Fullness
of Life
together

Reimagining Christian
engagement in our communities

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livability

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Contents:

Introduction

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. Indeed, recent research shows that 90% of Anglican churches are responding to at least one social need in their community[1] and that, on average, church groups of all denominations are engaged in eight social action projects each year.[2]

Both Church Urban Fund and Livability work to support churches as they engage with their communities, and have contributed to the development of a Christian response to local life for many years. 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 the service delivery model which is so dominant in our society. According to this model, professionals deliver services to meet the specified needs and problems of their users. This approach has its benefits and is appropriate in some contexts. However, we believe that it also has unintended consequences, particularly for churches, and that these deserve attention.

1 Eckley B. and Sefton T. (2015) *Church in Action: a national survey of church-based social action*
2 Cinnamon Network. (2015) *Cinnamon Faith Action Audit National Report*. p. 7

In this paper, we first set out why, as Christians, we would challenge the conceptions that lie at the heart of this traditional service model. However its primary purpose is not to labour a critique, but to explore possible alternatives.

We then consider two possible responses for churches wishing to adopt a different approach. Firstly, we look at the model of co-production as a way of reimagining and reshaping the way services are delivered. Secondly, we consider how asset-based community development can help to strengthen associations and mutuality and build robust and resilient communities that are less reliant on services.

Finally, we consider how to move forward. Three theological convictions demonstrate the resonance between the Christian tradition and the values of co-production and asset-based community development. We offer these in the hope that they can help to guide churches as they seek to work together with their community to cultivate life, and life in all its fullness.

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

A service delivery society

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; judges determine punishments for offenders; 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. On those terms, it has achieved a huge amount of good, reducing material poverty and suffering for many through the commitment and hard work of skilled and caring professionals.

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 or problems.

We argue that, despite the significant contribution it has made, this model is limited and can have negative effects upon individuals and communities.

Firstly, it can create a destructive identity amongst 'service users'. They can end up defining themselves by their needs and believing that these can only be met by professionals who have a monopoly of the power and solutions. Consequently, they may become passive recipients with no sense of agency and control. A mind-set in which people feel they have nothing of value to contribute increases dependency and the tendency to rely on others to solve problems.[3]

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

Secondly, it risks dehumanising both service providers and users. As public services come under increasing pressure to hit targets, save money and demonstrate results, people with all their complexities may be reduced to problems to be solved or boxes to be ticked. Professional providers are also constrained to comply with bureaucratic measures, rather than care for the people they wish to help. There is very little space to build the relationships that would promote successful, long-term outcomes.

Thirdly, it can separate and divide communities. Services tend to target specific groups, such as youth clubs for teenagers, support groups for those with schizophrenia, activities for people with depression, care homes for pensioners. This divides communities into sets of people with the same problems, each cut off from others who might be able to offer help.

Fourthly, and relatedly, it can weaken community bonds. Local communities are ceasing to be the primary source of support and resource. The mutual support system that previously held communities together weakens through disuse and, rather than calling on neighbours for help, people feel unable to deal with significant life events or challenging situations without professional assistance. When services are then withdrawn or reduced, the loss of community competence is felt even more keenly as people feel they have nowhere or no-one to turn to. This supports the diagnosis of Robert Putnam and others who describe contemporary society as more isolated and fragmented than ever before.[4]

4 Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Simon & Schuster, New York.
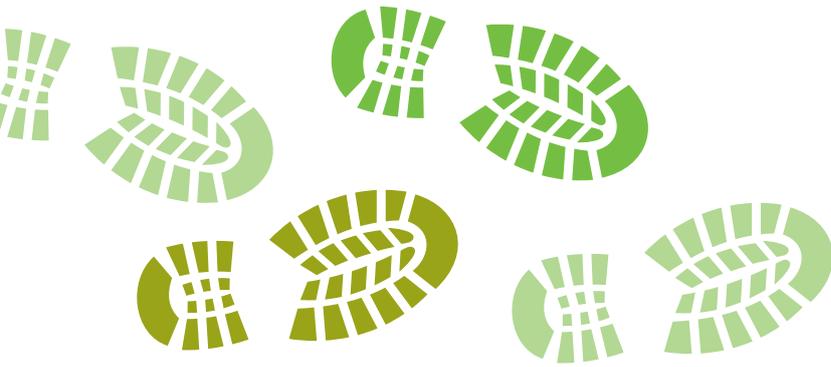
So it seems that this service delivery model, whilst useful and fruitful in many ways, has unintended consequences that are potentially damaging for our communities and our common life together. These consequences, whilst historically acknowledged, are now gaining wider public recognition. Statistics tell us of significant increases in loneliness and isolation[5], depression and mental ill health[6]. In the 2014 Care Act, the government responded to the rising demand for increasingly stretched services with an emphasis on the 'well-being' of the individual, working preventatively and taking a more holistic and participative view of welfare provision[7]. This points toward the limitations of dependence on service delivery to produce an overall, long-term improvement in people's lives.

A service delivery church?

It is perhaps inevitable that this service delivery model has influenced the ways in which churches deliver activities. It is difficult to escape an idea that has become so embedded in our culture. We see churches conducting needs analyses in order to understand, identify and categorise the problems and deficits in their communities. They then design activities to meet these needs, in the shape of food banks, job clubs or perhaps support groups for people with mental health problems.

In many ways, this approach makes sense and is 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.

5 Mental Health Foundation (2012) *The Lonely Society?*

6 Nuffield Foundation (2012) *Social Trends and Mental Health: Introducing the main findings; Sentiff (2012) The Great Depression*

7 Care Act (2014). http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/1 accessed 16/9/2015.

Firstly, we would challenge its concept of identity. Core to the Christian faith is the belief that each person has been created in the image of God. That means not only that we are all of infinite and equal worth, but that we have been given great capacities to think, feel, experience, imagine, do and create. Each one of us has particular strengths, abilities and interests which allow us to shape the world and people around us through our words and actions.

Also core to the Christian faith is the belief that each one of us is broken and in need of help. This applies equally to those on high and low incomes, those with highly successful careers and the unemployed. Embracing this reality means recognising that we all need each other and that even the most apparently successful people still have a need to learn from and be loved by those around them.

These core beliefs lead us to resist the tendency to define people exclusively according to their needs and problems, and the temptation to believe that service providers are uniquely able to help others.

Secondly we would challenge the distribution of power inherent in the service delivery model. Separating service providers and users puts professionals in a dominant position. Since they have all the training and expertise, it is up to them to determine the appropriate course of action. This power dynamic not only weakens and disempowers individual service users, it also makes unrealistic demands of the professionals who are given the entire responsibility for bringing about change.

In recognition of this, we would seek ways in which power is shared and both sides work together to find solutions.

Thirdly we would challenge the lack of space the service model allows for forming relationships. In the sort of 'professional relationships' it encourages, service providers are expected to be objective and neutral. This can be appropriate when, for example, providing access to basic services such as food, education and housing, but long-term change happens through relationships. We would therefore seek to act in a relational way, allowing space for mutual relationships that recognise the strengths and weaknesses on both sides and have greater potential to transform lives.

Is there another way?

There are many who seek to deconstruct current systems and provide analyses of their problems and failures. Far fewer, however, seek to offer solutions. We passionately believe 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).

The Church can have a powerful impact on society by exercising its 'prophetic imagination'.[8] Based on our Biblical tradition and our life together, we can imagine how our society and our world might otherwise be. We are not constrained to how it is, or the current paradigms that order our lives, but are free to imagine new ways of organising social power and social relationships.

Yet, entangled as we are in our society's systems, it can be difficult to see another way. The prophetic tradition also raises our awareness of the ways in which we are shaped by those systems and even complicit in maintaining them.

Below we explore two alternative models which we believe can provoke the Church to consider the implications of its current way of working. Co-production and asset-based community development are only two examples of alternative approaches and there are others.[9] Furthermore, the ideas from which these models are derived are not new, as the community development sector has long embraced similar core principles.[10] Co-production and asset-based community development are, therefore, best understood as current re-conceptions of community development values, evolved in response to the particular issues raised by the context of contemporary public sector services.

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8   Brueggemann, W. (2001) *The Prophetic Imagination, Second Edition,* Minneapolis: Fortress.

9   For example Local Area Coordination http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org

10   See the Federation for Community Development Learning website for the Community Development National Occupational Standards http://www.fcdl.org.uk/about-us/community-development/

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.**'[11]

Introduction

In recent years, growing numbers of people have been critiquing the traditional model of service delivery. One alternative, offered in response to this critique, is the co-production model.

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 bring about 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.

Proponents of co-production argue for reforming public services by allowing users to design and deliver them in equal partnership with professionals. This requires a remaking of the professional-user relationship, a rebalancing of power, and a recognition that solutions can only be found when we draw upon the assets, knowledge and experience of people on both sides of the relationship.

11 Boyle D. and Harris M. (2009) *The Challenge of Co-production,* p11

Building the movement

The co-production movement has been building for several decades. The phrase was first coined by Nobel Prize winner, Elinor Ostrom, in the 1970s. Having conducted a series of studies of the Chicago police, she realised that the service was becoming less effective as it became more 'professionalised' and more distant from the public.

However, it was the work of American lawyer, Edgar Cahn, which brought the core ideas of co-production into the mainstream. In his book *No More Throw-Away People; the co-production imperative* (2000), Cahn developed co-production into a practical agenda for system change.

An early application of this was his 'Time Dollar Youth Court' in Washington DC, in which young offenders sit as the jury for first-time offenders. In 2007, these juries dealt with 80% of cases, with a re-offending rate of just 17% - less than half the average in the mainstream juvenile system.[12]

Over the last ten years, the concept and vocabulary of co-production has gained ground in the UK and is now regularly used by policy makers and government officials. The take-up has been greatest within the healthcare sector. In his 2008/09 annual report, the Chief Executive of the NHS listed co-production as one of four key principles for bringing about change[13] and, in 2013, the approach was publically endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer for Wales[14] and the Director General of Health and Social Care and Chief Executive of NHS Scotland.[15] Several healthcare trusts are now exploring how to embed this approach into their service delivery. In 2009, the Cabinet Office also released a discussion paper exploring how co-production could help to improve public services[16], and the 2014 Care Act emphasises the importance of individual participation in decision making for recipients of services[17].

12 Ibid. p13

13 NHS (2009) *NHS Chief Executive's Annual Report*

14 NHS Wales (2013) *Co-producing Services: co-creating health*

15 Loeffler E. et al (2013) *Co-production of Health and Wellbeing in Scotland*

16 Cabinet Office (2009) *Co-production in Public Services: a new partnership with citizens*

17 Care Act (2014) http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/1 accessed 16/9/2015.

What is co-production?

Co-production has been defined in different ways by different people. Here, however, we use the six key characteristics set out in the *Public Services Inside Out*[18] report, as we believe they are most helpful in summarising this approach.

Building on people's existing capabilities: The co-production model builds on what people can do, rather than trying to fix what they can't do. Everyone involved is told that they have something to give back, either to other people or to the services themselves. This causes a subtle change in the way people see themselves and others. Service users come into an equal partnership with the professionals, based upon making the most of one another's capabilities, and the expectation that both parties will contribute.

Mutuality and reciprocity: Recognition of the assets of service users creates the basis for mutual relationships. Professionals are recognised for the expertise they have developed through years of study and work; service users are valued for their life experience, relationships and personal capacities. Each side brings something to the table; both need the other to bring about long-term change.

Peer-support networks: Co-production recognises that people with particular life experiences - of a certain medical condition, bereavement or loss of employment - are well placed to support and encourage those in similar situations. One of the side effects of conventional services – like mental health or justice – is that people can become isolated from the very networks they need to recover, whether family or supportive friends. Projects that embrace co-production value and support the mutual support provided by these networks.

18   Boyle D., Slay J. and Stephens L. (2010) *Public Services Inside Out*

Blurring distinctions: In mutual, reciprocal relationships, responsibility for bringing about change lies on both sides. This sharing of responsibility inevitably leads to a blurring of the line that divides professionals and service users. Successful co-production programmes encourage users to take part in the planning and management of the projects, not remaining at a distance, but becoming involved in running frontline services.

Facilitating rather than delivering: Co-production, unlike the traditional service delivery model, doesn't start by identifying people's needs and matching them with the available services. It asks different questions: What sort of life does this person want? What do they feel is good for them? These questions put the professional in the role of a facilitator, helping others to achieve their own, self-defined goals. The end point is not delivering a service, but enabling individuals to live the kind of life they want.

Recognising people as assets: This is a distinct core element of co-production, and, in many ways, the critical shift in values that underpins and makes the other elements possible. It's the explicit recognition that, whatever their health problems or social difficulties, service users also have skills and experience to share with others. Co-production projects create concrete ways for people to offer their gifts to one another, transforming them from passive recipients to equal delivery partners.

Conclusion

Co-production offers a different vision of how services are designed and delivered - one that challenges traditional power dynamics and argues for a new relationship between professional and service user.

We have briefly summarised the key principles of the approach. We are well aware, however, that defining principles is one thing and putting them into action quite another. With service providers under increasing pressure to deliver more for less, contemplating any sort of significant change can be overwhelming. It can also be tempting to adopt the new vocabulary without seriously altering the practice – as has happened in some institutions in recent years. Yet co-production is much more than simply volunteering or consultation; it requires a fundamental shift in values, practice and the balance of power.

Adopting a co-production approach will be a journey that requires, at heart, a cultural shift amongst those who deliver and receive services. It springs from a willingness to see the service user's experience and expertise, and an openness to exploring how their 'assets' can be used to help that individual and others. Only when that willingness is present, will practical and sustainable change be possible.

It is important to acknowledge that many situations will require professionals and service users to build up their capabilities in order to achieve co-production. Where confidence and trust have been seriously eroded, it will be almost impossible to re-set the professional-service user relationship. Much of the journey towards co-production will therefore involve reinforcing people's belief in their ability to make a difference. The following case studies provide working examples of co-production, demonstrating the depth of its impact and also the messiness involved in attempting this kind of change.

Case study

St Mungo's Recovery College

St Mungo's Broadway is a London-based charity that helps people to recover from homelessness. In 2012, they opened their Recovery College, putting the principles of co-production into action.

The college offers a variety of courses aimed at people who have experienced homelessness. There are no entry requirements and no charge for attendance which is via self-referral only. Students therefore have full access and genuine control over their involvement.

As well as attending the courses that interest them, students are encouraged to design and deliver courses themselves. These can range from help with literacy and music, to yoga and self-esteem. There are also courses to help people negotiate life on the street, including overdose awareness, first aid, and how to feed yourself on a small budget.

Allowing people the opportunity to lead a course helps to build their skills and confidence, enabling them to recognise their own ability and potential. People without experience of facilitation are trained 'on the job' and supported by more experienced co-facilitators, taking on more responsibility as their confidence grows.

One college attender, David, in his 50s, talks about using college courses as a fresh start,[19] 'It's a chance to find out what went wrong. We're all in the same boat, we have to sort this out. The Recovery College shows you can do it.'
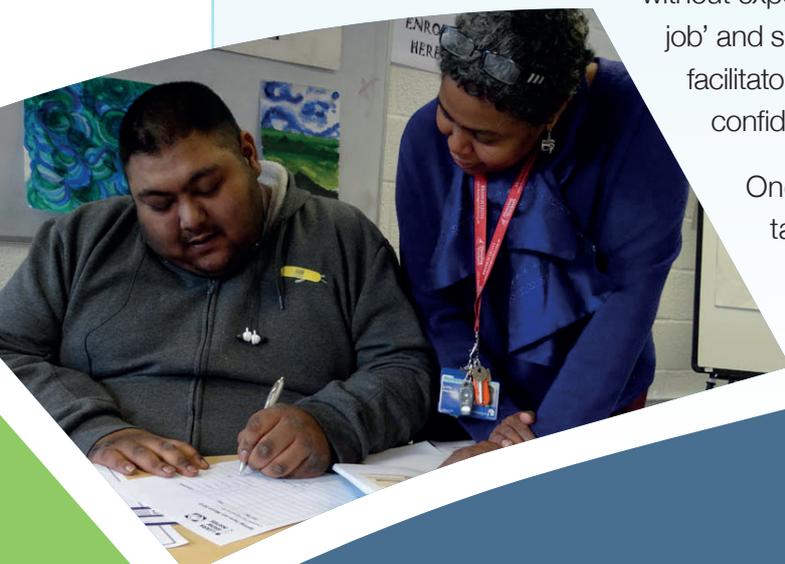
Staff and clients helping people enrol at St Mungo's Broadway Recovery College

19 BBC news report (2013) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21236680

Being a student is a sign of equality, he says. He also talks about the importance of the social aspects of learning for people who might otherwise spend many hours alone. 'Having a laugh in class' is even more important for vulnerable people with dangerous, stress-filled lives.

The college also allows people to use their experience of living on the street to help others.

'I feel like if there's any kind of silver lining in the crap I've been going through in the best part of five years, it's that living off experience, I could help other people,' says Jermain Malcolm.[20]

The 35-year-old, from Tottenham, north London, was jailed in 2008 for possession of a firearm. Despite gaining qualifications while in prison, he struggled to find work on his release two-and-a-half years later and was recalled to prison for smoking cannabis.

Sitting in one of the classrooms where he has studied topics such as assertiveness and self-esteem, Jermain says that St Mungo's education programme has made him 'a more positive person'. 'I feel like I live my life more professionally. I like being here.'

The Recovery College opens up education opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness, but. perhaps more importantly, it gives people the confidence and experience to pursue their own interests, while working towards full recovery.

20 Inside Housing report (2013) *On Course for Recovery*

Case study

The Pastors Network for Family Care

The Wandsworth Community Empowerment Network (WCEN) enables community and faith-based groups to help improve the way public services are designed, delivered and received in the borough.

They started this process by hosting facilitated conversations in which community groups and local service providers were encouraged to tell stories about themselves – their individual hopes, their dreams for their community, their concerns and worries, and their skills, assets and passions. These stories helped to identify issues of common concern.

One such issue was the high levels of mental health problems among the black community. This concern was shared by two specific groups - a network of 25 local, black-led churches and South West London and St George's (SWLSTG) Mental Health NHS trust.

After several conversations, 12 church pastors decided that they wanted to gain formal qualifications in counselling, in order to provide better care for people in their communities. Following this decision, they worked with SWLSTG Mental Health Trust to co-produce an accredited training programme of Systemic Family Therapy. The course was designed to build upon the pastors' existing counselling skills and equip them to provide more specialised mental health treatments and support in the community.

Wandsworth pastors who have completed their accredited training programme of Systemic Family Therapy

Delroy Powell, Senior Pastor of New Testament Assembly Church in Tooting, took part in the course. After completing it, he said, 'It is my hope that this excellent training will lead to our churches and public agencies working collaboratively to improve the health and wellbeing of these communities.'

'The pastors and others involved in pastoral care are the most enthusiastic and energetic group I have taught,' said Annie Turner, Head of Family Therapy and Training at SWLSTG. 'Faith leaders are often the first port of call within our communities when families are facing challenges and difficulties, so it is important that they are equipped with the right tools and methods to provide the best support they can.'

Having witnessed the success of this course, 10 leaders in the Muslim community of Wandsworth have signed up and are currently receiving similar training. WCEN also hopes to recruit 10 vicars to begin this course in September 2017.

'These courses open up the real possibility of mental health advice, information and support being offered deep into communities through avenues previously unseen, building community skills and capacity,' says Malik Gul, Director of WCEN.

This training course has equipped pastors, not only to support their communities with increased skills, but also to create an avenue through which these communities can be part of ongoing conversations about the development of public health and social care services within their communities.

Reducing the need for services:
building stronger communities

'Asset-Based Community Development 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.'[21]

Introduction

Another response to the perceived weaknesses of the traditional service delivery approach is asset-based community development (ABCD). At its core, this is a critique of the needs-based approach to development. It is a decisive move away from seeing service provision as an answer to the issues facing communities, towards a strategy for sustainable, community-led change.

ABCD asserts that real, sustainable change can only occur when local people are committed, with themselves and with their resources, to the process. The story it tells is not of individuals with a series of problems to be fixed, but of communities with bountiful assets and the capacity for driving the development process themselves.

It differs from co-production in not focusing on the way in which services are delivered, or on services at all. Instead, it seeks to strengthen communities and rebuild associational life at the neighbourhood level, so that communities are once again able to meet their own needs. It is important to note, however, that ABCD is not a justification for austerity or the 'roll back of the state', as it has sometimes been used. It does not contain an implicit criticism of communities that are overly dependent or need to learn to stand on their own two feet. Indeed, in the words of Cormac Russell, Director of Nurture Development, *'in the current economic and political climate, there is great need to be very clear about the fact that those who support an asset-based community development approach stand shoulder to shoulder with those on the margins; that social justice is our shared bedrock, and that place-based community building is where we believe greatest effort should be directed.'[22]*

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

22   Nurture Development blog (August 7, 2014) *Paradise Lost: cargo cults and austerity*

Building the movement

The term ABCD was coined by development experts, John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, in the 1980s. Based in America, they had spent many years working in a context where the economy had shifted from industrial employment to a split between professionalised employment and routine low-paid service jobs.[23]

As McKnight and Kretzman recognised, in attempting to respond to the social issues created by this economic shift, the authorities were using a needs-driven approach. People were defined as deficient and policies and programmes were established to address their deficiencies. Long years of research, however, showed that this needs-based approach was ultimately disempowering, turning active citizens into passive service recipients.

Over time, McKnight and Kretzmann developed an alternative approach, focussed not on needs but on capacities. The approach was initially developed in their book, *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilising a community's assets.* In 1995, they co-founded the ABCD Institute in Chicago and their ideas have subsequently spread throughout the world.

23 Barrett A. (2012) *My Cup Runneth Over: 'assets', 'co-production' and the awkward contribution of the Christian community,* unpublished manuscript

What is ABCD?

'Targeting resources onto needs directs funding to professionals and to services, not to communities. The system needs needs.'[24]

Central to ABCD lie two principles in stark contrast to the current needs-based approach. First is the practice of identifying and appreciating the assets, gifts and skills inherent in communities. Swapping the needs-lens for an asset-lens, ABCD focuses on what a community has, rather than on what it lacks. In ABCD terms, the glass is half-full, not half-empty.[25]

Second is the premise that communities can drive the development process themselves, and do not need to rely on external agencies for resources or ideas. The basis of ABCD is participation and empowerment, with communities enabled as agents in, and producers of, their own development.

ABCD doesn't ignore needs but asserts that – whether social, psychological or material – they can be met by more than just services. Family, friends and community play an important and effective role in bringing about change and finding solutions.

24 Cormac Russell of the ABCD Institute quoted in I&DEA, (2010), *A Glass Half Full: How an Asset Approach Can Improve Community Health and Well-being,* p12

25 I&DEA, (2010), *A Glass Half Full: How an Asset Approach Can Improve Community Health and Well-being*

Defining assets

According to ABCD, people are more effective than programmes at bringing about change. ABCD values the assets, capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential that already exist within a community.

Assets have been defined in a variety of ways. Here we use the definition in the report *A Glass Half Full.* According to this, assets 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.'[26] They could be any of the following:

- The practical skills, capacity and knowledge of local residents
- The passions and interests of local residents that give them energy for change
- The 'social capital' in a community; the networks and connections, including friendships and neighbourliness.
- The effectiveness of local community and voluntary associations
- The resources of public, private and third sector organisations that are available to support a community
- The physical and economic resources of a place that enhance well-being[27]

26 Ibid. p7
27 I&DEA, (2010), *A Glass Half Full: How an Asset Approach Can Improve Community Health and Well-being*

The ABCD process

'This celebration of achievement and realisation of what they have to contribute builds confidence in their abilities to be producers, not recipients, of development.'[28]

As they are largely shaped by the dreams and gifts of individual communities, every ABCD initiative looks different. However, they all have some aspects in common, as summarised in *Asset-Based Community Development – An Overview.*[29]

1 **Collecting stories**: The telling of stories is the first stage of ABCD in any community. It helps to uncover the gifts, skills, talents and passions of the community. It energises community members, encourages them to believe in their own capacity, and builds relationships in the process.

2 **Organising a core group**: During the process of story gathering, there emerges a group of individuals who are passionate about their community, who have networks of strong relationships and who are able to lead. This group will become the core of the ABCD process.

3 **Asset mapping**: Instead of identifying needs and deficits, ABCD involves mapping a community's complete capacities and assets. This includes individuals, associations, local institutions, physical assets such as buildings and parks, and the local economy. More than a data gathering exercise, this allows people and their associations to build new relationships, learn more about the contributions and talents of community members, and identify potential linkages between them.

28 Cunningham G. and Mathie A., (2002), *Asset-Based Community Development: An Overview,* p2
29 Adapted from Cunningham G. and Mathie A., (2002), *Asset-Based Community Development: An Overview*

4 **Building a community vision and plan**: Amongst a broadly representative group, assets are matched with opportunities, and a vision for community development is developed. Institutions or facilitators take a back seat role and leave the decision making to those within the community who have been identified as leaders.

5 **Mobilising assets for community development:** Eventually, an 'association of associations' emerges from the connections that have been made in the community.

6 **Leveraging outside support for locally defined development:** Only after a vision for development has been created and local resources utilised, does ABCD ask for input from external resources. Doing development this way around puts the community in a position of strength in dealing with outside institutions.

Conclusion

ABCD calls for a radical shift in power. Often low-income communities are inundated by statutory sector programmes and well-meaning projects designed to address problems with externally planned solutions. ABCD requires those who are looking to bring in solutions to take a backseat, and, contrary to their normal way of working, to listen to what the communities themselves want and have to offer.

As with co-production, ABCD requires a cultural shift; from doing to listening. Listening allows unexpected and unexplored possibilities to emerge, and profoundly challenges the giver/receiver dynamics entrenched in our services systems.

ABCD also demands that those providing services recognise they may not be needed. It goes further than co-production in saying that not only does everyone have gifts to bring, but that those gifts, when recognised and mobilised, often render external services unnecessary.

Case study

St John's & the Kimberworth Park Community Partnership

St John's Church is an Anglican congregation on the Kimberworth Park estate in Rotherham. Kimberworth Park is an outer estate built by the council in the 1950s and 1960s. As with many similar areas, the estate had a strong historic sense of community which has been widely perceived as becoming fragmented in recent years.

For over a decade, St John's had played a role in the community primarily through its ministers. Two successive dynamic and community-oriented priests led to the church playing a founding role in setting up a local Tenants and Residents Association (TARA) and a community forum, which later became the Kimberworth Park Community Partnership (KPCP).

When the church faced a potentially long vacancy, they also faced a choice regarding their engagement with the wider estate. With no formal leader to continue this work, they debated whether to remain focused inwardly on their church family or to try to find a wider role in the community.

With few resources or staff time, the congregation knew they couldn't do everything themselves. Working with Livability's Community Engagement team, they decided to get to know potential partners in the community and, rather than duplicate activity, to join and support what was already going on. As Peter from St John's describes it, "discovering what was already there rather than having to do it ourselves was a relief!"

The Art & Crafts group at St Johns Kimberworth Park

This willingness to see the existing gifts in their community led to the further development of the relationship between the church and KPCP. Church members joined a local walking group and the TARA. Their church coffee morning became an open house, complementing the similar activity run by the TARA on other days.

Viv Scone from KPCP says of their partnership with the church; "on both sides it's an ongoing commitment that local people should be able to say what they need and be able to be a part of creating what they need."

From these simple actions, initiatives and community have blossomed. At the suggestion of the KPCP, an art and crafts group and Tai Chi group have been formed at the church, funded initially by KPCP but now self-supporting. In these groups, mutual relationships are built around a shared interest and local people, including church members, are growing their skills and talents. Ron, a member of St John's and a participant in the art group describes its culture: "no one is seen as the boss". This group have exhibited their work in Rotherham Library and at the Great Sheffield Art Show. These activities are providing a space to build community and include more vulnerable residents; some group members have mental health problems and isolation is a significant problem on the estate. One member of the group used to stay at home, rarely seeing another person; since joining the group, she has grown in confidence and recently had one of her poems published.

As a result of sharing buildings, resources and building community, the church has become a true part of the community 'rather than an island within it'. But this has not happened by running activities for people but by acknowledging what was already being done and the gifts of local people, and coming alongside as fellow participants and supporters. As Viv from KPCP says, "the church has been such a close partner, their mission and beliefs are extremely generous, it has been so easy to work with them."

Case study

St Clement's and the Anchor Project, Bradford

"We didn't want to do things that wouldn't be a part of us". So Indi Elcock describes the journey of St Clement's, an Anglican church in BD3, a multi-cultural inner city area of Bradford. Indi talks about the approach of the Anchor Project as a relationship-based, community development approach. While the language of asset-based community development is not used locally, its ethos is clearly visible.

As a small congregation, St Clement's first considered the skills of their own members and chose to act on their own gifts and passions, rather than rely on 'hired-in' help to engage with their community.

One gift which came to the fore was gardening and care for the environment. Their neighbourhood was known for problems with litter and fly tipping but church members saw the potential for something else. They began to host an annual garden competition, to celebrate the good and beautiful in their community rather than dwelling on the problems, as community worker Indi says, "not getting bogged down with the litter!"

Over the years, they have discovered beautiful gardens, fruitful allotments and even bee keeping in their neighbourhood! The competition has become a part of an annual

Plant stall at the Anchor project
Garden Festival 2015

Garden Festival, sharing and celebrating local art, craft, food, flowers and honey and, above all, celebrating the community as a place of care and cultivation.

Local volunteer, Georgina, won the garden competition in 2007 and was then invited to become a judge. She says, "To see people of different races and cultures coming together to share a common interest is very gratifying." This year, around 50 local people entered their gardens into the competition. New categories have been created to make space for the diversity of entrants, including Young Gardener of the Year in 2014, won by a seven year old girl growing potatoes and broad beans.

By focusing on the gifts that their church community had to share, St Clement's discovered a world of gifts and skills in their neighbourhood and, together, the people of BD3 are celebrating the positives in their community, and encouraging more people to get involved and be inspired by those around them.

Anchor project best small garden 2015

Moving forward:
values to guide future activity

So far, we have set out the reasons why we would seek to challenge the traditional service delivery model and explored two possible responses to its perceived problems.

We are not offering either co-production or ABCD as pre-packaged solutions, or suggesting that they are the only ways to bring about positive change in communities. However, we do believe that these models encourage a way of working that is more effective in the long term, and more in line with the Christian faith.

Both differ significantly from a traditional service delivery model in their fundamental understanding of what it means to be human. Both are asset-based and inherently relational, arguing that change comes about through people and communities, not systems.

We want to use this chapter to explore, in brief, the theological themes highlighted by these alternative approaches. In due course, a second, theological reflection paper will consider these in greater depth.

Here we offer three theological convictions which we hope can help guide local churches in their future community engagement work. We also suggest some questions to aid reflection on current activity and encourage conversation about the steps needed to move away from a service delivery model towards an approach more firmly embedded in Christian theology.

Every person bears the image of God

Both ABCD and co-production are rooted in a very specific understanding of what it means to be human. They begin from the assumption that this involves having something to bring, including creativity, skills, relationships and experience. They also assume that people have the capacity to reason and choose and that exercising this capability is central to human flourishing.

These convictions resonate with the Christian tradition in which we understand every human being to be made in God's image. From its beginnings in Genesis, this theme is developed throughout the biblical narrative. It extends into an understanding of the importance of the individual as a significant part of the 'body' of Christ, with the capacity to exercise their will to choose, and with specific gifts and skills to offer to others.

However, throughout the history of the Church, our understanding of mission and of ministry has often worked against this idea of personal agency derived from the image of God. Rather, we see people primarily as 'broken' or 'in need of a Saviour' and position ourselves as those able to offer a way to that salvation through the gospel, expressed in our service, care and witness.

The challenge from co-production and ABCD is to rediscover and reassert the conviction that every person bears the image of God and, at the same time, that 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.

For example: A Mums and Tots group for the local neighbourhood might be entirely run and managed by local church members, who put together crafts, bring snacks and make decisions about how the group develops. This may be seen as an act of loving service, expressing God's heart of hospitality towards the community. However, it also ignores the gifts, skills and capacities of local mums who are not a part of the church community.
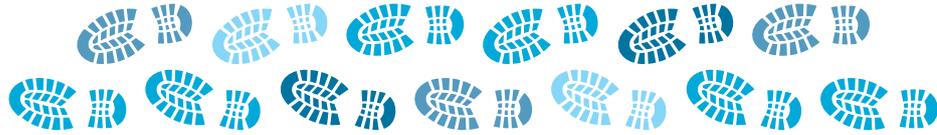
ABCD and co-production both prompt us to ask, 'What of the nature and character of God can I see in this person, and how can I enable that to flourish?'

Questions for reflection and discussion

In your church or community project you might consider:

- In our activities, where might we be failing to see the image of God in the people we are seeking to help?

- How can we begin to enable the people we have contact with to exercise their will to choose and offer their unique, gifts, skills and resources?

- Do these ideas raise further questions for us about the nature of mission or leadership? If so, how can we reflect on them more?

We are designed to be in community

At the heart of the Christian tradition is community in the form of mutual, loving relationships. From the Trinity to the Church, we see, both in scripture and in Christian history, the attempt, with varying degrees of success, to achieve the ideal of a group of people sharing life together.

ABCD takes the radical idea of a self-sustaining community as its aim. When realised in full, this ethos can enable a local community to provide for its own needs through the strength and depth of local relationships. Co-production takes a less radical stance, although it equally affirms the necessity of interpersonal connection and shared investment in our common life.

The Church, then, is well positioned to express values of interdependence, solidarity and sharing resources. However, in our community engagement, we are often hampered by our ideas of who is 'inside' and who is 'outside' our community, thus creating barriers to participation. We can also be uncomfortable with 'receiving' something from someone we perceive to be

more 'needy' than ourselves. Being a provider gives us a sense of authority and power which makes us far less vulnerable than entering into the mutual, give-and-take of community relationships.

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

For example: A church running a foodbank with volunteers from the congregation might be meeting an urgent need for emergency food in their community. But this can also create a clear sense of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots': the service meets a need but does not build community. As an alternative, the church could facilitate a community meal in which everyone brings what they have, however small and including their time and cooking skills, and the group cooks and eats together with leftovers being distributed to all.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Looking at the groups we have and the activities we are involved in, who is really in or out of our community?
- Do any of our activities meet a need but inadvertently create barriers which prevent community from being built?
- Is there a particular area of our life together that might be a good place to start?

The Church is a prophetic community

The role of institutions and organisations in co-production is to facilitate shared action alongside local communities. Within ABCD, institutions may even become redundant as local communities generate their own relational infrastructures of support. Local worshipping communities are often part of institutional structures themselves, but they are primarily relational entities committed to working out their Christian faith together in a particular neighbourhood. Given their dual nature, local churches can often find their place as local facilitators and organisers in communities.

We have suggested that, churches which rely solely on the service delivery model may struggle to bring about holistic change. Because of the model's limitations, they may end up 'meeting needs' rather than building community. The alternative approaches we have explored are a reminder of the Church's role as a prophetic community. We are called to stand alongside the most marginalised in our society, to work for justice and to create communities which exhibit a new reality: to provide glimpses, however faltering, of the incoming kingdom of God. This requires us to be alert to the ways in which we might uncritically accept the status quo, by listening to God and to the people of our neighbourhoods, particularly those suffering marginalisation.

For example: A church running a drop-in youth club might respond to cuts in local youth services by opening it more frequently. It may see itself as creating a positive 'diversion' and keeping young people off the streets. It may even be celebrated within the local church and community for helping to resolve an anti-social behaviour problem. On the other hand, it may simply be endorsing the status quo of service cuts and teenager demonization. To enact its prophetic calling, this church could instead begin to mentor young people, getting to know them better and encouraging them to share their views and feelings of alienation and abandonment as services were cut and trusted youth workers left. Through such mentoring relationships, young people could be empowered to campaign for issues that matter to them, finding a voice that will be heard by those in authority.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- How can we listen more deeply to God and to those suffering marginalisation in our community?

- In what ways have we uncritically accepted the status quo?

- How could we recover our prophetic voice in our communities and neighbourhoods?

These convictions are derived from our theology and our practice, scripture and tradition. It is evident that the challenges provided by ABCD and co-production require a deep re-thinking of the traditional service delivery approach, particularly in church contexts. To adopt the alternative approaches we have advocated necessitates a cultural shift which only happens incrementally, over time.

This culture change needs to be deeply rooted in our understanding of God's character and his calling to us as his people. Therefore, while we have hinted at the theological significance of these models we will explore the theological resonances and implications of both approaches in more depth in a future paper.

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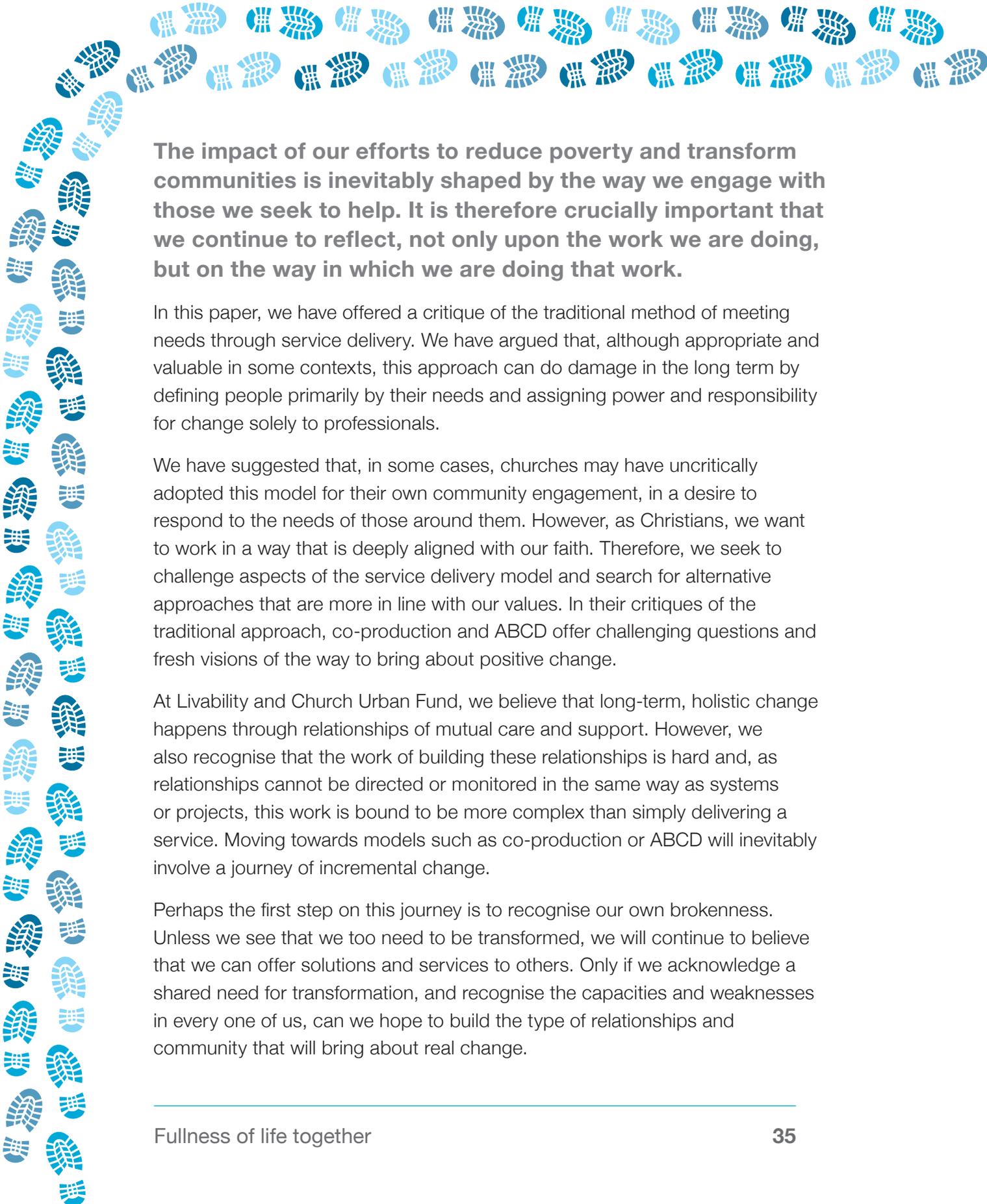
The impact of our efforts to reduce poverty and transform communities is inevitably shaped by the way we engage with those we seek to help. It is therefore crucially important that we continue to reflect, not only upon the work we are doing, but on the way in which we are doing that work.

In this paper, we have offered a critique of the traditional method of meeting needs through service delivery. We have argued that, although appropriate and valuable in some contexts, this approach can do damage in the long term by defining people primarily by their needs and assigning power and responsibility for change solely to professionals.

We have suggested that, in some cases, churches may have uncritically adopted this model for their own community engagement, in a desire to respond to the needs of those around them. However, as Christians, we want to work in a way that is deeply aligned with our faith. Therefore, we seek to challenge aspects of the service delivery model and search for alternative approaches that are more in line with our values. In their critiques of the traditional approach, co-production and ABCD offer challenging questions and fresh visions of the way to bring about positive change.

At Livability and Church Urban Fund, we believe that long-term, holistic change happens through relationships of mutual care and support. However, we also recognise that the work of building these relationships is hard and, as relationships cannot be directed or monitored in the same way as systems or projects, this work is bound to be more complex than simply delivering a service. Moving towards models such as co-production or ABCD will inevitably involve a journey of incremental change.

Perhaps the first step on this journey is to recognise our own brokenness. Unless we see that we too need to be transformed, we will continue to believe that we can offer solutions and services to others. Only if we acknowledge a shared need for transformation, and recognise the capacities and weaknesses in every one of us, can we hope to build the type of relationships and community that will bring about real change.

What next?

We have offered the questions above to help you to start conversations in your local context, and continue the journey of bringing deep change to your communities. If you would like more guidance about how to continue those conversations 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* or contact: *hello@cuf.org.uk*

livability

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