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Learning the new ABCDs *by Jay Van Groningen*

Thinking about asset-based community development (ABCD) is a way to find and mobilize resources that already exist in a community. This article is reprinted with permission and is available at www.fastennetwork.org.

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 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 its 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

PROBLEMS WITH NEEDS-BASED APPROACH

We define 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 any label that may have a negative connotation and the potential impact it can have on an individual:

- Feeling hurt and turning inward
- Feeling angry and fighting back
- Losing energy and ambition
- Feeling resigned, waiting for a saviour
- Giving up and settling
- Depression
- Helplessness

Likewise, negative labels also affect communities:

- The glass is “half empty” when a community does not look for and call for the participation of all its 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.

THE ABCD RECIPE

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. Gift of Individuals – These typically fall into three categories:

a. *Head knowledge*. What do I know that others do not know? What have I learned from life experiences that others have not had the opportunity to learn?

b. *Hand knowledge*, or practical skills.

What am I good at? What are three things I do better than most? What are my professional skills? Do I have creative and artistic gifts?

c. *Heart knowledge*. What I am most passionate about? What do I love to do, what do I care most about, and what am I most willing to work on with my time and talents?

Individuals in a neighborhood almost always have what is needed (skills and knowledge) to help a neighbor get something done. Groups of neighbors in cooperatives get things done by contributing their time and talent and working together.

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

2. Gift of Associations

– an association is a group of local citizens joined together with a vision of a common goal. Some of their important common characteristics are:

- Political with the ability to create power and act on issues.
- Social
- Venues for gift-giving

It is especially important for Christians to note that churches are associations. Churches have power, are social and are vehicles for gift giving. What would happen if churches – your church – used their gifts for the benefit of their neighborhoods?

To use a personal example, a Community Mental Health (CMH) official was threatening to close a sheltered workshop in my town. The workshop employed people with disabilities. Within two days, we had more than 400 people show up at a CMH board meeting to voice their concerns about the proposed closing. We harnessed hu-

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sations” 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:

- 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?

Three elements are required to move from individual development to mobilizing community (individuals, associations, institutions) development:

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

Getting community members’ participation requires plugging into their self-interest and passion.

PASTORS’ ROLE IN ABCD

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 (including pastors and other ministerial 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, effective community partnerships – usually marked by the following elements:

man participation and voice through our network of association leaders.

3. Gift of 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); and
- Reliability (no mistakes)

Although institutions and associations are both important to ABCD, they are different. The gifts of institutions must be steered in support of what the *citizens* want and need, not what the institutions want and need.

For instance, low-income communities typically are inundated with social service organizations. Those organizations exist to do a particular job – generally to 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? The best use of institutions is in a supportive role, supplemental to what the citizens are doing and want to do.

ENGAGING PEOPLE IN ABCD

The ABCD process involves finding out, through listening and asking, what people really care about. “Learning conver-

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

CHURCH'S ROLE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The church is the bearer of the values of God's original creation, and that involves healthy, flourishing and inclusive communities. One of the primary roles for the church is to attend 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 to accomplish?
2. How will the church support, supplement or lead in helping the community meet those goals?
3. How will the church add scriptural value to the work of the community? In other words, how will the church demonstrate God's sovereignty in the neighborhood?

SUMMARY

Individual, association and institution gifts, combined and blended in appropriate amounts and sequence, can result in a recipe for change that will transform your church and your community.



FIND OUT MORE ...

<http://shop5.gospelcom.net/epages/FaithAlive.storefront/>

Communities First ("God is active in your community. Are you?") A 9-book series and DVD edited by Jay Van Groningen of CRWRC and available at the Faith Alive Christian Resources Web site.

<http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd/>

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University. This site includes many of the researchers and thinkers that have influenced Jay's work in community development.

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

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ A church that wants to transform a community will position itself as the connector of individuals, associations, and institutions to bring all their respective gifts to the

ABCD process.

List some of the institutions and associations present in your community. For each on your list, assess what its strengths, gifts and talents are (*i.e.*, employees, staff, personnel offices, buildings, office equipment, supplies, sales teams, marketing teams, etc.)

⇒ 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?

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