



ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Asset-based community development (or ABCD) is founded on the idea that change will only happen if we identify and mobilise the gifts and capacities of local people and the social, physical and economic resources of a local place. It is an approach that seeks to build strong, sustainable communities from the 'inside out', through forging and nurturing relationships of care and creativity.

Although not an explicitly Christian methodology, ABCD's core values and methods resonate deeply with Christian theology and practice. This paper explores those resonances and the ways in which ABCD can be a vital, life-giving tool for local churches as they join in the mission of God in their local contexts – engaging and supporting their communities, tackling poverty and injustice, and helping to grow resilient and inclusive neighbourhoods where all are able to participate and flourish.

Discovering the language and principles of ABCD has, quite genuinely, been a conversion experience for me – a conversion, however, to something I think I already knew and was, to a certain extent at least, already practising. In exploring three of ABCD's core values, and sharing a little of my Birmingham church congregation's journey, I want to highlight why I believe ABCD is both necessary – helping us to resist some of the currently dominant, social pressures – and deeply Christian – encouraging us to embrace a reality at the very heart of our faith.

1. ABCD IS ASSET-BASED: DISCOVERING AND CELEBRATING WHAT'S ALREADY THERE

ABCD begins with a shift in vision: from seeing the world around us, our neighbours and our neighbourhoods, for what they are lacking, to seeing them for what they have. It is very easy, when approaching a neighbourhood like mine in Birmingham, one that ranks quite highly in the Index of Multiple Deprivation, to start by cataloguing its problems, lacks and needs. ABCD, however, invites us to look first for the gifts of its people – their passions, knowledge and skills – as well as for other resources that may sometimes be hidden, but have often simply been overlooked or dismissed as insignificant.

Just as Jesus instructs his disciples in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, ABCD invites us to 'go and see'. In places of apparently overwhelming need and a critical lack of resources, we are encouraged to discover what turns out, in the end, to be more than enough.

Christians are well-practised at rehearsing what Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the 'liturgy of abundance', a song of praise for God's creative generosity. We do this when we recognise the wonderful diversity of the planet's flora and fauna, the awesome views from the mountain-top or the rich resources of the earth.¹

ABCD invites us to practise the same liturgy of abundance in our own neighbourhoods: to open our eyes to the ways God has blessed *this* place and *this* people with goodness, vitality and fruitfulness. It may be in the place itself, in the stories that it contains or in the webs of relationships that knit it together. It certainly begins by recognising the wealth of gifts of the people who inhabit it and the marks of the 'image of God' that define each and every one of them.

³⁵When it grew late, [Jesus'] disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late. ³⁶Send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' ³⁷But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii-worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' ³⁸And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.'

Mark 6: 35 – 38

Practising thanksgiving and celebration

A local church taking an ABCD approach will practise thanksgiving (the meaning of 'Eucharist') by actively seeking out, discovering and celebrating the blessings and the gifts that exist within its own congregation and within its neighbourhood and its neighbours.

In Hodge Hill, we undertook a course called 'Know Your Church, Know Your Neighbourhood'. This enabled a team of volunteers from our congregation to look inwards, at the gifts we had amongst ourselves, and then outwards, to the assets of the wider community. We mapped out those assets and listened to the stories of some of those who lived and worked there.

The process led us to want to celebrate the people we'd encountered, and to discover many more. We therefore decided to host an event we called 'Hodge Hill Unsung Heroes'. We asked members of the community to nominate local people they felt were making a valuable contribution to their neighbourhood and then held a prize-giving ceremony for 97 local 'heroes'. Over food, drink and much laughter, we told their stories and gave thanks for their contributions to their (and our) neighbourhoods. It was a hugely energising process and the ripples are still being felt around the area.

2. ABCD BUILDS COMMUNITIES FROM THE 'INSIDE OUT': BEING PRESENT WITH OTHERS

Community-building, the ABCD way, is founded on the belief that a neighbourhood already contains the most important assets its residents need to grow and learn, raise children, feel safe and secure, be healthy, age well and act to change the world. ABCD is not like other models. We are all used to the 'top-down' implementation of major regeneration projects or government initiatives, or the 'outside-in' approach of external agencies delivering services to a community. In contrast, ABCD works from the 'inside out'. It starts at the smallest level of interaction between neighbours and helps to grow local networks and associations that, in time, discover the power to make change happen through acting together.

In essence, this approach describes an incarnational way of engaging in mission. If, as Rowan Williams has put it, 'mission is finding out what God is doing and joining in', then, as local churches, we are called to be 'insiders' in our communities. That means being bodily present, walking their streets and making our home there. When it comes to community development, we are perhaps more familiar with the service-delivery approach in which 'experts' identify a need and deliver a service to meet it. The ABCD approach, on the other hand, invites all of us to spend time with people, patiently getting to know them and discovering their passions and gifts.

In Hodge Hill, we talk of 'gifts' rather than 'strengths' or 'assets', because, in our experience, the things that feel most fragile and vulnerable often turn out to be the most creative and fruitful. We have also learnt that the process of helping people to discover or identify their gifts takes a lot of time, a huge amount of encouragement, painstakingly-built trust and plenty of listening.

It is also important to remember that we are not on our own when it comes to building community. We can see glimpses of community all around us, even if they are not often as visible as a formally constituted Community Association or Residents' Forum. Informal networks of support and friendship, caring and sharing are always there, even – or perhaps especially – in neighbourhoods where there is little financial wealth. An ABCD approach encourages churches, their leaders and their members, to seek out these pre-existing networks, taking time to get to know them and working with them to help them grow and flourish.

Starting with the local does not mean abandoning the political. Local networks can also 'find their voice' to question and challenge much more widespread social, political and economic arrangements – just as Jesus is someone who not only attends with deep care to those around him, but is also a political figure who challenges and transforms. Churches adopting an ABCD approach will find themselves called to a similarly prophetic role, in what they say and what they do. By living out what we might term a 'call to conversion' from some of our society's most pervasive 'idolatries', they are calling people away from what theologian Rachel Muers has dubbed the 'big lies' that 'dominate and reshape our social reality'. These are the 'taken-for-granted patterns of thought and behaviour ... that not only obstruct the worship of God, but prevent the recognition of suffering and need and impede human flourishing.'² Two such 'big lies' might be the power of money or the idea of service provision (see below).

ABCD challenges the power of money

'You can't serve both God and money' (Matt 6: 24)

Money claims that unless you can put a price on something or somebody, it doesn't really 'count'. ABCD encourages us to see and value all kinds of assets (or gifts) that are literally price-less, and people and neighbourhoods that have been written off as economically inactive.

Money claims that it is the only way to achieve the things we really want, even apparently good things like community regeneration. ABCD challenges the way the market and state 'asset strip' certain neighbourhoods, but it also proclaims that the most important stuff – genuine, sustainable community – is achieved through patient relationship-building and neighbourly care.

ABCD challenges the service provision approach

'I call you friends' (John 15: 15)

ABCD recognises that the motivations for providing services, such as food banks, are usually compassionate. However, the structures of service provision have often done as much harm as good to local communities. ABCD asks challenging questions of those involved:

- How much do you need a steady stream of 'clients' for your own survival as an organisation or project?
- Where are you creating dependencies on your service and disconnecting people from the interdependence and mutual support of their local community?
- What are you doing that the community's networks could do for themselves (with or without support)?
- What are you doing 'to' or 'for' people that you might be able to do 'with' them?
- How can you start from people's gifts and strengths, rather than their needs and problems?
- How can you turn strangers into friends, rather than 'clients' or 'service users'?

3. ABCD IS RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN: CONNECTING PEOPLE AND GIFTS

ABCD is about making connections. It is about discovering the 'web of connections' that is already present in a neighbourhood, and helping to forge new ones between neighbours so that gifts may be shared. This type of work is characteristic of Bishop Taylor's 'Go-between God'³, the God that liberates and activates the gifts within each person, and weaves connections between people so that an infinite diversity of gifts can work together for the common good.

We are familiar with Paul's theology of the Church as the body of Christ, made up of interdependent, differently gifted parts. ABCD invites us to consider our wider neighbourhoods, beyond the obvious boundaries of 'church', as part of that interconnected, interdependent, richly-gifted 'body'. As we spend time with people, discover more about their passions and gifts, we can help them connect with others and build up the 'body' of the neighbourhood.

There are many ways in which these networks can help to connect people's gifts to each other. It may be through offering practical support, such as cutting a neighbour's grass or babysitting their kids, through sharing a skill, such as teaching a friend to knit or use a computer, or through coming together to achieve something bigger, such as a regular 'bring-and-share' lunch of people's speciality dishes or a guerrilla gardening group to tidy up a local footpath. As churches help to build these networks, even those who have previously been told they are 'too old', 'too young' or 'too fragile' to make a contribution, are drawn into relationships of mutuality, sharing and transformation.

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²²On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

1 Corinthians 12: 4 – 7, 21 – 22

Practising listening and connecting

On the evening that we celebrated Hodge Hill's 'Unsung Heroes', we asked people, 'If you could find two or three other people to join you, what would you start in your neighbourhood?'. Beginning from that simple question, we have been able to support Ola, a passionate Nigerian cook, to draw some of her Nigerian friends and neighbours together to cater for major community events. We have also been able to support Phil, a local man, in setting up a local theatre group which has already put on a Christmas panto and an amazing, open air Community Passion Play, written and directed by Phil, drawing a wonderful mix of people of different faiths (and none) into both the cast and audience.

CONCLUSION

The story of the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus with expensive oil in Simon's house in Bethany (Mark 14: 3 - 9) highlights some of the core elements of an ABCD-shaped vocation:

- To learn to be a guest at other people's parties as much as, if not more than, a host of our own.
- To creatively receive the gifts and initiatives of others – even when they seem awkward or uncomfortable – in the cause of the gospel, as much as, if not more than, focusing on our own actions.
- To challenge the limited and distorted imaginations of those caught up in those 'idolatries' of our society that so often exclude and destroy people and communities.
- To enable the telling of stories of 'good news', of giftedness and possibility, of reciprocity and abundance, in our neighbourhoods. And to make sure that more and more of our neighbours, and not just us, are telling them.

I have written this paper in the expectation and hope that you and your church will recognise much of what it contains and are already practising it within your own neighbourhoods.

The core values of an ABCD approach to community development resonate deeply with a Christian faith that celebrates the gifts of our Creator God, the humble, challenging presence of our Incarnate God, and the deep listening and connection-making of our Go-between God. The aim of ABCD is nothing less than a desire to 'seek the shalom [peace, wellbeing, flourishing] of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7). It's a call to relationship, to interdependence, and to community, which is what Christians understand to be at the very heart of God as Trinity.

On the one hand, ABCD simply offers us a helpful, practical framework for translating what we believe with our hearts and heads into meaningful presence and activity in our local contexts. On the other, it is also a 'call to conversion' from some of the temptations and tendencies into which we, the Church, can find ourselves slipping. It is a call to give up much of the power, control and status with which we are often all-too-comfortable, in favour of the empowerment and flourishing of our neighbours, and our neighbourhoods.

In Hodge Hill, where our church congregation suddenly found itself without its much-loved, much-used building, we have found the ABCD approach (even before we had learnt to call it that) to be a liberating, energising new phase in our life and mission. It has helped to release gifts and passions within the congregation, as well as in the wider neighbourhood, and has enabled us to do things together that we could never have imagined to be possible while using the funding-intensive, 'church-based community project' model. At times this approach has demanded much patience and perseverance, often the 'fruits' of it have been small. However, like Jesus' 'mustard seed', there is a sense that it is helping us to put down deep roots - connecting with the bedrock of our faith and establishing a kind of sustainability that is not dominated by anxiety. It is growing slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, into something with life, space and fruitfulness beyond what we could ever have imagined.

Endnotes:

- 1 Brueggemann W, 1999, 'The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity', available <http://bit.ly/1UifTa>
- 2 Muers R, 2013, 'Tales of the Unexpected: Theology in Public Space', in Tom Greggs et al (eds.), 'The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford', London: Cascade Books
- 3 Taylor J, 2004, 'The Go-between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission', London: SCM

For further reading:

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