

# A GLASS HALF FULL: EXPLORING STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

*Part four, November 2015*

**In November 2015, Church Urban Fund and Edinburgh University's Divinity School hosted an event on the theme of community development. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, this event was one of a series of four that have been held in different locations and on different themes around England.**

**This series of events aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, bringing together academics, clergy and practitioners in order to share their diverse expertise and experience on various poverty-related themes.**

**This paper is a summary of the presentations delivered in the fourth and final event and has been written in order to share the learning and hopefully, to encourage similar discussions around the country.**

## **EXPLORING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

*Cormac Russell, Managing Director of Nurture Development  
and Director of ABCD, Europe*



Let me begin by telling the story of Marian Tompson, a young breastfeeding mother in 1950s Chicago. Back then, many so-called experts claimed that formula milk was better than breastfeeding. However, a few women like Marian were determined to promote the natural alternative. Together, they founded the *La Leche League International* breastfeeding movement, which now has a presence in 68 countries worldwide.

A mother's milk is a basic asset, yet the marketplace had used power and money to convince most people that an artificial replacement for a natural product was better. The fact that we no longer accept this shows the hazards of experts and evidence.

Notably, the *La Leche League* has remained a movement rather than turning into a bureaucratic organisation. From it we may learn three lessons for local community development.



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- 1 Everything remained mother-sized, hyper-local and within pram-pushing distance. The movement's interpersonal nature enabled its proliferation. Gift-exchange was local.
- 2 The movement was clear about what it was for, rather than defining itself in terms of what it was against. Energy wasn't expended taking on paediatricians or the formula milk industry.
- 3 Clear borders protected the movement from the institutional world. Otherwise, systems would have pressed against the social movement, eroding the free civic space on which it stood.



*The key is people making connections between themselves around a common interest and becoming present to each other... The people who have been defined as the problem may themselves redefine the problem.*

Another example of a social movement is the Men's Shed (or Community Shed) movement, which began in Australia. Tools were pooled in one place, and other neighbourhood residents could come and have jobs done. By the mid-1990s, researchers were studying the movement and found that men involved in one of these projects had an increased life expectancy.

The movement wasn't based on an impact assessment but on the impulse to be helpful. Support networks formed that encouraged men to discuss their problems and to seek social or medical support where needed. If he has a power tool in his hand, a man will talk about anything!

Initially the movement spread rapidly across Australia. However, as the government attempted to fund and support the movement, it plateaued. Similarly, as it spread to Britain, the movement became a programme with funding, rules and regulations. This undermined the free space on which it stood. Unlike in the *La Leche League*, there was a lack of clarity about where power was to be grown from and for what purpose.

There are examples of asset-based community development in scripture, which we need to allow to shape our own narratives. One is the Good Samaritan, who took the person who had been mugged to the inn. He led by stepping back, trusting in the relationship between the innkeeper and the person. Resources were available in the background, but they were not the leading issue.

The key is people making connections between themselves around a common interest and becoming present to each other. This enables an understanding of the assets that a community already has. The people who have been defined as the problem may themselves redefine the problem. Power comes from free space and the connections people make as citizens within it. They are no longer recipients of charity but co-creators of their own future.



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Of course, institutions also have a role in promoting well-being, and we mustn't ignore deep structural problems in them, such as racism. The question is about how to grow the truth and from where. It might be easier to grow the community citizen base and the social fabric rather than transforming institutions. That way, institutions are more likely to serve the community. They need to be accountable to the public they serve, rather than requiring 'recipients' to justify their need for resources and account for them.

## A RECENT HISTORY OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

*The Revd Dr Jeremy Morris, Master of Trinity Hall,  
University of Cambridge*



Currently, churches are being expected to take on a range of community roles. Looking at churches' changing involvement in local communities helps us see new opportunities, but also reminds us of the scale of social need and the necessity for churches to prioritise.

Writing in 1913, Neville Figgis saw churches as independent institutions with a mediating role between citizens and the state. Their goals and methods, he stated, are different from those of government. In particular, they can't use force or legal compulsion. Churches are communities of moral formation in which outward behaviour is shaped by inward dispositions. Although moralistic perspectives can alienate wider society, Christianity is a social ethic and should promote harmony.

“ Looking at churches' changing involvement in local communities helps us see new opportunities, but also reminds us of the scale of social need and the necessity for churches to prioritise. ”

There are many examples of sacrificial ministry and community service by churches and clergy across the country of many denominations. Father Dowling said: 'The reason I am making a fuss about the drains is that I believe in the incarnation.' For him, social action directly followed theology. Father Charles Lowder and the Sisters of Mercy ministered during the 1840s cholera epidemic in London. Other activities included visiting and nursing, what is now called social work, and referring people onward to other agencies. Churches ran Sunday schools, sports clubs, coal clubs, clothing clubs and missionary societies, which formed a 'penumbra' of activity around the worshipping community.

These activities were means of Christian moral transformation, with the churches promoting a moral economy. The virtue of charity, which means love, helped overcome many obstacles that the market economy presented to human flourishing.

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Churches wanted to be compassionate but recognised that some forms of charity could act as disincentives. However, they were unable to change fast enough to cope with the rapidly expanding Victorian cities, and their functions were gradually taken over by local government, which also grew. Examples included burial grounds and libraries. The different denominations often weren't good at working together to remain stakeholders, with the Anglicans disliked by many others!

The 'welfare state' was a term coined by Archbishop William Temple, yet the 1948 Lambeth Conference saw the problem of expanding states undermining Christian philanthropy. However, by then it was difficult to imagine an alternative to state welfare provision, especially following wartime bombing, death and injury.

Community engagement is now seen as key to church life, but in reality churches can themselves only undertake a small fraction of the work that they have previously done or that the state now does. A better role for the churches is that of a mediator, promoting the liberty of citizens. They can also help people recover the joy of being amateurs, literally lovers of what they do rather than cogs in a service delivery machine.

## CO-PRODUCING WELL-BEING: WHY IT MATTERS AND HOW TO DO IT



*Lucie Stephens, Head of Co-production at the New Economics Foundation*

Co-production is a relationship in which professionals and citizens share power in order to plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve the quality of life of people and communities (*Co-production Critical Friends Group, 2012*).

The core economy of co-production is the human and social assets that make it possible for society to flourish. A good analogy is with a computer operating system: without it, nothing else works. Professionals need to recognise that the financial economy depends on the core economy.

There are six key characteristics of co-production. It involves:

- seeing people as assets, working with their expertise gained through experience
- building on capabilities, supporting people to put their skills to use
- developing two-way relationships, mutual responsibilities and expectations
- growing peer support networks
- blurring distinctions, reconfiguring service design and delivery
- facilitating not delivering, enabling people to achieve own goals

In co-production, it is important who takes the first step and how relationships are configured. In developing a cooking programme, for example, the best way forward is likely to be enabling people to cook together with other people, rather than setting up an instruction class for interested people.



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## MAKING CHANGE A REALITY IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES



*The Revd Mike Mather, Broadway Church, Indianapolis*

Churches can maintain highly successful activity programmes for young people and satisfy the requirements of funders. However, if wider social transformation doesn't follow, what value do these really have? I used to run a summer programme attended by 250 children each day. However, in the final year nine young people were killed within four blocks of the church. The numerically successful summer programme had failed to bring peace to the neighbourhood.

I would like to tell a story about a woman named Adele, who came into my church to ask for food from our food pantry. As part of her visit, we asked her to fill out a 10-page gifts survey, which asked detailed questions about what she enjoyed, her experience and her skills. Adele wrote that she was a good cook. We said 'prove it'.

We asked her to cater for a lunch meeting for church staff. The food was delicious. We then took her on for nine months as a part-time paid cook for church bookings. At the end of this period she cooked lunch for one hundred business and civic leaders who were meeting at the church. Each received her business card and her work grew. Eighteen months later she opened her own business. All this had begun with the gifts survey.

The six principles of an asset-based approach are:

- Treat everyone as the people of God that they are
- Begin with and build upon the gifts of these neighbours
- Parents and guardians are the first and best teachers
- Invest first and most in the good that the people of the neighbourhood seek
- Money must flow into the neighbourhood
- Love your neighbour

Over our time working in Indianapolis, we have developed five practical rules to guide our work:

- Never do for others what they can do for themselves.
- Identify and use the gifts, contributions and capacities of others, giving them a place in the community.
- Whenever a service is proposed, push to get it converted into income.
- If a service is the only option, try to get vouchers, so people may choose who will serve them.
- Practice hospitality.



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Develop the discipline of looking and seeing what gifts are around you. This might mean doing less within formal church structures. If structures are to be created, this should be by building practices that attend to the gifts of other people.

Publicly recognise and celebrate skills. Share the gift or share a story about the gift. This might include laying hands on people and blessing them. These gifts especially include contributions to the church and to the wider community.

Unlock networks, relationships and access to resources, and be willing to take risks. People with ideas and proposals need to be challenged and allowed to make these a reality themselves.

## DISCUSSION POINTS:

Church planting is too often based on a model of bringing outsiders into an area, rather than nurturing the local resources already in a place. We shouldn't see the outsiders who come into a place as the people who make the difference, but create a climate in which the people already living there may flourish.

Many community development workers travel into a place during working hours, but incomers need to see a locality as a place to be part of where they may be enriched and learn.

We need to focus on values rather than on issues and target groups.

Franchises often focus on efficiency but can consume huge amounts of time. We need to stop looking for blueprints and solutions that can be imported from elsewhere and start trying to discern the underlying culture or cultural change that enables things to happen.

Physical places of welcome with a certain character, such as churches and community centres, can weave a thread of community through even a fluid neighbourhood with a high population turnover.

We need to hear people into voice and into conversation, building relationships before we begin campaigning. The collective experience and collective voice can be extremely strong, such as in the case of mothers resisting eviction. Beware of people who say or believe that they speak on behalf of the community.

**We hope that this event was an encouragement for the people who attended, and also for those who read this summary. We would like to thank all the speakers who contributed to the day and look forward to working more closely in partnership with many of the people and organisations who work so hard to build flourishing communities.**



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