

BUILD LASTING STRENGTH THROUGH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

When church leaders survey the surrounding community, its urgent problems may leap to the eye. “How can we help?” someone asks. The alarm is sounded and without further ado the mission committee leaps into action. But wait: Do we know what the crisis calls for? What will really help? In recent years, a consensus has begun to emerge that short-term immediate help must be balanced by long-term community development. Engaging in long-term community development can feel quite different from offering help in a short-term crisis. It requires a different mindset and a different set of tools.

Moving beyond Relief

Of course, emergencies happen, as any pastor who has received calls for cash assistance, food, or shelter can relate. Poverty often presents itself as a crisis demanding immediate relief, writes Steve Corbett, a community development specialist. “**Relief** can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis.” The key to effectiveness lies in the term **temporary**. Unfortunately, extending relief over the long term can create dependence. As soon as the crisis ends, rehabilitation must begin, which “seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions.”¹ Further down the road, development must begin, defined by Corbett as “a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved—both ‘helpers’ and ‘helped’—closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.”

Many American churches make the mistake of applying relief where rehabilitation or development would be more appropriate. To illustrate, Corbett tells of his church’s work at a homeless shelter. Church members would bring food and prepare a meal for shelter residents once a month, then return home satisfied at the help they had provided. Yet relief seemed the only thing they knew how to do, and they slathered it on. “We did everything short of spoon-feeding the men, never ask-

ing them to lift a finger in the entire process. A more developmental approach would have sought greater participation of these men in their own rehabilitation.”²

Asset-Based Community Development

Community development represents a long-term approach to community engagement. Asset-based community development, for example, focuses on the resources required to rebuild a troubled community. This approach prioritizes asset-building over problem-solving, thereby energizing community actors to discover creative solutions for themselves.

The asset-based approach to community development involves five steps.³

Step 1: Map the Entire Community’s Assets

“Mapping” is a visual metaphor for taking an inventory of the different capacities that reside in the community. As you look across the landscape, start with individuals, and look for the “gifts of strangers” in your midst: persons who have capacities that rarely come into view. Move next to associations such as congregations or community



WE COULD HAVE DONE WITHOUT LARRY'S
"SOMEWHERE...OVER THE RAINBOW."

organizations, and finally to institutions such as hospitals, parks, libraries, banks, businesses, or corporations. Develop the entire picture, or least aspire to do so.

Step 2: Build Relationships

Relationship-building can start during the mapping process. Ask for help. Invite community members to engage in joint fact finding, perhaps through one-on-one conversations or community meetings. There is no single blueprint for building relationships, but people generally know the difference between being analyzed by an outsider and being engaged as an equal.

Step 3: Mobilize Assets for Economic Development and Information Sharing

Economically hard-hit communities can resemble Swiss cheese: the holes are apparent to those willing to look. If the problem is the lack of banks in the neighborhood or a crying need for grocery stores that provide inexpensive, fresh produce, then mobilizing assets might involve linking the existing institutions together, such as banks and grocery stores, to begin the process of economic renewal. Mobilizing gets you moving from talk to collective action.

Step 4: Convene the Community to Develop a Vision and a Plan

There are many models for community-wide strategic planning. No matter which strategic planning process you use, participants need to make three simple commitments: (1) begin with assets, (2) expand the table by inviting a wide variety of stakeholders, and (3) ground your planning, which can sometimes become starry-eyed in its optimism, in the reality of day-to-day problem-solving. Plant your feet firmly on the ground.

Step 5: Leverage Outside Resources

It should be obvious by now that an asset-based planning process must be driven from within the community by local residents. Nevertheless, leveraging outside resources (from government or business, for instance) can play a significant role, as long as it represents the final step and not the first one. Try to avoid a situation where outside resources, such as a government funding or a foundation grant, serve as the cart that drives the horse.

Examples of Long-Term Partnerships

The Mission at the Eastward (<https://missionattheeastward.org/>) grew out of a cooperative parish of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations in Central Western Maine. A key ministry serves youth in collaboration with their parents, taking an asset-based

approach that first determines the family's strengths then seeks to build resilience and confidence.

The Missional Wisdom Foundation (<https://www.missionalwisdom.com/>) offers a coworking and maker space for culinary entrepreneurs, artists, creators, small business owners, nonprofits, and makers in the basement of White Rock United Methodist Church in Dallas.

Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis (<https://www.broadwayumc.org/>) is starting a Civic Engagement Hub and inviting downtown residents to discuss policy issues, structures, and systems that cause people to become frustrated, apathetic, or disengaged from civic life.

Looking Further down the Road

In a sense, developing long-term partnerships represents the frontier of community engagement. Whether through community development or some other method, leaders need to practice good listening skills, focus on community resources, and think about how the project will enhance community sustainability five, ten, or fifteen years down the road. Doing so will ensure that the community receives lasting benefit.

Resources

Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2013).

L. Shannon Jung, *Building the Good Life for All: Transforming Income Inequality in Our Communities* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

Michael Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018).

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University offers "Faith-Based Resources for Action," including publications, videos, and examples: <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/Faith-based-Resources.aspx>

This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell's book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).

1. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 104.

2. *Ibid.*, 111.

3. John Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Skokie, IL: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 1993), 9.