

## **Religious Liberals in Appreciative Community**

**By George Buchanan**

In my own journey as a religious liberal, I have come to understand and feel the vital importance of small groups founded on mutuality and appreciation. These small groups are vital to me, and I believe they are vital to all of us as religious liberals.

I hear a clear and demanding call here. This is based on reflection, study and personal experience, interwoven over many years. I phrase the call this way:

*To be more effective as religious liberals, we must first enable the transformation of our small working groups into appreciative communities.*

What follows is in four main parts. Part 1 gives a more detailed picture of appreciative community. Part 2 looks at the effectiveness of appreciative community. Part 3 explores some of the enabling conditions we need to begin the work of appreciative community. Part 4 returns to the idea that we are called to put appreciative community first.

### **Appreciative Community**

The best definition of appreciative community I have seen comes from Scott Peck, describing his own work to encourage community formation:

"A genuine community...is a group whose members have made a commitment to communicate with each other on an ever more deep and authentic level. There are very few true communities." (Peck, 276)

These words come close to the essence of what I mean. But they are very abstract. We need refinements and examples and to get a proper picture of appreciative community.

### ***Mutuality and appreciative community***

Peck's definition speaks of "true community", and "genuine community." I am using the term *appreciative community* instead because I want to emphasize the appreciative process involved.

The process Peck is speaking of, the process of communicating "with each other on an ever more deep and authentic level," is the process Henry Nelson Wieman called *creative interchange*. (Wieman, 22) He calls the form of understanding we develop for each other *appreciative understanding*. This is the source of the name I am using here - *appreciative community*.

Roy Phillips noted that Wieman's concept has been worked out in some detail. This was by scholars who call the process *mutuality*. (Phillips, 71) Other religious liberals

have used this same term for the process of creative interchange at a deep and authentic level. So I will use the term *mutuality* here

There are two distinct but related ideas here. One idea is *mutuality* - a disciplined form of deep, authentic interpersonal communication. The other is *appreciative community*. This is a condition that a group might achieve if they are committed to and engaged in *mutuality*.

These two ideas are not new or original. Mutuality is a discipline long respected among religious liberals and others. The theory and practice of appreciative community are known as well, although with various names. We saw Scott Peck's definition. Glenn Turner, in his wonderful article "Transforming Our Churches With Small Group Ministry," refers to groups with the appreciative quality as *relational groups*. (Turner) The terms vary but the underlying idea is the same.

Nor is it original to hold up the virtues of mutuality and appreciative communities. There are many dedicated religious liberals and others already working for mutuality and appreciative communities. Small group ministry is all the rage in my particular denomination. Some are working on covenant groups. I applaud and support all this. My purpose here is to clarify the urgency and importance of appreciative community work with small groups among religious liberals.

### ***Examples – appreciative communities among religious liberals***

Before looking more into the meaning of appreciative community, some examples are in order to get a richer picture of what we mean. We can see appreciative community living and growing when a book study group of religious liberals calls forth deep sharing of feelings and ideas week after week. Appreciative community bursts into new life when the youth group in the church basement safely share their authentic inner thoughts at two o'clock in the morning. Appreciative community can also sputter into life when the late night meeting of the Building and Grounds Committee breaks through to a consensus on the renovation plan for the coming year.

We might also see appreciative community in social action task forces, in other congregational committees, in denominational boards and working groups, in weekend seminars, and in the many other groups we frequent as religious liberals.

Appreciative community, of course, happens in secular and religious institutions of all types, not just for religious liberals. In these pages, I am focusing on how this universal human possibility plays itself out among religious liberals.

### ***Grace and appreciative community***

An appreciative community can arise in a group when the elements of commitment to mutuality and reinforcing practice are present.

Note that I did not say that an appreciative community *must* arise with these conditions, only that it *can* arise. There is always an element we do not control in community building, and our best efforts are not always successful. You can call this uncontrolled element grace, or whatever you will.

That said, my experience as a group member and leader in liberal religious institutions has been that, if the conditions are right, appreciative community is likely to emerge.

### ***The feeling of appreciative community***

A group that has actually become an appreciative community feels different, and is different. When I am a member of such a group I feel empowered, and safe within the group. I sense my relationship to the group purpose.

I am talking about feelings rather than ideas here deliberately. A group will not be an appreciative community until the members have these feelings of empowerment, and safety, and right relationship. Take the hypothetical example of a study group. As a group member, I can abstractly understand that the leader of the group wants me to feel safe. But the appreciative community does not happen for me until I actually feel safe. My feelings of safety arise with time, and practice.

Roy Phillips talks about the feeling of appreciative community this way:

"Each time I have participated in (or even observed from outside) a group processing its work through the method of mutuality, I have known a profound level of caring, a remarkable degree of intimacy, insights about doing my work, and affectionate regard for others in the group, as well as a sense that I and others are precious and powerful."  
(Phillips, p. 75)

### ***Intimacy in the appreciative community***

Appreciative communities are by their nature intimate. The sharing is deep, and the community process leads to even deeper sharing and mutuality.

We need to be clear and careful in our understanding of this appreciative intimacy. This appreciative intimacy is not the same as romantic intimacy, for instance. Romantic partnerships call for exclusivity and physical intimacy inconsistent with the spirit of an appreciative community.

There are more subtle differences when we compare appreciative communities with family groups and groups of our friends. Appreciative community is different than family or friendship groups, and the forms of intimacy are different.

For instance, I am often in appreciative communities with people who are not my friends. I trust the other group members, and look forward to spending group time with them. Sometimes personal friendship may emerge, but that is not a requirement or a condition. The other people in an appreciative community need not be my particular friends.

### ***Systems and boundaries***

My feeling of safety in appreciative community comes from my trust that such community calls for deep but bounded intimacy. And part of the boundary around

appreciative intimacy is the feeling that other forms of intimacy - family, friendship, romantic - are not required. Nor are these other forms desired in most cases.

It turns out that an appreciative community is filled with such boundaries, lines of mutual respect and safety. These boundaries sprout from the discipline of mutuality. For those of you who study organisational systems, an appreciative community is a self-sustaining system. The system is sustained as long as the community members respect those boundaries, follow the discipline, and continue to share.

In appreciative community we have the freedom to communicate "on an ever deeper and more authentic level," as our starting definition indicates. This is in large part because of the bounds on appreciative intimacy. If I am in an appreciative community, I safely share my deep thoughts and feelings because I trust that these will be treated in confidence and with respect.

### *Institutional power in appreciative communities*

It is relatively easy to imagine appreciative community in a study group or spiritual development group in a liberal congregation. The purpose of the group is self-development, the group members are open to the possibility of mutuality and transformation, and the leaders can easily act as facilitators of mutuality and eventual appreciative community.

It is tougher to imagine appreciative community in a group with substantial institutional responsibilities and power. Imagine a congregational committee for Buildings and Grounds, for instance. The women and men involved see themselves in the group for very practical reasons – to deal with matters like gardens, furnaces, leaky pipes, and washroom renovations. The committee has real institutional power in the congregation, power to decide which renovation jobs get priority. The chairperson of the committee has more institutional power than the other members.

Nevertheless, appreciative community is still possible co-existing with institutional power. With the right kind of leadership and members who are committed to mutuality, this Building and Grounds Committee can be an appreciative community.

The key thing here is comfort with the institutional power involved. To enable appreciative community, all the members of the hypothetical Buildings and Grounds Committee need to be comfortable with the power their group has. They need to be comfortable with the power of the chairperson. They need to trust the chairperson, and each other, to wield the group's power wisely and with respect for all the institutional and personal boundaries involved. With this respect and trust, and a commitment to mutuality and appreciative community is possible. But if the group members do not trust each other about the group's power, then appreciative community is not possible.

The same logic can be applied to other committees and groups in a liberal congregation, and to denominational bodies as well. Institutional power does not preclude appreciative community. But the presence of institutional power in a group does impose more enabling conditions for appreciative community.

My personal experience reflects this. I have seen appreciative community arise in congregational committees with substantial power.

The quote from Peck I used at the start indicates that true communities of the appreciative type are rare. I do not dispute his claim, either in general or as applied to our particular groups of religious liberals. The natural incidence of appreciative communities has been low, in my experience in liberal religious congregations and other institutions. It has been particularly low in groups with substantial institutional power, and I think there may be some reasons for this. Leaders who can and want to thread the needle between institutional power and appreciative community seem to be rare.

Some might make an argument that appreciative community is not even desirable in groups that have substantial institutional power. We will look at this in Part 2.

### *Size*

Turner asserts that a spiritual development group should have fewer than ten members to maintain the feeling of appreciative community. (Turner) This confirms my experience with all types of groups. I have seen rare cases where groups with more than ten members were able to reach appreciative community, but never a group larger than twenty or so. Appreciative community is definitely a small group phenomenon.

With the exception of tiny fellowships, almost all liberal congregations are too large to be appreciative communities as such. But this is not a problem if the congregational culture encourages appreciative community in small groups.

### **The Effectiveness of Appreciative Community**

From this discussion, we understand an appreciative community to be a small group committed to mutuality and communication on an ever deeper and more authentic level. We get a picture of a place where members feel safe, empowered, and well related to the group. Group members sustain appreciative intimacy through the discipline of mutuality and the respect they show each other, and deepen that intimacy with their sharing.

Communities with this appreciative quality are powerful by their nature. Turner affirms that liberal religious personal development groups with the appreciative quality are wonderfully effective. (Turner) Scott Peck affirms that groups that reach a state of appreciative community become incredibly effective in doing their work, as well as having a feel that group members enjoy once they have reach it. Here is a sample of what he has to say:

"The shift into [appreciative] community is often quite sudden and dramatic. The change is palpable. A spirit of peace pervades the room. There is more silence, yet more of worth gets said. It is like music. The people work together with an exquisite sense of timing, as if they were a finely tuned orchestra under the direction of an invisible, celestial conductor. Many actually sense the presence of God in the

room. If the group is a public workshop of previous strangers who must soon part, then there is little to do beyond enjoying the gift. If it is an organization, however, now that it is a community it is ready to go to work – making decisions, planning, negotiating, and so on – often with phenomenal efficiency and effectiveness." (Peck, 275-276).

My own personal experience with appreciative community is the same as Peck's, and Turner's. Appreciative communities are wonderfully effective at meeting our personal and institutional needs at the same time. We can have less effective small groups where we occasionally practice mutuality between individuals. But those are not nearly so effective as appreciative communities that embody and sustain mutuality in all interactions.

I know it took me some time to really get this idea. I worked for many years in liberal religious institutions assuming that I would belong to two types of working groups. One type would be the warm group doing personal and spiritual development. The other type would be the hardworking, dedicated institutional group. It took me years to realize that the quality of appreciative community was possible and highly desirable in both situations. Appreciative community is the wonderful common factor.

A tipping point in my feel for this came when I served on a ministerial search committee for my congregation. As a group, we succeeded in using the rather large institutional power we had been given, and reaching our institutional goal. But at the same time, we also found ways to work with each other that embodied mutuality. We became comfortable with our institutional power, and with each other. Without knowing much about it, we stumbled into a state of appreciative community, although I did not have the right words at the time.

I recognize that I still need to belong to small working groups with different goals – some explicitly for personal development, and some for dedicated institutional purposes. I do not meet all my needs in either type of group.

Other religious liberals may need other types of small groups, or a different mix than I do. The common element in our needs is appreciative community. *This wonderful form of community makes any of our small groups much more effective, in both personal and communal terms.*

### **Enabling Conditions for Appreciative Community Work**

Suppose we have group of religious liberals that seems to be of the proper nature and size to be an appreciative community. I believe three conditions must be present before the group can begin the work that will allow appreciative community: First, the group leaders must be committed to appreciative community. Second, the group members must be open to the possibility of appreciative community. Third, the leaders and group members must understand and trust each other about the institutional power that they have communally and individually.

We will look at each of these in turn.

### *Commitment of the group leaders*

The group leaders need to understand the idea of appreciative community, and be comfortable with the practice. The leaders need to be comfortable with the practice of the techniques involved in appreciative community leadership. I will not describe these techniques here. The authors I have referred to, and many others, have documented these techniques far better than I ever could.

I do want to consider the deeper sentiments of potential leaders. Leadership of assertive community requires giving up much in the way of superficial control and image. To be such leaders, we must deal with many of our fears. Linda Hansen writes in general terms about this in her moving work "Community: The Most Genuine of Victories."

"We live in a world as frightened of community as it is of death. The truth is, we human beings are understandably frightened of the vulnerable, finite creatures we truly are. We seek escape from vulnerability and death by redefining ourselves in our philosophies and religions, or by hiding behind material wealth and power at the expense of others." (Hansen)

These words seem rather bleak, but they are appropriate. I know that I am frightened of community, and need to work with that fear every time I lead a group. I cannot hide behind my power and still lead the group to appreciative community.

When I overcome my fear, it is because I know the value of the appreciative community. This deep knowing comes from experience and from reflection, from recognition of the power of mutuality even in the face of my own limitations and imperfection.

I see and hear about other successful leaders who go through a similar passage. Leaders need to be committed to appreciative community, committed enough to overcome their fears about it.

### *Openness of the group members*

For a group to open up to appreciative community, the members need to be open to the process of mutuality and the idea of appreciative community. The group members do not need to understand all about appreciative community when they start; their leaders can teach them and show them by example. But the group members need a fundamental openness to the process once it begins.

As group members, we may have barriers that close us off from appreciative community. Here are some of the potential barriers to appreciative community, barriers we might bring as group members: "a need to look witty or wise, difficulty being in a receiving as opposed to a giving role, terror of being out of control, a compulsive tendency to organize..." (Peck, 278)

The group members need to be able to let go of these kinds of barriers to allow appreciative community to happen.

Group leaders will find that sometimes they cannot move the members of a group past these barriers. The dream of appreciative community may not be possible in these cases. Leaders can continue to model mutuality, and otherwise behave in a loving way in the group, but there are limits on where the group can go together.

Leaders have broad choices in these tough situations. They can decide whether the group is worth their continued attention. Groups that are actual or potential appreciative communities might be more fruitful ground for these leaders.

In general, leaders and group members all can consider whether a given group is still a fruitful place to put their time and energy, when appreciative community seems impossible for any reason.

### ***Mutual trust about institutional power***

We touched earlier on the situations where small working groups have substantial institutional power. These might be powerful congregational committees, for instance, or denominational working groups, or denominational boards.

*As noted earlier, these powerful groups are open to appreciative community if the members and leaders trust each other about the institutional power they have.*

If mutual trust is lacking, group leaders may be inclined to try to do the work needed to realize trust, as a precondition for reaching appreciative community. Often, however, this is beyond the power of the leaders. The lack of trust may be set so deep, or so rooted in the surrounding culture, that the leaders are stuck with it.

In dealing with intransigent situations like this, leaders will need to accept the situation in some form, and work out how explicit they will be with the group about the perceived lack of trust.

I have heard suggestions that mutuality and appreciative community cannot work in groups laden with institutional power. There is a germ of truth in these suggestions; those who feel this way have often encountered power-laden groups with high levels of mistrust, and quite correctly decided not to struggle against this mistrust in particular cases.

But I know that these trust barriers can be overcome in at least some cases. This is based in part on my own experience. As with so much else in life, it is a matter of picking the right spot.

### **Putting Appreciative Communities First**

As an ideal, appreciative community would seem like a good thing to most religious liberals. They understand the call to loving relationship. They can understand the call to mutuality in general, and they like the warmth of small groups when those groups work well.



However, I am going beyond saying that appreciative communities are nice to have. Let me restate the my sense of our call here:

*To be more effective as religious liberals, we must first enable the transformation of our small working groups into appreciative communities.*

### ***Unpacking the words***

This is a strong claim, and needs some unpacking and explanation to be properly considered. Let's look at some of the terms and phrases here.

The *small working groups* are those with the potential to become appreciative communities. Groups with this potential will be small, usually under ten members as we noted above. The time the group will spend together must be long enough for the mutuality process to work.

The precise criteria for deciding on appreciative potential are less important than recognition that many groups are by their size and nature not potential appreciative communities. This is not at all a problem. A liberal congregation, for instance, can be a wonderful culture-bed for many small appreciative communities, with larger and perfectly wonderful groups for social and worship purposes.

As I understand it, being *effective as religious liberals* means that we are undergoing positive transformation. We are transformed, and the world around us is transformed - both in positive ways, and usually both at once.

I do not claim that we can make our groups become appreciative communities with some guaranteed rule. Rather, I said we *enable the transformation* of our small working groups in recognition of the element of grace noted above. We can prepare for self-transformation and group transformation; we can work on the conditions; but our action always interweaves with elements we do not control.

### ***Being more effective***

I made the case in Part 2 for the extra effectiveness that appreciative community brings to a group. This effectiveness lies in both community and individual development at the same time.

I do not know of any other way to get the boost in effectiveness, both communally and individually, that appreciative community brings. Things like better worship, or cleaner buildings, or denominational changes may bring some marginal improvement. Practicing mutuality on a one-to-one basis is a good thing, but has little sustained institutional impact. Appreciative community, on the other hand, transforms us and transforms our groups in powerful ways. We become more effective in large ways, and in ways that can be sustained institutionally. Therefore I believe that the path to greater effectiveness lies in the work of appreciative community.

I also said that we must *first* enable the transformation to appreciative community. I used the word *first* deliberately, to describe the sense of the call that I feel in my own heart. If we wish to be more effective, preparing for appreciative community is not

one among many priorities. It is the first priority. If we wish to be more effective, appreciative community is not something we can prepare for sooner or later, when we feel like it. We need to get ready for appreciative community first.

As potential leaders of appreciative community, it is easy to fall prey to the fears that might prevent us from committing. It is also easy to be distracted by the multitude of possibilities and pleasures that modern life brings. The knowledge that preparation for appreciative community must come first sharpens our focus and lets us work past these fears and distractions.

In sensing the urgency of appreciative community work, I sometimes forget the need for patience. The work of preparation is urgent, but the appreciative result takes time, and sometimes may not come at all. As leaders, and as group participants, we must do the work of being ready, offer mutuality, and then work patiently with the responses we get.

### ***Hearing the call***

I express my thesis here as a call. I use the word *call* in the sense that we mean when we say that a certain situation calls for something. I believe that the situation of religious liberals calls us urgently to the work of appreciative community.

### **Conclusion**

We live in a busy, complex world. It is a world of wonderful possibilities and overwhelming dangers. For religious liberals, who so wish for positive transformation in the world, I believe that our path together must be founded in and through the appreciative communities we nurture. If we are confused about where to begin, or feeling discouraged, we must remember and follow the call to appreciative community.

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