taking us. Leadership training is an integral part of our internal church ministry, with the goal not only of "equipping God's people for the work of ministry" but also of raising up new leaders who have a heart for God's kingdom.

In a similar Appreciative Inquiry initiative in an Episcopal church in Minnesota, USA, a number of significant themes in its common life and ministry emerged: the importance of food, a deep commitment to hospitality, variety in worship and spiritual practices, the role of the arts in worship, fellowship, and prayer, connecting with the neighborhood, the importance of intergenerational ministry, and welcoming innovation, creativity, and change. The AI model is now widely used in many different

denominational churches throughout the world. As evidenced above in the experience of two particular Christian congregations, it is much more than a method of planning an organization's future: rather, it represents a new way of *visualizing*, and then *entering into*, congregational life. When implemented sensitively, graciously, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it offers a compilation of inviting and appealing gospel-affirming scenarios of what God's future truly can be. In the next chapter we shall briefly examine the implications of AI for those who are called to leadership within the life of the church.

Gratitude and Positive Thinking

Appreciative Inquiry has its origins in the 1990s at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management in the United States, but clearly it has great value beyond its initial relevance to business management. If, as argued at the beginning of this chapter, pragmatism's merit is grounded in an event, process, or action that leads to certain practical outcomes that have value, that make a measurable difference, in concrete human experience (following William James' focus on practical consequences), then Appreciative Inquiry has the potential of being an extremely useful pragmatic method for congregational life. Many local churches approach their future by asking questions that address some of the things that are going wrong: the problem-solving approach. Conceptually AI is radically different because it seeks to reveal what is good and right in an organization, not what needs to be fixed. It builds upon the important principles of *gratitude* and *positive thinking*, no strangers to the biblical/Christian frame of reference—in his letters, the apostle Paul often wrote about the importance of thankfulness, and in Phil 4:8 we read his exhortation: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." This verse alone would serve as an appropriate mantra for AI.

Whenever we import approaches such as AI from business into the community of faith, we need to ask two questions. Firstly, does the methodology serve the ultimate, eschatological, new-creation purposes of God? More specifically, does it serve God's revelation of his will for us, in this place where we now live and have our being? Secondly, if so, is the methodology *in itself* a legitimate expression of the goodness and

righteousness of God? Thus we are to constantly evaluate methodology in the light of theology and God's ministry in the world. Pragmatic methodology drawn from business management is valid if, and only if, it passes through these two filters. Appreciative Inquiry is one organizational model that offers the possibility of points of contact between the business world and Christians who want to become more efficient in the way they engage in ministry in and for the world. Grounded in the virtue of common sense, it represents one constructive example of how the wisdom of the world can usefully inform the practice of Christian ministry.