



FROM METHOD TO MINDSET:  
MODEST EXPERIMENTS WITH  
ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

# Modest Experiments

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## SUMMARY

Taking an asset-based approach to leadership and community engagement involves starting from the strengths and resources that are already there: it takes time, patience and trust. It involves a shift in perspective from what is lacking in a community and what they need, to choosing to see what is already present in the gifts and skills of the people and the assets in the area. In Durham Diocese, a group of clergy and lay people have been attempting to implement an asset-based approach in their communities, coming together to share ideas and learning. They identified ways to change their leadership in order to help to identify and release the gifts of the people in their community as well as finding new ways to engage people in thinking about their gifts and skills. This paper is an overview of the process and what the group learnt.

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is an approach to sustainable community development that recognises the inherent skills, gifts and talents present in individuals, local associations and institutions.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on capabilities instead of deprivation and in doing so enables people to identify and mobilise assets to build strong and sustainable communities.

The approach, developed by two international development experts, Kretzmann and McKnight, is defined by three key characteristics: that all individuals and places have assets and gifts to contribute; that sustainable change comes from within communities; and finally that it is relationship-driven, such that when people come together and combine their assets, communities will be made stronger.<sup>2</sup> ABCD helps to shift power back into the hands of communities, as they become less dependent on external agencies dictating what they need and how they will be supported.

ABCD resonates with the Christian understanding of the intrinsic value of each person, as made in the image of God. Each person has been created with gifts, passions and talents, and acknowledging and using these gifts will help them to experience fullness of life.

To learn more about this approach, and its practical connections to Christian theology and local contexts, Church Urban Fund (CUF) and Communities Together Durham (a member of the Together Network) attempted to put it into practice through a series of 'Modest Experiments' which took place in the Diocese of Durham. This report explores the challenges that people faced in implementing an asset-based approach and what was learnt through the process.



# The story of Modest Experiments

In November 2015, Pastor Mike Mathers visited Durham Diocese and spoke to several clergy about how he had been using ABCD in his local area. His stories inspired many of those who heard them to ask the question 'what would this look like in our parish?' A group of four parishes came together to try to put the theory into practice.

With support from Communities Together Durham and CUF, the clergy recruited lay people in their parishes to join the experiment as 'Community Listeners'. The intention was that these people would conduct intentional conversations with people in their communities, in order to uncover and mobilise people's gifts, hopes and passions. These participants in what became known as 'Modest Experiments in ABCD' met together to share experiences and learning with each other at a series of workshops. No specific outcomes were outlined in the planning stage in order to give each of the participants an opportunity to see the asset-based approach take shape in a way that was natural for, and specific to, their community.

The first workshop began with an activity called 'Head, Heart, Hands' during which people were asked to identify and discuss their passions, gifts and skills.<sup>3</sup> This was a significant starting point as it helped the participants to realise what it felt like to be asked to talk about your gifts and skills for the first time. This was something they were planning to ask people to do in their communities. For participants, this activity revealed a deeply rooted aversion to publicly recognising their own interests and talents. It became clear that in order to free people to identify and acknowledge their gifts and skills there would have to be a broader shift in culture in their communities and relationships. Creating an environment in which people felt comfortable to freely identify and encourage gifts they saw in themselves and others was key to people recognising the abilities and capacity that they and others had.

The first workshop also included a presentation outlining ABCD as an approach, discussion about active listening and the development of a set of questions that could be used during conversations. The session concluded with time for each parish to plan how they were going to 'experiment' with ABCD in their communities and the conversations that they were going to have.

Once participants began putting their plans into practice, however, it quickly became clear that 'doing ABCD' in communities needed to go beyond having conversations with people to discover their gifts and connecting them with others with similar interests, gifts and skills. Furthermore, having a prescriptive set of questions to ask proved to be off-putting for the Community Listeners and wasn't something that people easily engaged with. Instead, these Modest Experiments in ABCD led to incremental shifts in the Community Listener's mind-sets and how they approached all situations, not just specific conversations or projects.

## ACTIVITIES

Head, Heart, Hands asks people to identify their skills, or gifts of the hands; knowledge, or gifts of the head; and passions, or gifts of the heart. They write these around an outline of a human body and then spend time looking at other people's sheets and talking to them about what they've written or drawn. This is an activity that can be done in small groups or as a whole church as part of a service. It helps people to recognise that they have gifts to bring and helps to identify things that they have in common with, or can share with, others.



# The story of Modest Experiments

## CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

One clergy member said that during baptism preparation he usually asked parents how the church could support them in keeping the promises that they would make at baptism. Having spent time considering what it would mean to have an asset-based approach in that situation, he changed his questions to ones that invited the family into a form of partnership, such as ‘What kind of community would you like to see your child to grow up in?’ and ‘How can we work together to achieve that?’ These types of questions invited the parents to identify their hopes for their child and enable the church to support them as they work towards that future.

The Community Listeners looked for opportunities to engage others in conversation. Moments of connection between the church and community offered space for these to happen. Informal conversations after church, around weekday activities, or when parents were in church for Baptism preparation, were good opportunities to discuss interests, gifts and dreams for the community.

As the ‘Modest Experiments’ progressed, the team involved in the project moved away from the term asset-based community development. Instead, they began speaking about an ‘asset-based approach’ which for them spoke of a broader set of attitudes, outlooks and practices that can pervade every aspect of life and ministry. It was felt that the language of ‘community development’ implied that communities necessarily had to change in a way determined or imagined by people from outside the community. This sentiment undermined the dedication to being community led and asset-based.

One participant started to redevelop part of the churchyard as a garden. This involved him spending a lot of time digging up the ground around the church. Many people stopped on their way past to ask what he was doing. He began to see this as an opportunity to have conversation with people and invite them to join in and develop the community garden together. Groups from the community, including groups from a local school began to take part in tending the garden.



# Learning from experience

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Throughout Modest Experiments the clergy and Community Listeners came together to reflect on their experiences. During the final gathering participants took part in informal interviews so that the depth of their experience and insight could be captured. This section draws upon some of that learning to share some of the lessons learnt and obstacles experienced and overcome throughout the process.

## Ability and Confidence

A theme that ran across all of the parishes was that whilst all people have skills and abilities, many did not have the confidence to use them or in some cases did not recognise or acknowledge their own skills. There were multiple ways that the Community Listeners thought may help to overcome people's lack of confidence.

Running a 'Head, Heart, Hands' activity during a church service was a moment of potential vulnerability for clergy and congregation alike. One of the risks uncovered was that some members of the congregation felt unable to identify any gifts or things that they had to offer. This was particularly evident with elderly people. Where this became apparent, the vicar was able to work through the sheet individually with those people, helping them to realise that they had gifts, and recognise what they were (some of which they had dismissed as 'just things that I do'), and to realise what an asset they were to the community. One way to help ensure that the activity provides a positive experience, then, is to equip a small number of helpers in the congregation who could look out for people during the activity and provide some support, as needed.

In another parish there was great resistance from people in the church to having conversations about gifts and skills. To address this, the vicar ran an eight week sermon series about gifts and skills in order to build understanding and awareness amongst the congregation about the skills that they had. On the eighth week, the congregation were asked to do the Head, Heart, Hands activity. The congregation, who had been so reluctant to have conversations about their gifts and skills at the start, all took part. One of the Community Listeners then decorated gift bags with the passions, gifts and skills that had been shown to be in the community. These were left in the back of the church so that the congregation could look at them and see the range of interests and skills they had between them. By limiting what was being asked of people and introducing the topic gradually so that people became more comfortable with the language, the vicar enabled the whole congregation to take their first steps in putting an asset-based approach into practice together.



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# Learning from experience

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'In creating an environment in which skills are recognised and encouraged it is possible to develop a culture of identifying and celebrating gifts in ourselves and those around us.'

As these issues arose, the Community Listeners discussed running a 'Skills Day' or 'Give-it-a-go Day' as a community event is a way in which people's belief in their abilities can be developed. The concept is to have a one day community event during which people can run a short training session on something that they can do. A few people run these sessions and others sign up to participate in one in the morning, all eat lunch together and then participate in another session in the afternoon. A Give-it-a-go Day builds the confidence of those running sessions as well as empowering and building confidence in those trying new skills for the first time. This may make them more likely to try other new things in the future or to recognise the gifts that they themselves could share. In creating an environment in which skills are recognised and encouraged it is possible to develop a culture of identifying and celebrating gifts in ourselves and those around us.

## Expectations and Opportunities

At the outset of the 'Modest Experiments' many thought that they would begin to see change in their communities quickly. However, as the experiments moved beyond simply attempting to employ a prescribed set of questions to help identify assets, towards effecting much deeper shifts in culture within churches and local communities, there was a recognition that change would take much longer.

Christmas is a time of opportunity as the language of community and gifts is already in use. Following the success of the Head, Heart, Hands gift bag activity, one parish planned to invite people in the community to decorate a tree with baubles on which they had written some of their skills or passions. This was a way to help people find out what already exists within their community and for people to get involved without feeling that anything more would be asked of them as a consequence. This was seen as part of building towards a change in culture in the community in the long term. This is not as easily measurable as other outcomes, for example the number of people attending church or particular activities. Rather, seeing positive change in the lives of people and communities can be a slow process that needs a great deal of perseverance and love.

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The idea of persistence effecting eventual or long term change is encapsulated beautifully in Jean Giono's short story, *The Man Who Planted Trees*. In this story, a man spends years slowly planting trees at the foot of the Alps. At the very beginning, the land is desolate, communities struggle to live and the wind blows ferociously, unobstructed across the land. As the years go by and the man perseveres in planting acorns and other seeds, steadily and patiently, vitality returns to the land as life springs from the growing trees. Communities of people develop, and the barren landscape of previous years becomes almost unrecognisable. Giono writes 'the transformation took place so gradually that it became part of the pattern without causing any astonishment... Who could have dreamed of such perseverance in a magnificent generosity?'

As with an asset-based approach, it takes time for seeds to grow and transformation to occur. The steady patience in planting that appears to produce little fruit at the beginning of the process may bear a rich harvest in time.<sup>4</sup>



# Learning from experience

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## Resistance, anger and openness

At the beginning of the experiment, the participants assumed that people who lived within their local communities would be willing to engage with them. In reality, many faced resistance. Some reasons identified for this resistance were a lack of interest in being connected with others, a fear of change in social groups, and people simply not having capacity to take on more than they were already doing.

Reluctance to have conversations about gifts and skills seemed to be related, in many cases, both to confidence and to a fear of being asked to do something. Whilst people seemed to worry about being asked to run events or programmes, there was a greater willingness to contribute their gift or skill to a group if they did not have to be involved in the organisation and administration. This may have to do with lack of capacity, and perhaps also reflects the fact that people enjoy doing things that are aligned with their gifts and skills but may not like the planning required to make things happen. There may be value in trying to develop community events and programmes collaboratively, so that those with the interest can be supported in the set up and running of programmes.

For some people anger was a barrier to engagement. This can present an opportunity because if people are angry about an issue, they may have the desire to seek change. Working to address the issues that are making people feel angry or alienated can enable people to put their passion or conviction and skills to use in a fruitful way.

Finally, there was recognition that in some areas people can be very transient. People may only be in the area for a short amount of time so may have no interest in engaging within the local community, or may live in one area but spend much of their time working in another. One parish were considering ways of connecting with the people who commuted from the parish, including ideas such as pop-up cafes at weekends.





In April 2016 a number of families were settled in an estate in Durham as part of the Syrian Resettlement Scheme. After a few months local children began to tease the Syrian children and targeted one family in particular by throwing things at the house. The local churches had befriended the families and were very concerned about the impact of this upon the families' wellbeing. Initially they began conversations to solve the problem with the police and local authority, however it was feared that this would develop more divisions and so they began to take a different approach.

Members of the local church had conversations with the new Syrian families and discovered that football was a common passion so, with the help of CUF funding, they began to run community football sessions in the middle of the estate.

Over the last couple of months new relationships have begun to build between the children and the parents (who also have a game after the children). Providing a space for parents to have a drink and get to know one another has also been important.

If the community leaders had continued to look at the problem in terms of what the community 'needed' rather than what they 'had' the story would likely have been very different.

# Leadership and an asset-based approach

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Operating in an asset-based way as a church leader posed some unique opportunities and challenges. When an asset-based approach is a new concept for a community, it can be difficult for a leader to encourage uptake of this and effect a change in the culture without imposing it in a 'top-down' way.

The group that developed around the Modest Experiments became not only a group for sharing learning, but also one that provided mutual support and encouragement for those in leadership roles who were attempting to work in an asset-based way. Sharing ideas, frustrations and successes helped to spur the clergy on in their ministry as they encouraged one another in the incremental change they were seeing through asset-based practice.

During the course of the Modest Experiments, one vicar moved parish and was able to step into his new ministry with an asset-based approach in mind. He said that in the past, when taking on new roles, he had taken stock of existing ministries, identified the gaps and set up programmes to fill them, encouraging people to follow and get involved. By contrast, now, instead of calling other people to follow his vision, his role became that of a facilitator, listening to people's passions and then helping to release them into doing that, by supporting and encouraging them. In this way he was enabling people to discover and step into their vocations instead of dictating the activities that they should be doing. He described this using the analogy of seeing the crops that are already growing and harvesting those, instead of trying to plant a different crop in its place. He stated that working 'with the grain' in this way enabled him to step to the side and let God lead on what was happening: his position was now to encourage and help to grow what God had already started.

Similarly, another vicar identified that in the past her ministry had been based around need; identifying what was not happening and what needed fixing. This approach had become very overwhelming and draining in a context where there was a lot to be done. She shifted her approach, refocusing on the gifts and passions present in her community. She reported that, having done so, she is flourishing more and is enabling her parish to do so too.



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# Conclusion

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Building an asset-based approach within a community takes time. People learn to recognise the assets present in themselves, in each other and in the space around them. Taking part in Modest Experiments highlighted the importance of valuing and celebrating the small. Those small things may be assets, changes or steps towards a flourishing community. Valuing them can take various forms from public recognition to prayerful gratitude. Identifying and articulating the value of the small helps to build the culture of encouragement and belief in the ability of the community.

These Modest Experiments attempted to translate the belief that all people are made in God's image into the way in which local churches engaged with their communities in practice, by employing an asset-based approach. It is important that community engagement begins with the knowledge that gifts, skills and passions are already present, and that connecting with people can help release and nurture them for the benefit of the community as a whole. For churches, there is a great opportunity for an awareness of this to be woven into the way that congregations interact with each other and into the way that positive change in communities is brought about. By identifying and celebrating gifts in communities, people can be encouraged and empowered to see for themselves that God has given them specific gifts so that he (and we) can delight in their being used, and therefore use them both for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the community as a whole. Such a counter-cultural way of being in community takes time to nurture and embed but in the long term can form an important part of the development of flourishing and sustainable communities.

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