

ASSET BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT |

An Introduction to Asset Based Community Development for Church Leaders

By Dr. Jay Van Gronigen

Introduction: Thinking About Community

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a way to find and mobilize what a community has.

In many communities, social service organizations and governments tackle community change by asking what is wrong, what has to be fixed. ABCD takes a totally different approach to community change. ABCD starts by looking at what a community has that it can give/contribute to desired change.

The first place church leaders should start in their journey to understand and apply the important insights of ABCD is by reflecting deeply on community. Specifically, I recommend that they begin by considering this important question: What does the Bible have to say about the nature of community and living in community? Some personal Bible study on the following topics will help Christians begin to answer this important question:

- The community within the Godhead (three in one)
- The Israelite community and their posture/witness among the nations
- The early New Testament church community as the visible representation of Christ
- The eternal community and the pictures of life we can anticipate in eternity
- Biblical leaders who were nurtured in and by community

Beyond digging in the Word, a next helpful step is to reflect personally or in a group about community – after all, community development is all about community!

Community is about relationships in a specific context (geographic, familial, ethnicity). Take some time to think about your own experience in community. Consider the questions below, and jot down your thoughts.

How have you been blessed by being part of a community? Were church members, neighbors, family friends part of the shaping force in your life?

What do you think makes community? What are the ingredients? Make a short list of your answers.

What is valuable about living in community? List benefits of living in community.

Our parents and grandparents have much stronger stories to tell than more recent generations of how they were shaped in/by community. Why is that? What is different today?

Do you think is it possible to recapture some of what was best about community then in today's environment? If yes, how could it be done?

On a scale of 1 = low level of community to 5 = high level of community, how would you rate community life where you live? How do you feel about that?

Communities and Neighborhoods

There are many different types of communities today. Consider these for example:

- A family and family tree
- Chinese community or Eritrean community or any ethnic group
- A congregational family
- A Coptic community, Jewish community or any similarly religious community
- A Neighborhood
- A workplace community
- A "virtual" (web-based) community

For the purposes of Asset Based Community Development we will always supply the concept of neighborhood or people group to our conversations about community. We do this because:

- We can most directly invite participation from people in neighborhoods and people groups (associations)
- We can most directly influence life among people in neighborhoods and people groups.

How do you suppose Christian themes like those below might influence community life (especially at the neighborhood level)? Consider each one, then write down your thoughts:

- Blessed to be a blessing

- Saved to serve

- Showing Hospitality and Generosity

- Being suffering servants

- Living as peacemakers

Do you suppose that Christians might become the sweet aroma, the foretaste of heaven on earth to their neighbors, if they live out these themes in community?

Problems with the Needs-Based Approach

Earlier, we defined ABCD as “a way to find and mobilize what a community has.” It starts with the community’s assets, rather than with its needs or problems.

Consider what often happens when the discussion of community development starts with “needs and deficiencies” instead of with assets and gifts. It often is de-energizing. It can lead to loss of hope. It can overlook gifts so abundantly present.

Yet we in the church often approach community development from this “needs-based” approach. We do it in and to both individuals and communities. We give them labels that imply they are not gifted; we imply that they are useless, hopeless, bad. Think of labels like: retarded, gang banger, convict, single parent, at-risk youth, home-bound senior, mentally ill, alcoholic, drug addict, homeless, etc.

What happens when an individual has a label applied to her/him?

- She is hurt, and often turns inward
- He is angry and fights back
- They lose energy and ambition
- She waits for a savior to show up
- He gives up and settles for the best that today will give.
- They sit in a deep depression
- They begin to believe and live out their learned helplessness

What happens when a community has a label applied to it?

- The glass is “half empty” when a community does not look for and call for the participation of all her members.
- The disconnection of individuals from community leads to overlooking their gifts, to internalizing inferiority, to community malaise.
- Preoccupation with one-way transfer of aid from the middle class and the rich to the poor distracts us from looking for and engaging the gifts of the poor.

A strong community fundamentally knows “there is no one we don’t need.” Everyone’s gifts must be given scope. But because we are often used to first thinking about problems and needs instead of gifts and assets, we have to be intentional about developing new thought processes. Try this exercise, to begin this new way of thinking:

- Consider someone you know who has been given a label. Now describe a gift that that person willingly shares with others.

Can you imagine what might happen if Christians and churches today began to unleash the capacities of their members and their neighbors in ways that helped neighbors succeed and the community improve?

The Ingredients of ABCD

A fundamental question in the ABCD approach is: What can this community do itself to achieve its own goals and dreams?

ABCD is a process, and it’s not unlike baking a cake in that there are certain critical ingredients.

1. The first ingredient in the cake is: Gift of Individuals.

Individuals have gifts that fall into 3 categories:

- a. **Gifts of the head** — knowledge, information: What do I know that others do not know? What have I learned from life experiences that many others have not had opportunity to learn?
- b. **Gifts of the hand** — practical skills: What am I good at? If I had to choose the three things I do better than many other people, what would they be? What are my professional skills? Do I have creative and artistic gifts?
- c. **Gifts of the heart** — What I am most passionate about? What do I love to do, what do I care most about, and what I am most willing to work on with my time and talents?

When we take time to really consider the gifts that people residing in a community already have, we can begin to get excited about the potential for positive change in that community.

Imagine your own neighborhood, where you live. Think of all the individuals there:

- Imagine the list of all of their possessions
- Imagine the list of all their gifts of the head
- Imagine the list of all their gifts of the hands
- Imagine the list of all their gifts of the heart

When combined around a cause that they believe in, is there anything the individuals in your neighborhood could not do?

Individuals in a neighborhood almost always have what is needed (skills and knowledge) to help a neighbor get something done. Groups of neighbors in co-operatives get things done by contributing their time and talent and working together. Barter systems get things moving in some neighborhoods. When the city of New Orleans as a whole was judged to be about 40% recovered from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it was no accident that the Vietnamese community there was more than 80% recovered. They pooled their gifts (head, hands, heart) and worked to help each other recover. Others by contrast waited for external aid to arrive.

ABCD believes, and I believe, that most neighborhoods have everything they need already in them to take next steps in their development. Where God's human family dwells, there is an amazing display of his gifts in individuals. Harness those gifts for neighborly good and there's hardly a limit on what can be imagined and accomplished.

2. The second ingredient in the cake is: Gift of Associations

An association is a group of local citizens joined together with a vision of a common goal.

Association Members:

- Decide WHAT they want to do
- Decide HOW they want to do it
- Take action and DO IT!

A gift is not a gift until it is given. Associations are the principle vehicles for gift giving.

- The Vietnamese community in New Orleans had a Vietnamese association. They were 80% recovered from Hurricane Katrina when the rest of the city was barely 40% recovered. A Sudanese Association in the city where I live enjoys their ethnic heritage, culture, language, food, and stories. They help each other prepare for and find jobs. They are a self-help group.
- Mothers of Pre Schoolers --MOPS--is an association of moms who gather around a common task. MADD - Mothers Against Drunk Driving--is another example.

List as many associations as you can that exist in your neighborhood:

Associations have some important common characteristics. Specifically:

- Associations are political. They make power, they have the power to act on what they care about.
- Associations are social: Relationships, care, safety net, perpetuation of culture etc.
- Associations are vehicles for gift giving.

It is especially important for Christians to note that churches are associations. Churches have power, they are social, and they are vehicles for gift giving. Now think about what would happen if churches—your church!—used their gifts for the benefit of their neighborhoods!

In the ABCD process, there are two main reasons for thinking about associations:

1. If you want to get something done, convene an association of people who care about the same thing and do it! They have power; they make power.
2. If you need to harness a lot of human participation, you have instant reach if you can mobilize people through associational networks. For example, a Community Mental Health (CMH) official was threatening to close a sheltered workshop in my town. The workshop employed people with disabilities. Within less than two days we had more than 400 people show up at a CMH board meeting to voice our concerns about the proposed closing. We harnessed human participation and voice through our network of association leaders.

Name a problem in your community:

Can you imagine forming an association of people who care about the issue to work on it? Might they have the power to act (within the law) and solve the problem?

A church that wants to transform a community will position itself as the connector of individuals and associations to bring all their respective gifts to the visioning and activities for community transformation.

3. The third ingredient in the cake is: Gift of Institutions

Institutions exist to do something. Institutions include all organizations with paid staff that exist to accomplish tasks. They are organized for:

- Consistency (doing one thing well)
- Sustainability (they work to be self-perpetuating);
- Reliability (no mistakes)

List some of the institutions present in your community:

Now think for each of those on your list, what they might have that might be gift to a community? What are they good at? What do they have? (Hint: They have things like: employees, staff, personnel offices, buildings, office equipment, supplies, sales teams, marketing teams, beautiful grounds, money, and so much more)

While institutions and associations are both important to ABCD, they are different. Consider the following comparison of the characteristics of institutions and associations:

Associations

Powered by consent
Choice/Freedom
Care in action
Care/Love
Citizens that give
Citizens
Freedom
Capacity
I would not want to fly a plane with this one.

Institutions

Controlled environment
Involuntary; Powered by \$
Designed for production
Needs a client or a consumer
Service/Not a servant
Consumer/Client
Produce services
Drive to meet a need.
This one does not mobilize volunteers.

The gifts of institutions are important but they must be steered in support what the citizens want and need, not what the institution wants and needs. Think about poor communities. Typically, they are inundated with social service organizations. Those organizations exist to do a particular job—they generally provide a specific service or benefit. Their mission is to provide that service consistently and fairly (by the rules) over the long haul. But if the organization needs a client in order to maintain its existence, then it may not have much motivation to help people become “non-clients.” Is it likely they will help their clientele graduate from their programs? Because of institutional self interest, it is important that institutions are controlled in their participation. If they are not, then citizens and associations will lose interest and participation. The best use of institutions is in supportive role, supplemental to what the citizens are doing and want to do.

ABCD: Getting People Engaged

ABCD is a practice of engaging citizens in the things that affect them!

Think about the implications of this statement:

The tragedy of American Compassion is that it focuses on the transfer of goods and services and overlooks the recipient (the person) and her/his gifts.

What if Christians understood compassion as developing and unleashing the gifts of the poor? How would it change Christians approach to mercy and benevolence?

*“THERE IS NO POWER FOR CHANGE LIKE A COMMUNITY DISCOVERING WHAT IT CARES ABOUT”
- Margaret Wheatley*

ABCD involves finding out, through listening and asking, what people really care about. “Learning conversations” are the tool to discover what people care about “enough to act on it” (e.g., concerns, dreams/goals, and gifts). Here is a simple question sequence that has proven helpful in following the ABCD method in many communities—you could try it in yours:

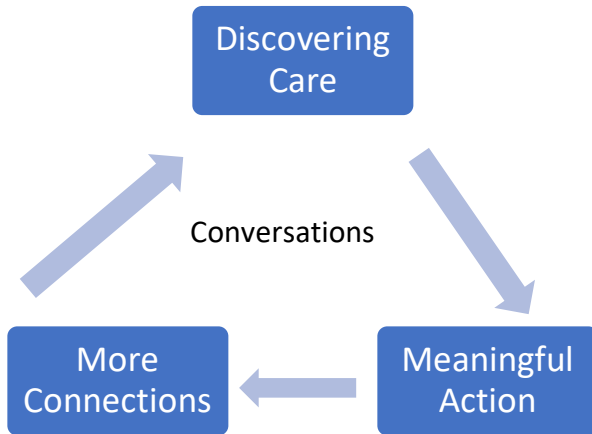
- If you could wave a magic wand and make one thing better in your community, what would it be?

- If others would join you in making that possible, what contribution (gifts of the head, hands, heart) would you make to achieve that dream or goal?

Moving from Individual Development to Community Development

Mobilizing a community (individuals, associations, institutions) requires three elements:

- learning conversations,
- finding 'motivation to act', and
- a connector/leader bringing all of the needed resources together.



Individual Gifts
+
Associational Gifts
+
Institutional Gifts

When working together can accomplish most anything!

Returning to the cake baking analogy: Adding the ingredients to one another in just the right doses, in the appropriate sequence, produces the best cake!

Getting community members' respective participation requires plugging into their self interest and what they care about.

It takes a connector to link assets (individuals, associations, institutions) and desire with opportunities for change. Once a community has defined a vision and what it wants to do, well-connected leaders can engage the wider

community, using learning conversations to discover motivation to act (at the level of individuals, associations, and institutions) to bring supplemental participants and resources into the change process. This can then give birth to new community partnerships that really work, that are marked by the following elements:

- Have a clear vision/mission/task
- Involve people who care about the proposed change/venture
- Empower people to use and give their gifts
- Have a level playing field for participants
- Trigger participants' motivation to act
- Invite diverse gifts

The ABCD Community Organizing Process

Now we have defined ABCD, discussed how this approach differs from the needs/problems-based approach, and explored the essential ingredients of ABCD. What are the steps that church leaders can now follow to actually start organizing the community following the ABCD approach? Here is a quick overview:

- 1) Do asset mapping in your community to see what there is to work with
- 2) Listen to the community and find out what they want to change.
- 3) Enlist their gifts and participation
- 4) Organize the work and the workers – create (together) and follow a plan
- 5) Enlist the support/partnerships of Associations and Institutions
- 6) Just do it!

Mapping Assets is the first critical step. It's a good idea to inventory the assets in the targeted community for several reasons:

- The process of discovery will help you develop eyes for your community if you do house by house and block by block asset mapping. You will find people who share your heart to make the community a better place.
- An asset mapper has the knowledge necessary to be a connector in the community because he/she knows who has what resources and gifts; he/she is strategically ready to begin connecting people in ways that help them help each other
- Having a ready database that one can turn to when something or someone is needed is a ready gift in a community!
- Mapping assets is essential when it comes time to implement a community activity/vision!!! It is the basis for recruiting participation.

Consider the value in having these inventories in your community:

- Individual Gifts:
- Associations:
- Institutions:
- Physical Space Maps:

Note Well:

- Asset mapping is only as valuable as its utility for engaging neighbors, and helping them participate in the development of the community.
- Asset mapping is not an exact science. Don't be pre-occupied with perfection or with exhausting all the possibilities.
- Communities are often changing and asset maps will constantly change. You must weigh the cost in composing new asset maps.

The Role of Church in the Community Development Process

Churches are the bearers of the values of the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom places high value indeed on healthy, flourishing, inclusive communities. One of the primary roles for churches is to show up or convene neighbors in community visioning processes.

Church members can be servant leaders at any or all stages of the community change process. They can facilitate the beginnings of revitalized communities by posing the key questions of the ABCD paradigm:

1. What does the community want done?
2. How will the church support, supplement, lead in getting it done?
3. How will the church add value – Kingdom of God value – where she is planted?
4. In what ways will she demonstrate the reign of God in the neighborhood now?

Author's note: This article draws from important material I have learned about ABCD from Mike Green (www.mike-green.org), Dr. John McKnight, and a two-day training event with Jim Diers. Their notes are included here by permission.