

SMALL CONGREGATIONS AND ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



by Eliza M. Carney, Coordinator,
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The Asset-Based Community Development Religious Network is a network of people of faith who are working to support and build community within their congregations and neighborhoods, following the basic principles of asset-based community development. These principles are:

- Communities can be built only by focusing on the strengths and capacities (i.e. the assets) of the citizens who call that community home
- Vital communities are those that accept every member as gifted and provide opportunities for those gifts to be shared

We are affiliated with the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois,¹ and were formed

¹ www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html

in 1997 with the goal of reaching congregations and other faith-based groups with the concept and principles of asset-based community development, and finding and bringing together those who are already using this approach. I volunteer my time as coordinator of the Religious Network, receiving only reimbursement for my expenses from the ABCD Institute. The network has no other staff, and does not receive assistance from any government entities.

Many congregations and faith-based organizations are caught up in a “needs-based” approach to community and human development that regards struggling communities and the people who live in them as “half empty:” needy, deficient, problematic, incapable of regeneration and constructive contribution, and sorely in need of fixing by outside “experts” and professionals. They take the charitable or philanthropic approach to poverty

by supporting food banks, homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Or, if they are looking beyond the symptoms to the causes of poverty, they tend to support the social services approach of fixing individuals rather than first identifying and mobilizing the strengths of those individuals and their communities. Using the metaphor of a glass half-full and half empty, we see all communities and the people who live in them as “half-full.”

Our efforts to turn the thinking and actions of these congregations toward the “asset-based” approach utilize several methods. These include networking with and offering resources to various denominational agencies that support community development, maintaining an online discussion group, and sponsoring an annual retreat/seminar which focuses on such topics as welfare reform, community economic development and youth as community builders. As coordinator of the network,

I am also a member of the ABCD Training Group, which presents three day workshops and five day learning retreats offering intensive learning, discussion and practice in the application of ABCD principles and tools in interactive small group settings.

In my experience over the past few years working with faith-based community development, and before that working with anti-hunger efforts, I have been particularly impressed with the relatively small number of congregations that are going beyond relief measures to take on the long-term challenge of rebuilding lives and communities, beginning with the strengths and assets of those communities. It is this group that our network seeks to identify, support and use as models for other congregations. While some of these churches have large congregations and budgets, and may be well-known locally and even nationally among scholars and activists in community development, this article will focus on the smaller activist churches.

These smaller congregations, which are usually based in inner-city neighborhoods or in distressed rural areas, are doing extraordinary things: sponsoring youth activities and outings, community clean-up, local entrepreneurship and self-help groups. All of these projects are fueled by the greatest assets these congregations have: their pastors and members, and their ability, commitment and willingness to work one on one building up the faith individuals have in themselves and affirming their self worth. And, once the

individuals in these distressed communities believe that they are worthy, they begin to believe that change is possible. That is when sustainable community development can occur.

And yet these smaller, less affluent churches, some with no more than 30 or 40 members, and all with less than 200 members, are usually ignored, even dismissed as part of the problem, by foundations, scholars and activists involved in community development. In an excellent study of a group of 35 such churches in Chicago, *The Black Churches of West Humbolt Park*,² the authors describe them as, “. . . mostly small, storefront churches, with a single pastor. Ministers had full- or part-time jobs during the week and were usually available on Sundays or Wednesday nights and by phone to their parishioners. In many cases there was no money for staff and there was no answering service to receive calls during the day.” (p.3)

These churches see themselves as all members of the family of God, with their congregation serving as an extended family, and the pastor as the father or mother figure. The researchers discovered that ministers used the term “ministry” to describe what others might call “community development.” The difference is the familial model, and the love, acceptance and patience that it exudes, which produces a powerful and transforming force. This people-centered, familial model of community development is generally at work not only in African-American churches but also in small, community-based Anglo and Latino congregations, whether their communities are urban or rural. Someone once said that the perfect community development project has plenty of money, clear objectives, a good plan and no people. Indeed the challenge is rarely technical, but rather almost always relational. Asset-based community development is all about relation-

ships, and small churches have the gift of relationships. They should be supported and encouraged to give that gift.

So how can banks help to support and fuel these small but powerful engines of community development? First, of course, you need to make contact with them. One way to do this is through associations active in the community, such as a local ministerial association or council of churches. These will probably not be listed in the phone directory, but the local police department or a local school may know about them. Or perhaps there is a seminary in the area which has contacts in the community. Find out if you have employees who are members of small, community-based churches. Do you have a branch of your bank in the community? If so, ask the bank manager to identify some of the more active churches. Or drop into a local barber shop or hairdressers and ask what churches are doing in the community and how you can get in touch with

Resources

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ABCD Training Group
636 E. Victory Dr.
Savannah, GA 31405
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e-mail: abcdtraining@aol.com
www.abcdtraininggroup.org

2 *The Black Churches of West Humbolt Park; final report prepared Jan. 1999 by Bernice Taylor, Ed.D., Associate Director and Cynthia Milsap, Community Scholar; DePaul University-Egan Urban Center; 990 W. Fullerton, 3100; Chicago, IL 60614. btaylor@depaul.edu*
www.depaul.edu/~euc/

some of the more active pastors. Then, visit two or three of the pastors and ask if they can set up a meeting with other pastors and church leaders to discuss what they are doing or would like to do to improve the lives of people in the community and how you can support them. Listen carefully, be patient, don't be shy about asking questions, and discuss what assets the churches, the community, and your bank have that you can use together to help build a safer and more livable community. The key is not to come in with your own agenda but to listen to, work with and support the people who know the most and care the most about the community—the people who live there. Your patience and willingness to listen and respond in ways that put your assets to the best use may result

in a stronger, more economically viable community which welcomes your bank as a valuable stakeholder.

Finally, remember that churches, like banks, have their own culture, language, role perceptions, etc., so as you begin to build relationships with these small congregations, it's good to have a guide—someone who understands and appreciates both cultures (perhaps one of your bank employees or a local business-person who is a member of one of the congregations) and can help bridge the gaps as you work together. The ABCD Training Group (see resources) provides excellent training for what it terms “gappers,” people who work “in the gap” between neighborhoods and the institutional world of agencies, government and private business. **CI**

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economic development opportunities such as job or entrepreneur training, this is the group that financial institutions may see as their primary partners. However, all of these efforts are laudable and worthy of being supported, regardless of tier.

Like other community-based organizations, faith-based organizations rely on various support to effectively undertake community revitalization. Not only grants or donations, but also support that extends to processes and methods. For instance, a streamlined and transparent process, unfettered by discrimination, for applying for government grants or for designation to deliver federal- or state-sponsored social services and programs, is often as valuable as a check. Fred Mendez's overview of President Bush's faith-based initiative discusses how this is being addressed.

Training and other technical assistance is also essential to help faith-based organizations recognize and ultimately, maximize their resources. To this end, the Asset-Based Community Development Religious Network trains congregations to identify their community's assets as a first step in determining where and how to expend those resources. The FAITHS Initiative exemplifies the significance of building coalition and serves as an excellent model for how foundations are working through churches. Government-sponsored entities and agencies such as Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Bank system and HUD offer specialized expertise to assist faith-based CDCs in applying for grants to build affordable housing and community facilities.

Mostly, the challenges and needs facing faith-based organizations are no different than those of traditional community development groups. Notwithstanding the article that looks at the unique challenge of financing for followers of Islam, the stories, information and initiatives discussed herein are neither specific nor distinct to faith-based organizations. The primary purpose of this edition of *Community Investments* is to spotlight a sometimes-overlooked civic partner—faith-based institutions, to underscore their often-unsung efforts and to illuminate their role as a ubiquitous and viable community development partner. **CI**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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