
CHURCH
URBAN
FUND
Exploring
ASSET BASED
COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT

How to use the activities and exercises in this guide

This guide has been developed by Reverend Al Barrett and Church Urban Fund (CUF) to help individuals and groups understand asset-based community development (ABCD) and to think about how they can practice some of the principles of ABCD in their lives, community and church.

- There are 8 sections in the guide. Each short section includes something to read, followed by a question for reflection or discussion.
- You could work through the sections on your own or as part of group.
- If using with a group, you could look at sections 1-4 in one session and sections 5-8 during a second session. Each session would last about 2 hours. It would be helpful to nominate a facilitator and have some paper and pens to hand.
- CUF equips churches to grow new connections and make a difference where they live by providing tools and resources to identify and respond to local need. Find out more: cuf.org.uk/resourcehub

Introduction

At a time when local churches are feeling the pressures of being part of an anxious institution, in a wider world that feels increasingly polarised, fragmented and fearful, what might it mean to shift from a mindset of scarcity to one of abundance? Asset based community development (ABCD) is a call to that mindset shift; finding the treasure in our local neighbourhoods in ways that can nurture flourishing communities, and transform the local church's engagement in the mission of God.

For nearly 40 years CUF has mobilised people, churches and whole communities to tackle complex challenges like poverty and exclusion, and to make a positive difference. This work is founded on the belief that local people know their communities best, and that local skills and knowledge are the key to building communities where material needs are met and everyone feels connected, valued and loved.

This guide draws on insights gleaned from continuing to practice and develop community-building work locally, and from co-writing (with Ruth Harley) the book Being Interrupted: Reimagining the church's mission from the outside in.

The Revd Al Barrett, January 2025

Contents

1. A story: a village, a crisis and a wise woman

10 min

A village had been hit by a crisis that was threatening to overwhelm it.

The village elders got together, and decided that what they needed to do was go and ask the wise woman for help. So a delegation went to the wise woman's hut, a short walk from the village itself, and asked her to help them. She agreed, and told the elders to gather the whole village together under the big tree. And so the elders hurried back, and did as she told them.

When the wise woman arrived, she looked around at all the villagers, and then spoke. "I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know," she said to them. "Do you know what I'm going to tell you?"

The villagers were a bit puzzled, and one by one they shook their heads and said, "No. No, we don't know. That's why we asked you to come here."

"Well," said the wise woman, "then I'm afraid I can't help you." And she went away.

The elders were frustrated. This was not what they'd been expecting. They put their heads together again, and decided to try again. So the delegation went back to the wise woman, and asked her to please come back and address the village again. "We really need your help," they told her. And so she agreed.

Again, the elders went back, and gathered the whole village together under the big tree, and the wise woman came and spoke to them again. "I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know," she said again. "Do you know what I'm going to tell you?"

Now this time, the elders had given the villagers a stern talking to. "This time, give her the right answer!" they had said. And although the villagers were still pretty sure the answer was "No", they guessed the right answer must be "Yes". So with a mixture of shakes and nods of their heads, they replied to the wise woman, "Yes. Yes we do!"

"Well in that case," replied the wise woman, "you don't need my help!" And she went away again.

By this time, the elders were pulling out whatever remained of their hair. The crisis was big, and urgent, and they desperately needed help. What were they going to do?

Eventually, one of them came up with a cunning plan. And a third time, the delegation went back to beg the wise woman to return to the village. And a third time she agreed. And a third time she came and addressed the whole village under the big tree.

"I'm not going to tell you anything you don't already know. Do you know what I'm going to tell you?"

And this time, the villagers had all been thoroughly briefed on the cunning plan. So half the village said "No". And the other half of the village said "Yes".

And the wise woman paused, and looked around, and a smile came over her face. And slowly, quietly, she spoke.

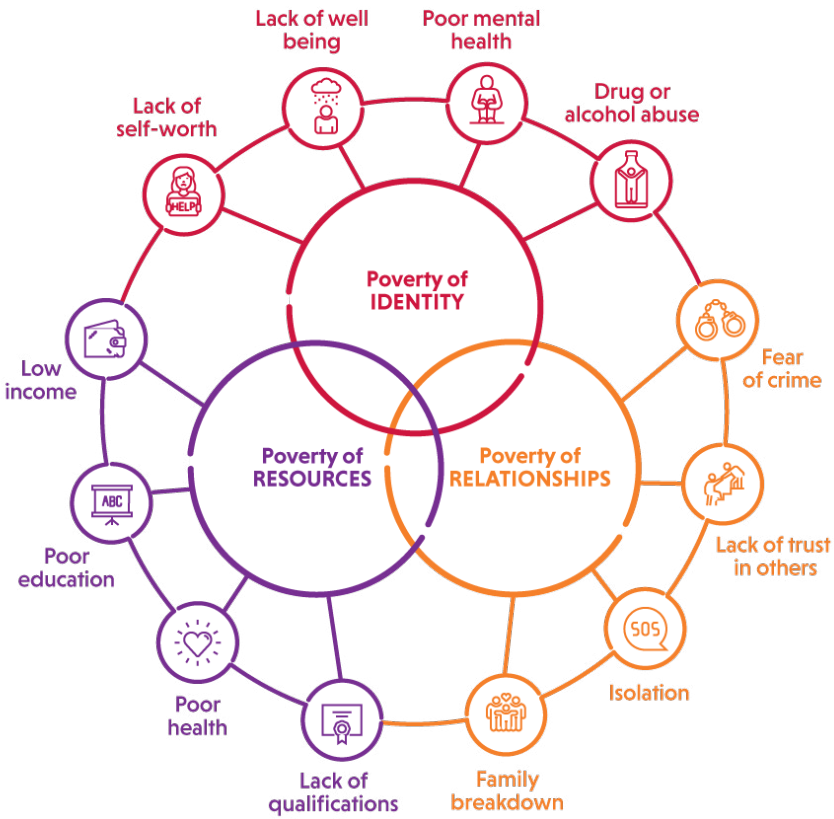
"Well in that case," she said, "listen to each other!" And she went away, and was never seen again.[1]

Question:
What wisdom do you hear in the story?

[1] I heard this story from a long-time friend and mentor, Cormac Russell (founder of the ABCD training organisation Nurture Development), in an ABCD training course in West Bromwich in 2012. I believe it may have its roots in West Africa. As stories do, it has almost certainly changed a little along the way.

2. The web of poverty

10 min



Let's think for a moment about poverty. Since 2010 I've lived and worked in Hodge Hill parish, on the eastern edge of Birmingham, just under the concrete pillars of the M6 motorway as it makes its way east from Spaghetti Junction, past Fort Dunlop, towards Birmingham airport. One way of telling the story of my neighbourhood is that it is among the 5% most deprived parishes in the country. A more complex story might recognise – via the web of poverty[2] – that poverty is not just about money, but also the lack of other kinds of resources (such as skills, qualifications or health), relationships (without which there is isolation or social fragmentation), and the sense of self-worth and self-confidence that are part of a healthy sense of identity.

Where the web of poverty tends to focus on poverty of identity at the individual level (entangled with poor mental health, and sometimes leading to addictive behaviours, for example), on my estate in Hodge Hill we know that this can also be powerfully felt at a collective level. Neighbourhoods like mine have, over the years, been labelled 'sink estates', 'ghettos', 'broken' and 'workshy': stories often told about us by powerful people in politics and the media, and often driven by an agenda that is not first and foremost about either compassion or justice. And the trouble is, when these versions of the story are told, loudly and repeatedly, about neighbourhoods like mine, the people who live in places like this begin to internalise the language and believe it about themselves. So a vital part of the work of community building is not just helping individuals tell a different story about themselves, but enabling our stories of who we are as a neighbourhood to change.

Question:
Think about one or more of the three aspects of the web of poverty and reflect on how they impact at an individual or community level in your area.

Find out more about the levels of poverty in your area by using the Look Up Tool: cuf.org.uk/shinealight

[2] cuf.org.uk/resources/web-of-poverty

3. Seeing differently: a tale of three missional economies

30 min

How do we think our way through the messes we're in when the way we think is part of the mess?
Nora Bateson

The wise woman in the story refused to give the villagers any answers. What if our need for answers is one of the ways of thinking that is, as Nora Bateson puts it, 'part of the mess'?[3] ABCD is not an answer. It's not a mission strategy, or a model, that you can pull off the shelf, apply, and get results. It is, instead, a lens: a way of seeing the world differently to the kinds of lenses through which we're used to seeing the world. But it may also name something more explicitly that you already know, that you're already doing instinctively – and the naming might just help you.

Most lenses bring some things into clearer focus, and leave other things a bit more fuzzy. What we call missional economies[4] is a way of naming some of the different ways we might see the local church's relationships with our neighbours. Each of them shapes our imaginations, what we pay attention to, what we value, what we worry about – and even what we think God is most interested in! Each of them shapes how we interact with each other, and how we think about church and mission in our local contexts. As we explore them here, you might recognise something familiar in each of them: just as some of us have to swap glasses for different tasks, so each of these missional economies might be a lens you look through in different situations.

[3] This is a variant of something that is often said by the Nigerian-born thinker Bayo Akomolafe: 'what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?'. Bayo's work, on the complex entanglements of the more-than-human world that we live in, is mind-blowing, and has been hugely influential on my thinking over the last few years. You can explore his thinking at www.bayoakomolafe.net

[4] In our book: Barrett, A. Harley, R. (2020) *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside*, In. SCM.

Economy #1: Counting in

Our first missional economy gives us a lens for seeing most clearly the things that we can count: and the things that are easiest to count are people and money. In this way of seeing our church and our neighbourhoods, what we value most is what we can count into church: people who attend church services and activities, and money that comes into church funds (that we can report in our annual accounts). Looking through this lens, we feel good when there are more people and more money coming into church, and we feel bad when the numbers are going down. At its worst, underneath these feelings there is a deep anxiety about the survival (or otherwise) of the church as an institution: there is, perhaps, a feeling of a gaping hole at the heart of the church that needs filling, to keep the institution going. And notice how this shapes the way we see our neighbours: we value them, primarily, as potential attendees, to fill our pews, our groups and activities, and as potential financial givers to church funds. We need our neighbours, to help keep the church afloat.

Economy #2: Giving out

If the first missional economy was all about what came into church, this one is much more interested in what goes in the other direction: the flow outwards (of people, energy, love, care and generosity – and sometimes even money) from church into our neighbourhoods. This flow is what we often call service, or social action – but what we might refer to as 'preaching the gospel' or 'evangelism' has a very similar shape and direction. What these various versions of the second missional economy have in common is a sense that the lack, or the hole to be filled, has moved from being at the heart of the church (in the first economy), to being at the heart of the neighbourhood. Our neighbours need something the we, the church, has – and so why would we not do everything we can to give it to them?[5]

[5] Additional reading:
The three temptations that Jesus encountered in the wilderness can help us examine the power inequities that may be present when the churches mission is motivated by a sense of lack at the heart of the neighbourhood. This is explored in an optional extra section on page 21.

Economy #3: Treasure seeking and being interrupted

After all the risks we've identified in the missional economies of counting in and giving out, remember we're not suggesting that our third missional economy is the flawless, definitive answer! But it does shift our focus, change the way we see our neighbourhoods and the church's mission, in ways that can offer a life-giving corrective alongside the inescapable realities of the first two. There are, hopefully, less anxieties attached to this third economy, because it is shaped by an imagination not of scarcity or lack (whether within the church, or within our neighbourhoods), but of an abundance of God-given gifts: both within the church community, and within our neighbourhoods – even, crucially, within those churches and neighbourhoods that have often been labelled 'poor', 'small', 'struggling' or 'deprived'.

This abundance of gifts will rarely be measurable in financial terms, and often it won't show up clearly when we're simply counting people. Stories are one of the best ways of bringing this abundance to visibility, paying attention to it and celebrating it.

Stories of adventures, of going out and hunting for treasure, stories of finding it, stories of how those encounters and discoveries have surprised us, interrupted us, unsettled us and transformed us.

In this economy, the flow is two-way: we go out from church into our neighbourhoods, and we receive gifts from our neighbours which change us. But what comes our way, as church, absolutely can't be predetermined by some mission strategy, funding bid, or action plan. There is a strong expectation that we will discover and receive wonderful things (because the God of abundance is abundantly present in our neighbourhoods), and in there are certain kinds of things, in the broadest of terms, that we might be on the lookout for (we'll name some of those in the next section), but exactly what we will discover is utterly unpredictable: as such is the way of the Spirit of God, and of Jesus who told the most surprising of parables.

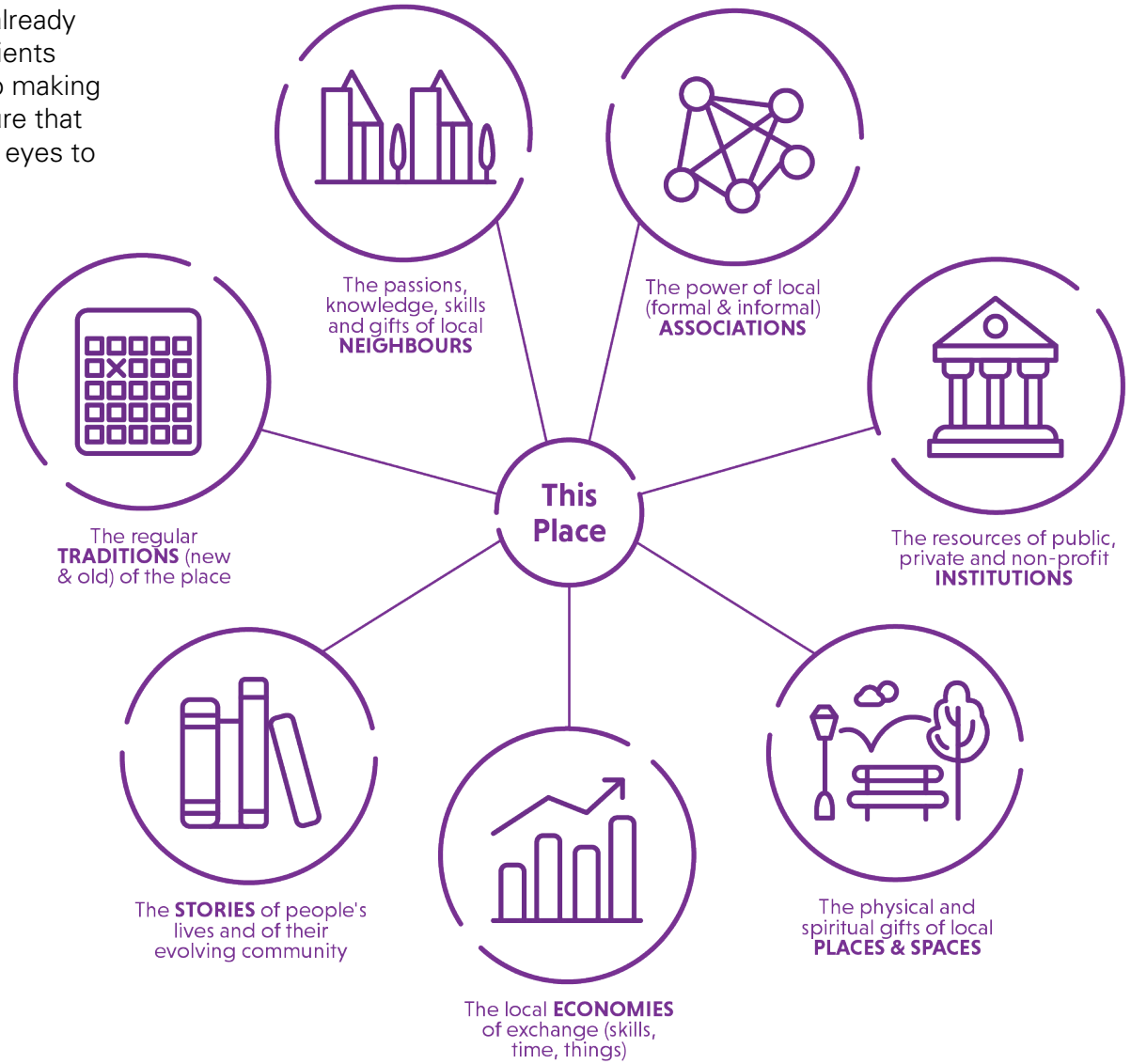
Space for your thoughts and reflections ...

Questions:
What did you recognise as familiar in each of the three models?
Are there any areas where you need to 'shift your focus'?

4. Looking for the treasure: 7 key ingredients of abundance in our neighbourhoods

30 min

So let's get practical. Let's name seven kinds of 'gift'[6] that are already in our neighbourhoods, ingredients that are already contributing to making community life happen, treasure that we might discover, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.



[6] Practitioners of Asset Based Community Development will often name these as different kinds of 'assets'. We prefer the language of 'gifts', because it points to their source in God the gift giver, and it resists some of the residual resonances of a capitalist mindset that treats all of God's creation as assets to be extracted, accumulated, owned and used, rather than gifts to be revered, shared and enjoyed.

7 key ingredients of abundance in our neighbourhoods

Places & Spaces

ABCD approaches often start with (and focus on) the human inhabitants of a neighbourhood but, in these times of ecological breakdown more than ever, I'd argue it's vital to begin with the more-than-human world around us: our creature-kin of other species, the trees and plants, the land and water, the green and not-so-green spaces of the place itself. However managed, shaped and disrupted by human life the ground beneath our feet is holy ground (Exodus 3:5). From an ABCD perspective, place is the context and foundation for community building. From an ecological perspective, our places are always already complex, multi-species communities, of which we humans are only one part.

Neighbours

Next, then, come the humans! We're searching out the passions, knowledge, skills and other gifts of our neighbours. 'Passions' name the many different things we care about deeply. 'Knowledge' includes not just intellectual, head knowledge, but all of the practical, grounded, embodied wisdom that each of us has picked up from the university of life. 'Skills' could be anything from woodwork and gardening to managing spreadsheets and facilitating meetings. So many of these gifts might be hidden away in every person we meet, but might also be waiting for an opportunity to be unleashed, shared, connected with the gifts and needs and longings of other neighbours – and it's in the connecting of gifts that the magic of community building really begins!

Associational life

Associational life is one way of naming what happens when people get together. It can be as formal as those community groups with agendas and constitutions and bank accounts, or as informal as the dog-walkers who randomly, but regularly, bump into each other in the park, or the parents and carers who gather at the school gate every day. But the associations of a neighbourhood have the power to connect people and their gifts together in ways that weave the fabric of community.

Institutions

Institutions with bases in our neighbourhoods – schools and council services, shops and businesses, community centres and places of worship – can be a gift to the work of community building, if they choose to open themselves up to their neighbours in generosity and humility. Sharing their resources, recognising their limitations, and prioritising the potential for community over their institutional agendas.

Local economies of exchange

Local economies of exchange include anything that is shared and swapped, including skills, time and things, as well as the money that circulates locally (rather than leaking out of the neighbourhood as profits for big businesses).

Stories

We've already noted that stories are at the heart of community life: the stories of individual neighbours, and wider stories within the neighbourhood. Majority stories that claim a widespread we, and minority stories of marginalization and dissent. Stories rooted deep in the land and history of a place, and stories that open up new dreams and possibilities for the future.

Traditions

Traditions are rooted in both place and time: they have a regularity to them (perhaps linked to particular seasons or days in the year), they bring people together and draw out the gifts of individuals and local groups, and they are often places for sharing stories and other kinds of exchange. They might be centuries old (like well dressing or maypole dancing) or recently invented.

Question:
Where do you see each of these in your community?

Optional activity: Use the table on the following page to help you consider and reflect on your community life across the 7 ingredients of abundance. This would make an interesting group exercise and might be something people want to take away and think about between sessions.

7 key ingredients of abundance in our neighbourhoods activity

Places & Spaces	Neighbours	Associational life	Institutions	Local economies of exchange	Stories	Traditions

Optional activity: Use the table to help you consider and reflect on your community life across the 7 ingredients of abundance. This would make an interesting group exercise and might be something people want to take away and think about between sessions.

5. Bumping-spaces: finding, inhabiting, nurturing, creating.

10 min

Where to start?
I wonder how you're feeling at this point? Perhaps you might want to pause for a moment and notice what's going on inside your mind, body and spirit…

Are you excited at all the possibilities you can already see, or begin to imagine, in your neighbourhood? Does the abundance that's out there waiting for you feel a bit overwhelming? Or do you find yourself, perhaps, still wondering where you might begin, what the way in or starting point might be, for you, to uncover this abundance that we're talking about here?

5. Bumping-spaces: finding, inhabiting, nurturing, creating.

This is not the kind of journey that starts with a route map to the destination. It's the kind of journey where one of the few things we know for sure, is that we don't know, can barely imagine, and certainly can't control, what the destination will look like. The 'seven ingredients' above give us some clues as to what we might be looking for in our neighbourhoods, but mostly we just need to take a first step, plant our feet onto a particular patch of earth, and see what we might begin to see from there. And I say this even to those of us – perhaps especially to those of us – that are already at work in a neighbourhood, and have been for years: for us it's particularly important to stop what we're busily doing, perhaps step into a slightly different space, and take a good look and listen around us.

And the first step we would urge you to take, is into one of your local bumping-spaces. The spaces in your neighbourhood where people literally bump into each other – and particularly people who are different to each other. The 'edge-spaces' where different communities-within-your-community might bump up against each other. The places where encounter happens – or could happen, if it had a bit of encouragement. You probably know some of them already. A school gate at the beginning and end of the school day. A spot in the park for young people, or dog walkers, at different times and often in different corners. A queue at the post office. A bus stop.

Some of these are designed to be spaces of encounter, sometimes labelled community centres. Some are much more accidental – but because human beings are social animals, people often turn places into bumping-spaces, less by design and more by chance and habit. Very occasionally, we might need to create a bumping-space. But more often, the bumping-spaces that are already there just need a bit of patient inhabiting and nurturing.

When my kids were in primary school, I'd hang out in the playground at the end of the school day, waiting to pick them up. I'm a bit of an introvert by nature, so not very confident at starting conversations with people I don't know. So I'd often be leaning against a wall, waiting, not far from other parents, also leaning against a wall, waiting. Generally, the women seemed to be better at talking to each other than the men, but on the whole there wasn't much conversation.

When a little team of us from church asked the Head Teacher if she would let us come to the school playground, once a month, to serve hot drinks and biscuits to the waiting parents and carers, she gave us an immediate and enthusiastic Yes! We weren't asking to raise money, or to advertise anything, and it certainly wasn't evangelism in any explicit way. We just wanted to encourage the waiting adults to get into conversations, to get to know each other better, and to encourage possibilities to emerge in the connection making. In other words: to nurture a bumping-space. And that's what happened!

Question:
Think about one place that you visit regularly. How could it become a place of encounter?

6. Uncovering the community root system: connectors, story-tellers, and earth-tenders.

Places and people are entangled together. The fabric of a community in a neighbourhood is shaped by the place, and woven by its people – however consciously or unconsciously. Or, to use a different image, the visible fruits of a community are like the mushrooms popping up above ground, which are just a small part of a vast, intricate fungal network below ground. When we start hanging out in our neighbourhoods expecting to discover abundance, we will begin to notice some of that underground life going on around us, and, like the bumping-spaces, find ways of nurturing and encouraging it. Here I want to briefly describe three kinds of gifted 'community-weavers' who, when we find them, will lead us deeper into those vital root systems of community life.

Connectors

First are the connectors. They are, as the name suggests, people who are well-connected within a community: they know people, people know them and, crucially, they believe in people and people trust them. And they love making connections: introducing people to each other, inviting people to groups and gatherings, spotting how one person's gifts and passions can connect with another person's needs and longings. They have an eye for the people on the edges, and are good at seeking them out and drawing them in. They might not always be people who find it easy to start a conversation with a stranger, but they'll take a deep breath and do it anyway. They know that the power of listening is more important than the power of speaking. Connectors are different to leaders: if leaders are often vocal and visible at the front of the room, connectors are quietly buzzing around in the middle or at the back. They might even shy away from being named as such – but they are vital within a community.

Story-tellers

A second kind of contributor to the community root system is the story-teller. They love telling stories: it makes them come alive, and at best it brings others to life too. They know that a good story will draw people in, take you through emotional highs and lows, make you laugh, make you cry. They know that stories aren't solutions to problems; they're not afraid of the messiness, complexity and mystery of life. And while they might happily tell you stories from their own lives, these are often people who are fascinated by other people's stories, by the ancient, deep myths rooted in this place, and by the unfamiliar stories brought by the newest neighbours arriving in the community. And, to return to the weaving image, in the right contexts a neighbourhood's story-tellers can be community story-weavers: weaving together a whole host of stories from diverse neighbours into a rich, multi-coloured, multi-textured tapestry that has the feel of something owned collectively.

6. Uncovering the community 'root system': connectors, story-tellers, and earth-tenders.

Earth-tenders

If that all sounds a bit poetic, our third kind of community root-worker is much more down to earth – literally. The earth-tenders know and love the earth that's under their feet, and delight in getting their hands dirty. They remind us that even the greyest of concrete dominated council estates contains a wealth of green corners and growing beauty; and they invite us to see our surroundings through different eyes. They often have grounded, practical knowledge of how to grow stuff, and to tend what is already growing. They may also be deeply spiritual (although not necessarily in an explicitly religious way), cherishing an intimate attachment to a particular tree in the woods, or feeling a deep connection to a local river. Their love for this specific patch of earth may come out of a long history of rootedness in this place, but not necessarily. Sometimes, they may have travelled across continents and oceans to make their home here, bringing with them earth-wisdom and plant-knowledge from another land, which they quickly transplant into the soil of this neighbourhood, all with a passion for life that can often be contagious.

And many more...! These three kinds of community-weavers are by no means an exhaustive list, or even the most important in some kind of hierarchy of gifts (community builders don't believe in hierarchies of gifts, just as I hope most churches don't). There are plenty of other vital kinds of contributors to community life. But I'm naming these three here because each of them offers us a way in when we're approaching a neighbourhood with fresh eyes, looking for its abundance. Connectors will introduce us to lots of other neighbours. Story-tellers will share with us some of the community's stories. And earth-tenders will help us get intimately acquainted with the world that's underneath us and all around us. It should also be obvious, hopefully, that none of these three are neat categories: the reality is always more mixed and messy. And each has its shadow side, risks and temptations. Connectors can be constantly, busily buzzing and cross-pollinating, and struggle to stay still for long, take time to go deeper,or embrace rather than resist their own human limitations. Story-tellers can get seduced by the sound of their own voice, or the power of a good story, and forget to make space for other voices, dissonant stories, and those outside the circle, to be heard. And earth-tenders can be so focused on their patch of soil, that they can be tunnel visioned and territorial, forgetting that 'their patch' is always part of a bigger ecosystem, and that not even 'their patch' is theirs alone. Nevertheless, each is a vital contributor to the community ecology, and each can take us on a different kind of journey into the often-hidden, complex, life-giving root systems of community life.

Question:
Which of the characters do you most identify with? What might that mean for you as you work with others to encourage the life of your community?

Head, Heart, Hands is a simple exercise to help you think more about your gifts and skills, and those of other people.

cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/HHH-Activity.pdf

7. Shifting the culture – bringing others with you on the journey

If you're reading this as a church leader, or as a church-based community worker, or as someone who is passionate about community building but is feeling like something of a lone voice in your church community, then you may well be wrestling with a question that goes something like this: 'All this sounds very exciting, but how do I bring others with me on the journey? How can I contribute to shifting the culture of my church congregation, so that this stuff gets into our DNA, and isn't just seen as the niche interest of a few?'

Just as ABCD is not a mission strategy or a model, I'm not going to finish this guide by offering a 'how to' for culture change in churches. What I can share here is just a little glimpse of one story – that of our church community in Hodge Hill – and some suggestions of principles that might be more widely applicable. And it's vital to emphasise that none of it happens fast. We talk about 'moving at the speed of trust' in our community-building work, and in our experience, trust often moves quite slowly, and by very wiggly, roundabout routes.

Precipitating moments

Something happens that is utterly out of our control, and it has a significant impact on our day-to-day life. We didn't plan it, engineer it or strategize it. But we do have choices about how we respond to it.

In Hodge Hill, one of those precipitating moments was the closure of the church building. St Philip & St James Church Centre had been built in the 1960s, a pioneering piece of church architecture in its day, its purpose built, multi-use community space well used by both church and wider community pretty much every day of the week. But by 2008, the building was beginning to fall apart, the church congregation were facing a £500,000 repair bill, and it was swiftly – and for many local people, shockingly – demolished. Amid the grief and shock, this homeless church community found ways to stay open enough to ask the question, 'how do we "do" church and mission now?'. Rather than staying stuck in mourning and bitterness, or pursuing pipedreams of rebuilding, church members chose to embrace the vulnerability of the circumstances they found themselves in, and the vulnerability of an unmapped path towards an unknown destination. That took collective courage. And it's by no means the only choice they could have made.[7]

Intentional Practices

A second aspect of the shift for us was to take on some simple but intentional practices that have evolved over the years here, but remain central to our ongoing community building work. These practices included building a small team of volunteers, mapping the neighbourhood, inhabiting bumping-spaces, listening deeply, and bringing what we heard back into the church's gatherings, so that our encounters with our neighbours contributed to the shaping of our vision and values, and our understanding of God's mission.

[7] See: Beaumont, S. (2019) *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading for a Liminal Season*. R&L

7. Shifting the culture – bringing others with you on the journey

External support, mentoring and/or companionship

During our initial stages of our journey, one of the great gifts was an external companion to travel with us through the process. At times he functioned as something of a guide, but not one who knew where we were going any more than we did. He encouraged our curiosity rather than supplying us with answers, and shared in the excitement of our discoveries along the way. He was unafraid to ask the 'why' questions of things that our more established congregation members may sometimes have taken for granted about church life, and sometimes he would help us make connections between things that we had not perceived as related (linking the stories to the statistics, for example). Like the wise woman in the story of the village, he was also sometimes the one who simply encouraged us to listen to each other – and to better notice whose voices were not being attended to.

ABCD resists our common temptation to look to an outside expert or authority to solve our problems for us. Instead, it invites us to start with the question, 'what can we do with the gifts that are already present in this place?'. But that doesn't mean there isn't still a place for external support. Sometimes specific expertise or resources are needed that we might not have within our community. Sometimes the perspective of the outsider, patiently and humbly offered, can help us insiders see more clearly. What locally we have come to call 'alongsiding' acknowledges the value of holding spaces for local people to participate, contribute, experiment, lead, reflect and learn – but also to support and mentor local people to begin to open up and hold such spaces themselves.

Characteristics of local leaders or 'animators'

Is the wise woman a member of the village, or an 'outsider'? We're told that she lived at the edge of the village, and she's definitely distinguished from the (increasingly desperate) elders in the story. The role of local leaders (including, but definitely not limited to clergy) is undoubtedly significant to stories of culture change, but is rarely straightforward. As someone in such a role, I acknowledge that often I identify more with the elders than with the wise woman. But if I'm fair to myself, I know that I'm a bit of both. The work of 'alongsiding' is not only for a certain kind of 'outsider', but for a certain kind of 'insider' too. The capacity to hold space for deep listening, attentive exploration, courageous experimentation, and the discernment and nurturing the gifts, passions and vocations of people and places, is a quality (or set of qualities) of local leadership that are quite different to those that are often extolled within the top-down, linear models of much that passes for 'vision', 'strategy' and 'leadership'.

Part of me would love to say that I knew what I was doing when I started as vicar of Hodge Hill. That there was a deep intentionality about the way I led here, from the beginning. But the reality is that I didn't. At best, I had a few hunches that turned out to have some truth in them: that there might be some divine potential in being a 'homeless' church; that something good would come from patiently listening to our neighbours in spaces where we weren't in charge; that this adventure could be

7. Shifting the culture – bringing others with you on the journey

most fruitful if we felt like we were all on a journey of discovery together. Of course, none of our learning here has happened without making plenty of mistakes along the way. I think we've been pretty good at being curious and reflective about what's 'gone wrong', and some of the best things here have emerged from situations where it's felt like things had fallen apart in sad, hard and painful ways. But that doesn't negate, or indeed justify, the costliness. Only to acknowledge that it's inevitable. The capacity to tolerate the paradoxes, to empathise with the hurting (even, or especially, when we disagree), to embrace not knowing and to seek to be constantly attentive to what's going on – these are some of the qualities I've discovered I've needed here, and have tried, imperfectly, to practise.[8]

Community building tools from CUF

Growing Good

Growing Good is a free seven session course that helps churches grow in confidence, grow new connections and make a difference locally. Each session includes reflection on scripture, time for discussion, inspiring stories and simple next steps.

Designed to be easy to run, activities within the sessions include neighbourhood mapping, discovering your gifts and skills, learning from other local organisations and a church life audit.

growing-good.org.uk

Question:
Who could you ask to come alongside your church or group? How can you hold space for participation from within the church and wider community?

[8] Sumpter, T. (2017) *Growing the Church through a spiritual winter: pathways through paradox*. Grove Books Ltd

8. Telling a different story: transforming imagination

10 min

Finally, we come back to where we started: to the power of story.[9] ABCD, we said at the beginning, is not an answer, a mission strategy, or a model. It's a lens that helps us see the world differently to the ways we're used to seeing the world. It helps us tell a different story about the places where we live, and the people we live alongside, than the stories that people are often used to telling – or to having told about them. Changing the culture in our neighbourhoods, and in our churches, needs a transformation of our imaginations.

When we went out that first time to intentionally listen in the bumping-spaces of our neighbourhood, we found ourselves coming back to church, overflowing with stories of kindness, compassion, generosity and care: of ordinary people loving their neighbours. And we decided to put on an event, that we called Hodge Hill Unsung Heroes, to celebrate some of those wonderful people, to tell their stories with thankfulness, and to invite them to dream, together, what might be possible in our neighbourhood if people came together around something they were passionate about.

One of the possibilities that emerged from our first Unsung Heroes event was a local theatre group. And that group, in turn, has created new traditions in our neighbourhood: places where neighbours have come together to tell stories old and new; places where neighbours have laughed and cried together; places where neighbours have discovered that their hidden talent (whether it's acting, make-up or set design) can contribute to making something magical happen. And alongside the annual Christmas panto and a whole host of other weird and wonderful theatrical performances, the Bromford Theatre Group has, quite unexpectedly, nurtured new Christian-rooted traditions in our neighbourhood too: a Street Nativity every Christmas (complete with a variety of live animals), and several performances over the years of a community Passion Play, reenacting the story of the last days of Jesus' life, in the streets, community buildings and green spaces of our estate. We have heard the cry of Jesus' godforsakenness echo around our wastelands, and we've been encouraged afresh to look for glimpses of resurrection.

The Christian tradition, of course, has an abundance of riches for this work of transforming our imaginations. It's right at the heart of our faith: a powerful torch that will reveal a wealth of hidden treasure, if we dare point it in the direction of our neighbourhoods.

Remember the feeding of the five thousand? It's a story that starts with profound anxiety among the disciples: 'there are a lot of hungry people here – what are we going to do? We don't have the money to feed all of them!'. And what does Jesus say? 'What do you have? Go and see.' He sends his disciples back into the crowd with new eyes, looking for something that maybe they weren't looking for before. And it turns out that in the crowd there is enough to bring to Jesus, who gives thanks over it; enough, we discover, to feed everyone there, with baskets left over. God's abundance discovered in our midst.

Question:
What are the different stories that could be told about the place where you live?
How can you uncover, share and celebrate the stories that exist in your neighbourhood?

[9] See e.g. Sumpter, T. (2017) *Growing the Church through a spiritual winter: pathways through paradox*. Grove Books Ltd

Additional reading: Temptations to power
(Economy #2: Giving out)

There is, of course, much that is vital about the second-economy way of seeing. But there are dangers in it too – especially in the way it risks skewing our relationships with our neighbours, and entrenching (rather than transforming) already-existing power inequities in those relationships. In Being Interrupted, Ruth Harley and I suggest that these risks might be likened to Jesus' three temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).[10] While questioning Jesus' identity as God's beloved child ('if you are the Son of God…'), the tempter seeks to lure Jesus into three different forms of what we might call heroic power. If we, the church, might see ourselves as going through the anxious struggles of an identity crisis in these challenging times, we should be alert to similar temptations for us.

The first temptation, to turn stones into bread, we might think of as the temptation to the power of the provider. There is, of course, nothing wrong with feeding hungry people. Feeding is one of life's most basic, necessary tasks. It is a scandal that, through political choices and unjust economic structures, many go hungry in our society, and our world. But where it goes wrong is when that is the fundamental shape of our relationship with our neighbours: they come to us with empty hands, and we give them food. It's wrong because no one is only a person needing food, and it's dangerous because we can get seduced into the provider role: it can make us feel good about ourselves and what we do, that we can be reluctant to let it go. In short, it can keep both the recipient and the provider stuck in those unequal roles, and a co-dependent relationship (with us, the providers, needing to be needed).

Jesus' second temptation, jumping off the Temple for the angels to catch him, we might call the temptation to the power of the performer. In much social action work this can be felt in the pressure to demonstrate our impact: to grant funders, or the wider church, or our neighbours themselves. We care about how we're seen, often for the best of reasons. But it can become seductive to want to be seen to be doing good, and again, it can skew our relationship with our neighbours, casting them as the passive audience of our performances.

Lastly, the third temptation when Jesus is tempted to bow down and worship the tempter and 'all this shall be yours' – this is the temptation to the power of the possessor. We may imagine that, if only we were 'in charge' of things (activities, projects, spaces, etc), then they would be run well, efficiently, safely, and so on. And we may sometimes be right. But that desire for control can, at its worst, disempower our neighbours in ways that risk repeating long histories of possessive power: capitalism's accumulation of wealth and exploitation of cheap labour, colonialism and empire's violence on black and brown bodies, patriarchy's subjugation of women, and the destruction of the earth itself that is entangled with those other forms of power. And on a much more mundane level, just think of any dispute in church or community life that has hinged on 'territory' and who controls it – the kitchen, the worship space, a role on a committee, you name it – and pay attention to the negative impact of such disputes on people, on relationships, on the possibilities of mutually caring community life.

Question: How are we entrenching existing power inequities and how can we transform these?

Church Urban Fund
The Foundry
17 Oval Way
London
SE11 5RR

0203 752 5655
hello@cuf.org.uk

www.cuf.org.uk

@ChurchUrbanFund

April 2025