



Fullness of Life together

Reimagining Christian
engagement in our communities

Executive Summary

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livability



Fullness of Life **together**

Thousands of churches around the country are working to support people in their communities, providing activities ranging from food banks and debt advice, to night shelters and job clubs. Given the impressive scale and diversity of Christian community engagement, it is all the more important that we continue to reflect upon the nature of that work - the way it is being delivered and its impact.

In this paper, we hope to do just that. In doing so, we are motivated by a perception and a concern that recent church-based social action has been unduly influenced by a service delivery model which focuses on meeting needs through professionalised institutions. While this model has its benefits and is appropriate in some contexts, we believe it also has unintended consequences, particularly for churches, and that these deserve attention.

We first offer a critique of the traditional service delivery model, setting out why we, as Christians, would challenge the conceptions that lie at its heart. We then consider two possible responses: changing the way we deliver services by using a co-production model, and focusing on building stronger, more resilient communities through asset-based community development. Finally, we offer three theological convictions to help guide local churches as they seek to work together with their community to cultivate life, and life in all its fullness.



The way things are: the contribution and limitations of the service delivery model

To a great extent, our public services are based upon a service delivery model. Professionals and specialists deliver services to meet the needs of ‘service users’. For example, doctors diagnose and prescribe treatment for those with health problems; teachers educate our children; social workers decide what to do with children suffering abuse or neglect.

This way of working evolved to promote inclusion and create universal access to basic support services and, on those terms, it has achieved a huge amount of good.

However, at its heart, this approach is ‘needs-based’. All services start from the analysis and identification of an individual’s or community’s greatest needs, problems and deficits. It also involves a strict separation between service providers and users. Professionals have the knowledge and expertise to offer solutions and service users are defined primarily by their needs. We argue that, despite the significant contribution it has made, this model is limited and can have negative effects upon individuals and communities.

We offer four critiques of the service delivery approach:

Firstly, its negative impact on the identity of ‘service users’ who can come to define themselves primarily by their problems or needs and may become dependent on professionals for help. Secondly, it risks dehumanising both service providers and users. With the current pressure on public services, people with all their complexities may be reduced to problems to be solved or boxes to be ticked.

Thirdly, it can separate and divide communities, segregating people into groups according to their issues, and cutting them off from those who might be able to offer help. Fourthly, and relatedly, it can weaken community bonds. The mutual support system that





previously held communities together withers through disuse, as people request the service of professionals rather than turning to their neighbours for help.

It seems that this service delivery model, whilst useful and fruitful in many ways, has unintended consequences that are potentially damaging for our communities and our common life together.

A service delivery church?

It is perhaps inevitable that this service delivery model has influenced the way in which churches deliver activities. In many ways, this approach makes sense as an efficient, targeted response to the obvious problems we so desperately want to address. Yet, by uncritically relying on this model for their community engagement, churches can be drawn into and shaped by the values at its very heart.

It is these particular values that we, as Christians, would seek to challenge.

Firstly, its concept of identity. We would resist the tendency to define people exclusively by their needs and problems, and the temptation to believe that service providers are uniquely able to help and support others.

Secondly, the power dynamic that often puts professionals in a position of authority over service users. Recognising the damage this does, we would seek to find ways that enable both sides to work together to find solutions. Thirdly, the lack of space allowed for relationships. Acting in an objective, neutral, 'professional' way may be appropriate in some circumstances, but long-term change happens through relationships. We would seek to act in a relational way, allowing space for the kinds of mutual relationships that have greater potential to transform lives.

We believe passionately that the Church should be a place where alternative visions are allowed to flourish and grow, where hope is offered





and new approaches found (or indeed, ancient ones re-found). In this paper, we explore two alternative models which we believe can provoke the Church into considering the implications of its current way of working.

Changing the way services are delivered: a co-production model

Co-production means ‘delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change.’¹

Co-production involves a radical reimagining and reshaping of the design and delivery of public services. At its heart is the key insight that our public services are failing to deliver the hoped-for change because they do not ask people to contribute their skills, experience and capacities. As a result, their assets atrophy, creating ever-more passive consumers and ever-more stressed and over-stretched professionals.

In this section, we explore the six key characteristics of co-production and use two case studies to demonstrate it in practice. St Mungo’s Recovery College, Southwark uses a co-production approach to enable homeless and vulnerable people to gain qualifications, life skills and hope for rebuilding their lives. The Pastors Network for Family Care in Wandsworth shows local church leaders and the Mental Health NHS Trust working together to improve the response to mental health issues in their communities. These stories demonstrate that adopting a co-production approach will be a journey demanding a cultural shift from those who deliver and receive services, and crucially requires people to believe that they can make a difference.

¹ Broad. R. (2015) People, Places, Possibilities, Progress on Local Area Coordination in England and Wales. Centre for Welfare Reform. p. 30.



Reducing the need for services: building stronger communities

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is ‘a strategy for sustainable community-driven development. [It] builds on the assets that are already found in the community and mobilizes individuals, associations, and institutions to come together to build on their assets – not concentrate on their needs.’²

At its core, ABCD is a critique of the needs-based way in which development is often approached. It is a decisive move away from viewing service provision as an answer to the issues facing communities. Instead it seeks to strengthen communities and rebuild associational life at the neighbourhood level so that communities are once more able to meet their own needs.

The approach is based on two central principles. First is the practice of identifying and appreciating the assets, gifts and skills inherent in communities. An asset can include ‘any factor or resource, operating at the level of individual, family or community as protective and promoting factors to buffer against life’s stresses.’³ The second principle is participation and empowerment. ABCD strategy is built on the premise that communities can drive the development process themselves, and do not need to rely on external agencies for resources or ideas.

In this section, we illustrate ABCD case studies from Rotherham and Bradford. We tell the stories of St John’s Church and their involvement with the local Kimberworth Park Community Partnership and of St Clement’s and the Anchor Project and their local Garden Festival. Both local churches have positively engaged with their local communities through recognising the gifts, rather than the needs, in themselves as congregations and in their local neighbourhoods.

² Collaborative for Neighbourhood Transformation, (n.d.), What is asset-based community development? <http://www.abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable/>

³ Ibid. p7



Moving forward: values to guide future activity

We believe that co-production and ABCD encourage a way of working that is more effective in the long term, and more in line with the Christian faith. In the final chapter of the paper, we offer three theological convictions which may help to guide local churches in their future community engagement work. These are followed by practical examples and questions for discussion and reflection to enable congregations to begin a conversation about their own community activities.

Every person bears the image of God: The challenge from co-production and ABCD is to rediscover and reassert the conviction that every person bears the image of God, and that at the same time, everyone is broken and in need of help. This requires thinking through the language we use, how we pray and plan for our community engagement and what we require of those who participate in our activities.

We are designed to be in community: This conviction leads us to accept the challenge from ABCD and co-production to allow ourselves to enter into genuinely mutual and equal relationships. In doing so, we build community rather than simply meeting needs and discover that the emotional, spiritual and practical needs of all, including our own, are met in the process.

The church is a prophetic community: Local worshipping communities are primarily relational, committed to working out their Christian faith together in a particular neighbourhood. We are called to stand alongside the most marginalised in our society, to work for justice and to create communities in which a new reality is seen: to offer glimpses, however faltering, of the incoming kingdom of God. This requires us to be alert to the ways in which we might be uncritically accepting the status quo, by listening to God and to the people of our neighbourhoods, particularly those suffering marginalisation.





Conclusion

The impact of our efforts to reduce poverty and transform communities is inevitably shaped by the way we engage with those we seek to help. It is therefore crucially important that we continue to reflect, not only upon the work we are doing, but on the way in which we are doing that work.

In this paper, we offer an evaluation of the traditional method of meeting needs through service delivery, acknowledging its contribution but also its limitations. At Livability and Church Urban Fund, we believe that long-term, holistic change happens through relationships of mutual care and support. We also recognise that the work of building these relationships is hard, and that this work is bound to be more complex than delivering a service. Moving towards models such as co-production or ABCD will inevitably involve a journey of incremental change. However in their critiques of traditional approaches, we believe that co-production and ABCD raise challenging questions and offer fresh visions for the future of Christian community engagement.

Read the full report online here:

Livability: www.livability.org.uk/fullnessoflifetogether

Church Urban Fund: www.cuf.org.uk/fullnessoflifetogether

If you would like more guidance about how to address these issues in your context or would value some further support, then please get in touch. Our organisational contact details are included below.

Livability: see our website www.livability.org.uk/church
or contact: joinin@livability.org.uk

Church Urban Fund: see our website www.cuf.org.uk
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