

daily lives, peace with the environment and “wars” over styles of worship, as well as big issues like the church’s role in the state.

Maria Krause of Langley Mennonite Fellowship was particularly appreciative of the talks about peace in daily living, especially of “the complexities of that peace and obtaining it, and the willingness to accept that there are times when all we can do is . . . give it all to God.”

The rest of the weekend was filled with all kinds of activities, such as hikes up the snow-covered mountain behind Squeah, board games, an impromptu Connect Four tournament, and plenty of maté (a tealike beverage, popular in many South American countries, brewed from the dried leaves of an evergreen shrub) to go around. ❧

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# Focusing on what works

*New appreciative inquiry tool helps churches to dream and hope*

BY DAVE ROGALSKY

Eastern Canada Correspondent

**I**t was time for Matthew and Hendrike Isert Bender, pastors at Nith Valley Mennonite Church near New Hamburg, Ont., to be evaluated.

“Matthew and I didn’t mind going through another evaluation process, but we thought that after almost seven years together it would be good to combine it with a congregational evaluation,” Hendrike says.

So, instead of filling out evaluation forms, the congregation used a narrative approach, telling stories of what worked in the congregation and in the congregational-pastoral relationship, including spending time face to face in a retreat.

Muriel Bechtel, MC Eastern Canada conference minister, says of the process known as appreciative inquiry (AI), “The stories that people tell are energizing to the teller and the receiver, in contrast to filling out forms that most people find de-energizing. It puts more responsibility on the respondents to think about—and articulate—what they see as a desired future and not just what they didn’t like in the past.”

AI has been around for more than 20 years in the corporate and business world, and has recently been making inroads in church circles. A quick survey across Canada shows that most area churches were familiar with the material, in part through a seminar sponsored by MC Eastern Canada last year, which invited conference ministers from across the country to attend. AI is most widely used in MC Eastern Canada, where pastoral and staff evaluations, congregational visioning and transformational/transitional listening processes are all using the material.

As was the case in the current Mennonite Central Committee New Wine/New Wineskins meetings, AI deliberately focuses on what is working, rather than looking for weaknesses and how to repair them.

Strengths can be both present- and future-oriented, as participants are invited to look at what works, and their dreams and unresolved hopes. The unresolved hopes are the place where weaknesses do show up, though, as AI does not exist in a Pollyanna world where no change is necessary.

Growing out of mathematical and scientific models in the 20th century, which looked at large numbers of data, AI theory suggests that “what we focus on becomes our reality.” If people focus on illness, they are sick and in need of cure. If they focus on health, they learn to build on their strengths.

According to AI proponents, simply asking questions begins to change organizations from within. By focusing on what is already working, they move into the future in areas where they already have comfort and strength.

MC Manitoba executive director Edgar Rempel found this to be the case. “When our board recently used AI, we noted that it helped us to move fairly readily to the aspect of brainstorming new ideas by building on strengths, as opposed to the natural tendency to work at deficits and problem solving,” he says.

Bechtel has found some reluctance to AI, though. “Some people are entrenched in the former ways of doing reviews and find it hard to express their hopes in the form of positive suggestions or dreams for the future, and revert to the old models of giving critique about past performance,” she says.

But she believes “the AI approach seems to me to be biblical, following Philippians 4:8: *‘Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.’*” ❧

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