

## ***Encouraging a Positive Outlook: The Benefits of Appreciative Inquiry in a Theological Library***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Librarians face a future of rapid and disconcerting change, and it is increasingly important to address this change in a constructive way. In contrast to problem-solving approaches that focus on the negative, Appreciative Inquiry helps staff recognize the good attributes of their organization and explore ways to build on those strengths for the future. This study investigated the application of Appreciative Inquiry in the context of a theological library at Trinity International University. Interviews and a summit meeting were held with staff to elicit positive characteristics of the library and their jobs. These results were then used to suggest proposals for the future. The process itself is a useful way to transform the culture of a library and create an environment that welcomes positive change.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The context of academic libraries is changing rapidly, a prospect that can be disconcerting for many librarians. Changes in technology, the growth of online resources, budget cuts, and pressures to expand online education present librarians with an array of challenges that are both compressed and unrelenting. Within that milieu of constant change, librarians have the choice to face the future with confidence and hope or uncertainty and fear.

Negative emotions can hinder progress and create numerous problems along the way. Negativity and apparently intractable problems need not paralyze an institution. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a method for addressing these reactions in a positive, potentially transformative way. In contrast to the more familiar problem-solving model, AI unearths and explores the positive attributes of an organization and builds on them. This can be a valuable tool for addressing crisis, conflict, and constant change.

This article will explore the usefulness of applying AI at a theological library. A study was conducted using AI at Rolwing Library at Trinity International University. Like many theological libraries, Rolwing has a history of challenges, including economic crises, limited resources, and interpersonal conflict, all of which have the potential to lead to a climate laced with negative emotions. Recent budget cuts have threatened to overwhelm positive changes in the library. The practice of AI, particularly when deeply integrated into the library's culture, has the power to promote a life-giving, constructive environment.

The first half of the article will describe AI, including its development, theoretical constructs, and models for application. Because it is being applied in the context of a seminary library, theological issues will also be addressed. The second half of the paper will describe the study that was conducted with the Rolwing Library staff. The methodology, results, and provocative proposals for this study can provide a model for other libraries to follow. This study demonstrates that AI can effectively promote a more positive culture in a theological library.

### **BACKGROUND OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY**

AI was developed in 1985 by David Cooperrider as part of his dissertation work at Case Western Reserve University. The traditional problem-solving approach involves focusing on what is not working and finding methods for resolving issues. Cooperrider decided instead to investigate the positive attributes of an organization. He interviewed staff to

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discover success stories and determine ways to encourage further success. This positive approach spread throughout the organization and affected the staff's conversations and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Cooperrider and his dissertation advisor, Suresh Srivastva, published the results of this study.<sup>2</sup> The concepts were then applied in many other contexts, including businesses, international NGOs (non-governmental organizations), community organizations, and other groups.

AI involves the open exploration of what is valuable, successful, and life-giving about an organization, which can then lead to positive changes. Further, it proposes that “questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational. In short, AI suggests that human organizing and change at its best is a relational process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.”<sup>3</sup> It is a process of questioning and dialogue with people in order to create a more positive organizational culture. One of the primary benefits of AI is how it helps people think about and approach their work. It is not hierarchical and ideally should include people at all levels in dialogue and in proposing change.

AI argues that choosing to think, speak, and act positively can have an impact. This is the main difference between AI and the traditional problem-solving approaches. Problem-solving or the “deficit-based approach” makes the problem the center of attention.<sup>4</sup> This can lead to negative impressions that the problems are overwhelming and more significant than the positives. However, this does not mean that problems should be ignored or dismissed. One of the primary concerns with AI is that it focuses on the positive and seems “Pollyannish.” Indeed, one should not make the error of ignoring or hiding problems. AI encourages looking at problems, but reframing them as opportunities for positive growth, rather than debilitating obstacles. In a fallen world, there will always be problems. However, problems are not “the only quality that is present in life or organizations. In addition to suffering, there is joy. In addition to problems, there are successes, hopes, and dreams.”<sup>5</sup> AI reminds people of these positives and mobilizes this hope to work toward a better world.

There are different models for applying AI. The most common is the “4-D Cycle.” This stands for “discovery, dream, design, and destiny.”<sup>6</sup> The 4-I model, or “initiate, inquire, imagine, and innovate,” was chosen because it was seen as best fitting the TIU context, which utilizes similar language in its strategic plan.<sup>7</sup> Planning is conducted during the “initiate” phase, including deciding on a process and focus to the study. Interviews are conducted during the “inquire” phase. For the “imagine” phase, the results of the interviews are examined to determine key themes and recommend provocative proposals. During the final phase, “innovate,” people in the organization are involved in implementing the changes.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these overall models, institutions have used a variety of methods for implementing the AI process. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom describe eight different approaches that have been effective. The two that were used for this study were the Whole-System 4-D Dialogue and the Appreciative Inquiry Summit. The Whole-System 4-D Dialogue lasts from a few months to a year, and interviews are conducted throughout the organization in order to identify and build on strengths. The Appreciative Inquiry Summit is a multi-day meeting that incorporates a large

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Kaplin Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: A Practical Guide to Positive Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 82.

<sup>2</sup> David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life,” in *Research in Organizational Change and Development: An Annual Series Featuring Advances in Theory, Methodology and Research*, Vol. 1, ed. Richard W. Woodman and William A. Pasmore (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1987), 129–169.

<sup>3</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change*. (Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore Communications, 2003), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2011), 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

number of people and is often focused on a particular topic.<sup>9</sup> The Roling Library study utilized shortened versions of these two processes.

## APPLYING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN A THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY CONTEXT

AI has been applied in a variety of situations. Previous studies have examined the application in the context of either theological settings or the context of libraries. This study seeks to combine these contexts by applying AI at a theological library. Particular issues related to theology and libraries will be examined in this section.

### Theology and Appreciative Inquiry

For theological librarians and academics, it is important to establish the theological validity of AI. If the theory espouses ideas that are contrary to biblical theology, this would create problems in applying it at a theological institution. Fortunately, many of the principles of AI fit well with key theological themes. For example, the Bible gives commands about being grateful and thinking positively, demonstrates the usefulness of stories and images, and values community and interconnectedness. Most centrally, the Bible describes finding joy and hope in the midst of problems and darkness. All of these concepts closely parallel AI concepts.

One of the foundational principles of AI regards focusing on the positive. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom call this the “Positive Principle,” which suggests building on positive aspects of a situation. Passages such as Philippians 4:8 (NIV) echo the idea of choosing to think positively. Paul, while in prison waiting for his execution in Rome, wrote, “Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.” Although Paul was in a distressing situation, he reacted by focusing on positive ideas, and he encouraged the church in the Philippi to do the same. Paul repeats the instruction to rejoice in numerous other passages, which is an indication of the strength of the command.<sup>10</sup> Henri Nouwen describes how gratitude is a choice that can be embraced and is a discipline that requires a conscious choice. He says, “I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint.”<sup>11</sup> Gratitude is not optional in the Bible; it is a command.

Another aspect of AI is the importance of stories and images. The “Narrative Principle” states that stories are powerful, while the “Anticipatory Principle” describes how our vision affects the future.<sup>12</sup> Much of the Bible is written in the form of a story. There are frequent commands in the Old Testament for the Israelites to remember their heritage, which gives them context for their identity and future. The story of the Exodus is both recounted and reenacted as a powerful reminder of God’s goodness and rescue in the midst of a desperate situation. In the New Testament, Paul encourages Christians to remember the story of Christ, which is the foundation for their faith.<sup>13</sup> Jesus used stories and parables to illustrate his principles, and the prophets used striking visual imagery to portray future events. Likewise, it is helpful for modern Christians to remember the history of their faith and to have a clear vision for the future.

The idea of community and interconnectedness is also central to AI. The “Wholeness Principle” encourages people to look at the whole picture, particularly how people are interconnected.<sup>14</sup> The importance of community and our responsibility to each other is emphasized in the Bible. The commands in the Psalms and Philippians to rejoice are

<sup>9</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 31–36.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see 2 Corinthians 13:11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, and Hebrews 12:28. In Philippians 3:1, Paul even remarks about how often he has repeated the command to rejoice.

<sup>11</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image, 1993), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 53.

communal commands rather than individual ones.<sup>15</sup> AI has also been used for interfaith dialogue as a way to focus on the positive commonalities among different faiths. For example, AI was used by the United Nations to create a global interfaith organization.<sup>16</sup> Different denominations have used AI and written about their experiences, including Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches.<sup>17</sup> Paddock's study on AI and Catholic theology describes how both value the inter-connectedness of all members.<sup>18</sup> AI's emphasis on community can thus fit well in the communal settings of churches.

Finally, the Bible describes how Christians can rejoice in the midst of problems and suffering in life. The Bible does not ignore problems, and at times it even starkly depicts the fallen nature of our world. However, it provides a model for how to be joyful in spite of the world's brokenness. Branson notes that the secular practice of AI can sometimes ignore "lament and confession" as part of the AI process, because there is the danger of becoming stuck in the negativity.<sup>19</sup> However, Christian theology provides a place both for mourning and also the ability to move past sorrow to joy. God's grace provides redemption and an answer to the problems of sin. What was formerly a source of sorrow can be a source of joy because of the redemption that has been experienced. In talking about his thorn in the flesh, Paul says, "I delight in weaknesses" (2 Cor. 12:10). The Psalms provide a good example of rejoicing in the midst of suffering. Brueggeman describes how even the Psalms that involve sorrow and frustration end with words of praise and hope.<sup>20</sup> The psalmists are able to recognize their problems, but they do not end in despair. Branson describes this mindset:

Christian faith lives fully in reality — facing the darkness of any age, knowing our own weaknesses and sins and follies, resigning from any ideas about saving ourselves or generating our own hopes. When we enter God's grace with gratitude we can be honest about our circumstances and ourselves. Gratitude alters our perceptions so we can see and receive more of God.<sup>21</sup>

Theology thus not only agrees with AI concepts, it can add support to the theory regarding how to be grateful despite problems. A Christian worldview provides ultimate hope for a positive future and the resolution of sin.

### Libraries and Appreciative Inquiry

In addition to aligning with Christian theology, AI works well within the context of libraries. The library world is facing many changes, and contemplating the future of libraries can generate negative emotions of fear and anxiety. However, the changing technology and culture can also be perceived as exciting. It is an opportunity for librarians to be reenergized and rethink services as they focus on the core mission of providing access to needed resources, even in a digital world. Hillenbrand argues that change can be seen as an occasion for transformation, rather than a crisis. Contrary to the feared decline of libraries, she argues that libraries have a crucial role to play in the twenty-first century, which she calls the "century of the mind." The amount of information readily accessible is growing exponentially and can be difficult to manage. There is thus an increased need for skilled managers of information.<sup>22</sup> Hillenbrand says that librarians often have a poor self-image, and that they need to act with more confidence in order to play a strong role

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: a Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 245; G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 288.

<sup>16</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 83–84.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Star Paddock, *Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church* (Plano, TX: Thin Book, 2003); Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*; Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change*, 234–235.

<sup>18</sup> Paddock, *Appreciative Inquiry in the Catholic Church*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations*, 52–53.

<sup>22</sup> Candy Hillenbrand, "Librarianship in the 21st Century — Crisis or Transformation?" *Australian Library Journal* 54, no. 2 (May 2005): 174.

in the future.<sup>23</sup> Rather than lamenting the perceived idea that libraries are undervalued on campuses, it can be an opportunity to work to demonstrate value and improve services.<sup>24</sup>

Bull agrees that it is possible to challenge the negative emotions involved with passively feeling that change is happening, whether it is desired or not. The challenge is to focus instead on constructive actions the individual can take to bring about positive change.<sup>25</sup> Instead of seeing themselves as victims of technology and cultural change, librarians need to be empowered to make a difference in the future. Going through the process of AI with fellow librarians can be useful in promoting a more active and hopeful attitude to change.

The application of AI in libraries has been examined in only a few studies. Sullivan and Kelly both note that libraries have been slow to adopt this approach because it is counter to the problem-solving approach generally used in libraries.<sup>26</sup> Sullivan suggests ways to incorporate AI into the everyday functioning of the library. Language is powerful, and positive words are more life-giving than those that focus on problems. She suggested creating a recognition program that will reward a variety of accomplishments. Along with this, leaders should remember the Pygmalion effect, and expect the best from each person.<sup>27</sup> In another study, Simons and Havert describe the recent application of AI at the University of Notre Dame during a time of leadership transition and strategic planning. Staff were expressing negative emotions related to “accountability, development and training, and employee-manager relationships.” Using AI helped to keep these attitudes from being debilitating and instead led to positive changes.<sup>28</sup>

The research presented here further contributes to the study of AI in libraries by focusing on theological libraries. Seminaries have a particular advantage with AI, because staff often have a higher sense of mission and calling, as they view their work as service for God. This sense of mission can be utilized in helping to create a positive vision for the future. Sullivan says, “The image of the future guides current behavior in any organization. Organizations evolve in the direction of their most compelling image of the future.”<sup>29</sup> The AI process can help remind people of their vision, as well as helping to delineate it more clearly.

## APPLYING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AT ROLFING LIBRARY

This study demonstrates how AI can be helpfully applied at a particular theological library. Rolfing Library serves a seminary, as well as a liberal arts college and graduate school at Trinity International University. The school has a total of 2,800 students at three different campuses and multiple extension sites. The main Deerfield campus has 1,200 seminary students and 750 traditional undergraduate students. The library has ten full-time staff and approximately twenty part-time student workers.

Like many libraries, Rolfing has faced challenges both past and present, which make the practice of AI a helpful process. The most significant issues have involved limited budgets and interpersonal conflicts. AI, along with other endeavors, has built a sense of teamwork among the library staff that has helped them to face difficulties more positively and make improvements despite the obstacles.

The AI study was conducted by three students from a doctoral class on leadership in the Educational Studies program. The goal was to conduct a pilot study with the hope of extending AI to the rest of the campus. Other areas of campus

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>24</sup> Tricia Kelly, “A Positive Approach to Change: The Role of Appreciative Inquiry in Library and Information Organisations,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 41, no. 3 (2010): 172.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Bull, “Managing the Emotional Side of Change,” *Library Mosaics* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 11.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, “A Positive Approach to Change,” 173; Maureen Sullivan, “The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations,” *Library Trends* 53, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 223.

<sup>27</sup> Sullivan, “The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations,” 228.

<sup>28</sup> Marcy Simons and Mandy L. Havert, “Using Appreciative Inquiry to Support a Culture Shift in Transition,” *Technical Services Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2012): 210, doi:10.1080/07317131.2012.681285.

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, “The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations,” 222.

were considered for inclusion in the study, but the initial study was limited to the library in order to provide a manageable test group for the purposes of the course.

The three facilitators developed interview questions to help generate positive discussion about the library and its future (see Figure 1).

<b>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</b>
<p><b>Opening Questions</b></p> <p>Please think about your entire experience at Roling Library.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. When were you most alive, most motivated and excited about your work at the Library?</li> <li>b. What happened? What was it about your situation, organization, colleagues, or yourself that enabled this to occur?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Value Questions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you value most about a) your work? b) the library, and c) TIU in general?</li> <li>2. What are the most important activities?</li> <li>3. What are the most valuable things you contribute to the library? Think of your personality, skills, perspectives. What are some sources of pride for you in your work?</li> <li>4. What is something unique or a strength that Trinity (or the library) can bring to the future of Christian higher education?</li> <li>5. What is something from the past you think should be preserved, even as we change?</li> </ol>
<p><b>Wishes</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Make a wish for the future of a) the library and b) the university at large.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Future</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How can changes in technology and culture be utilized to help Trinity in its mission?</li> <li>2. a) Thinking of the three pillars of the strategic plan (innovate, collaborate, and influence) how do you see the library in support of these? b) If success were guaranteed, what bold action would we take?</li> <li>3. Imagine twenty years into the future and all of the pressing problems of today's Christian higher ed libraries have been solved — what role has this library or Trinity played?</li> </ol>

Figure 1. Interview questions for Roling Library study.

Hour-long interviews were conducted with nine staff members, including six full-time staff and three student workers. The interviews were recorded and subsequently summarized. The facilitators analyzed the collected data and looked for emerging themes from the findings.

### Key Themes

Six primary themes were identified: (1) the importance of relationship, (2) long-term commitment, (3) attitude of service, (4) use of technology, (5) desire for academic excellence, and (6) desire to improve the physical structure of the library. Christian values and diversity were interwoven throughout these themes.

Relationships with other library staff are valued for providing friendship, mentoring, a sense of community, and teamwork. Several of the participants noted that one of the things they appreciate most about the library is their colleagues and the relationships they have with each other. The atmosphere was described as “like a family unit.” One staff member said that her co-workers are close, intimate friends: “It’s not just like they are my work friends. They are really friends, and they care about my personal stuff too.”



Staff commitment was a surprising and encouraging discovery of the study. Two young staff members in particular showed remarkable commitment during the interviews. One noted that “even if I spend the rest of my life with what I am doing now, I would not mind. I will be completely contented to stay. I really enjoy my job that much.” Likely reasons for this commitment include job responsibilities and community. These staff members expressed a sense of purpose and accomplishment in their jobs. There is also a sense of efficacy in being able to initiate improvements. One staff member said, “I am proud of the new initiatives that are started. I believe that I have brought excitement to the staff with new technology.... The willingness to listen to new ideas is exciting.” Providing the opportunity for staff to initiate new ideas and projects is important, even in a context of limited resources. Staff felt a sense of connection and community with their colleagues at the library. Building a sense of community and relationship can therefore be a worthwhile endeavor to increase employee satisfaction.

Service is a strong value for the staff. One said, “[What] I value about my work is knowing that I am helping students and faculty with their research.” The concept of service also includes changing as the world of libraries change. Another librarian noted that the library is becoming less centered on books, saying that “we [see] ourselves in the library becoming more of a service center to professionally equip ourselves and improve our ability to serve our clientele.” In general, the staff were positive and energized by the ideas of change.

The technology theme recurred frequently. The staff all commented on valuing innovative uses of technology, and that Roling Library seems to be ahead of many in adopting technology. One said that “we’re always innovating, always changing, because the way information is disseminated is changing all the time.” Another person appreciated the “changes with technology; Roling is good at that.”

The staff expressed strong support for academic integrity, and this quality was mentioned as one of the strengths of Trinity. A student employee noted the “level of scholarship in the classroom [and the] high standard for quality education.” One valued aspect of the academic experience at Trinity is diversity. Being exposed to ideas from other cultures makes one “feel alive in these self-discovery moments and discovering other ideas,” according to another student, who valued library resources that reflect a diversity of ideas and international perspectives.

While expressing appreciation about recent changes, the staff all longed for a better physical space, either by remodeling or expanding the existing library. A librarian had a vision of the library as a “central hub for the students,” a place “where students will go [other than] the dorm, undergraduates and graduates interact[ing] with one another.” It could serve as a safe place for students to gather, “one of the most life-giving places on the campus.”

## Provocative Proposals

Provocative proposals can emerge during the design or imagine phase of AI. These are positive statements that “list the organizational qualities [the group] most desires.”<sup>30</sup> This process involves examining the mission of the library and peak experiences of the staff to project a future vision for the library. In discussing the interview findings, the facilitators identified at least four potential provocative proposals: influence, staff longevity, academic hub, and technology. A meeting was held with the library staff to discuss the results of the study and to brainstorm about the provocative proposals.

The first provocative proposal regards the influence the library has on campus. In discussion of the university’s three strategic pillars (innovate, collaborate, influence) the participants found it most difficult to articulate areas of influence, or specifics about ways they presently or potentially could influence others. There was a desire to grow in this area and an acknowledgement that it would be important for the future relevance of the library. As a result of the AI process, the library decided to invite other departments over for the library’s regular break time on Fridays. The library has implemented this over the past year, with many positive results and feedback from other departments.

Second, it was recommended that the library’s strengths in staff longevity could be helpfully applied to other departments on campus. This can be attributed to leadership, mentorship, support for staff, delegation of responsibility, professional

<sup>30</sup> Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 9.

designation, and the close community that has developed. It is also important for leaders to be encouraging the staff under them to develop more influence. One provocative idea that came out of this process was to include part-time library staff more in vision planning and new ideas.

The staff also observed that the library has the potential to become a center for community on campus. One new idea that was suggested at the meeting was to have an ice cream social at the start of the school year to welcome students to the library. Other ideas for outreach developed out of this discussion and several successful events were held in the following year, including a publishing event, pumpkin decorating, and cookies during finals, among others. There have been signs that students are increasingly thinking of the library as a social center, as well as a place of study.

The library staff is excited about initiatives and growth related to the digitization of library resources. Most of the discussion about the strategic pillar of “innovate” focused on the use of technology in the library. One staff person noted that it is important to try something new and be willing to fail. In particular, the library staff are considering how to support the new online programs that are being developed.

### Staff Response

From staff follow-up meeting, a clear theme that emerged was the importance of a positive attitude. One person said that it is important to not be discouraged by obstacles. For example, as money continues to be an issue, the staff can seek ways to make improvements even with limited funds. It was also mentioned that AI makes sense given the mission of the school. As Christians, we trust that God is in control and has power. Choosing to be hopeful and trust that there can be good things is an appropriate response.

One person shared an evocative picture of the choice to be positive. After the staff layoffs and budget cuts in 2009, the staff could have chosen to be discouraged and hopeless. Instead, there was a choice (perhaps not entirely consciously) to be positive and continue to work toward constructive changes in the library. It is a testament to this choice that the library has continued to make progress on initiatives even without money or other resources. Indeed, the library staff felt that overall, they are actually more positive about the future of the library than they were in the past. One person said that if the AI study had been done a few years ago, it is likely that the staff then would not have been as positive.

After one year, follow-up interviews were conducted with two of the library staff. Both staff mentioned that the group discussion and brainstorming were the most memorable activities in the AI study. The group interactions demonstrated that there was a shared desire to work towards positive change, and brainstorming ideas generated positive energy among the staff. One of the newer staff noted that it was encouraging to discover a culture in the library that was energized about the future. Another said the meetings were helpful as part of a bigger trend in the library toward having more intentional communication. The AI concepts have encouraged more positive interactions in meetings since that time. Both staff said that it would be good to go through the process again in the future, to help review and reinforce the concepts. This feedback shows that the AI process has continued to have an impact as one of the activities that have encouraged a positive culture among staff.

### CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the AI study at Roling Library, it is interesting to realize that the process was more important than the findings. The key themes and ideas that were generated were useful for identifying areas of strength and priorities in the library. However, this had less long-term impact on the library than the discussions themselves. The process encouraged staff toward a more positive way of thinking and talking with each other. It helped influence the focus of meetings, particularly, how staff address change and determine areas to focus on.

This is not unusual for AI. In fact, the purpose of AI is to generate positive conversations, with the hope that change will occur as part of the synergy of those discussions. The “simultaneity principle” posits that the process of inquiry itself can create change.<sup>31</sup> The AI process encouraged staff to focus more on the positive and led to further constructive

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 52.



discussions. For example, recently a staff member suggested that we should have a yearly meeting where we look back at the previous year and celebrate our accomplishments.

AI works best not as a solitary event, but as an integral change to the culture of an institution. It was successful at Roling Library because it was one of other, similar initiatives. For example, there were discussions on how to have healthy conflict and good ways to interact and disagree. To be effective, both the leadership and the staff must choose to have a renewed attitude. It is not helpful if administrators try to command a more positive mindset among staff while remaining detached from the process themselves. It also helps to be clear about the goals. Just knowing that a positive mindset is a priority for the leadership can help bring about change.

This study was originally intended to be a pilot study, and it was hoped that it would be expanded to other parts of campus. This has yet to happen. However, the library is considering a follow-up study that would use AI to interview seminary faculty and students about their view of the library and its future. This could help to generate more positive interest and excitement among these groups about the library and the possibilities. It could also provide useful information for the library regarding what those groups value about the library and their hopes for the future. We would hope that the same benefits that arose from the interviews with staff would occur with these groups, who are important stakeholders of the library.

Other theological libraries could also benefit from applying AI at their institution. At the 2013 ATLA annual conference, participants at the session on AI expressed interest in the concepts, yet they were more ambivalent about the practicality of applying it in their context.<sup>32</sup> One concern may be that library staff at their institution would not welcome the idea. In the experience of the authors, it is helpful to begin with people who are more open. The energy from those people can then spread to others who may be resistant initially. Another concern could be the amount of time and effort required to conduct a large-scale study. There are ways to incorporate AI principles in a smaller way. For example, hold a meeting to discuss the strengths of the library and ways to build on those strengths. Talk with librarians who have been with the institution for an extended time about the history and strengths of the library in the past. Encourage positive communication among staff. Do “vision casting” that focuses on positives and strengths. In general, work on building the identity of the library around positives rather than negatives.

At the very least, theological librarians should consider whether their library’s culture focuses on the negative or positive and then consider concrete ways to improve. As we have shown in our discussion of “Theology and Appreciative Inquiry,” there is a theological imperative to do so. The Bible speaks of rejoicing even amidst challenges. It is also in the best interests of the institutions. Theological libraries will be facing increasing change and challenges in the years ahead. The attitude of theological librarians will play a critical role in determining the future of libraries. If they have a hopeless, pessimistic, resigned attitude, it is possible that these institutions will not survive or could play a diminished role. In contrast, a more positive outlook will encourage staff to look at the strengths of the past, consider how to build on those strengths for the future, and generate positive ideas for proactive change. The future of theological libraries will be brighter if librarians are willing to take the latter approach. The concepts of Appreciative Inquiry can be one useful way to encourage a more positive and hopeful outlook among theological librarians.

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<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Miller, “Appreciative Inquiry as a Model for Positive Change in a Theological Library” (paper, American Theological Association Annual Conference, Charlotte, NC, June 2013).