A Personal Asset Starter

Asset mapping happens between people. It is a group activity or, better yet, like a snowball rolled through the snow by a group of children, asset mapping spreads and grows among widening groups of people. My purpose is to help you find practical methods and lessons for “starting a snowball” in your congregation.

At the heart of asset mapping is a personal transformation: learning or relearning to see the cup as half-full. That’s something you can start to experience right now.

Begin with Basic Assets

What is your cup half-full of? What do you have to be thankful for? To begin with, you have basic assets. The physical objects you hold dear. Your own talents and skills. Your family or friends or the groups you belong to. Your economic assets—what you spend or save or sell. Let’s start with those. Fill out this Personal Asset Starter and see what comes to mind.

What is your cup half-full of?
What do you have to be thankful for?

This is just a first glance at the assets you are most aware of. Write down whatever comes to your mind:

Physical Assets

■ What are some physical things that you value?

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**Individual Assets**

■ What are you good at?
■ What do you know something about?

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**Associational Assets**

■ Who are the people you know or care about?
■ What groups of people do you belong to?

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**Institutional Assets**

■ Where do you work or volunteer?
■ What institutions make decisions that affect you?

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**Economic Assets**

■ What do you do to make money?
■ What do you spend money on?

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Congratulations. You just recognized and affirmed some of your assets. When you recognize even a few of your gifts, strengths, or assets, you are looking at the half-full cup. That’s a great start.

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Recognizing even a few of your assets is a start.

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For many people, taking even a small step like this starts to feel fresh and uplifting. So often, we make lists of things we haven’t done, problems we haven’t fixed, and complaints we haven’t addressed. We get so accustomed to dealing with negatives that we forget what it feels like to focus on positives. Just looking at assets, then, you might feel set free.

But you’ve only scratched the surface. You have many more assets than this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>These categories of Basic Assets are drawn from the work of asset-building pioneers John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann. They define the following five assets types:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical assets: things that you can touch and see, from land and equipment to natural beauty and the environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Individual assets: the talents, skills, and experiences of individuals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Associational assets: voluntary groups and networks of people, from the more formally structured volunteer associations (like a service club) to informally gathered groups (like the people who meet for coffee on Tuesday mornings).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Institutions: agencies, corporations, and other organizations with budgets and staff. These might be nonprofit (like a hospital) or for-profit (like a manufacturing firm) or public (like a government agency).</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Economic assets: community assets involving money, such as our spending power, our investments, and our capacities to produce goods and services for money.</td>
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Look for Hidden Assets

The value of asset mapping starts to grow when we look harder, dig deeper, or broaden our view. Like when we peel back the layers of an onion, we find assets that we did not think of at first. Those are the assets that often present us with new opportunities.

Every person is different. Individuals can use various techniques to see past their own blind spots and discover assets that were hidden from view. Let’s try a few approaches and asset starter questions and see what you discover beneath the surface.

Open Up

I once listened to a speech by Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in which he talked about how they used to run church council meetings where he was a parish pastor. Instead of the usual business agenda, they would get most things done by prayer, Bible study, and discussions of faith. And they would open every meeting with a question: “What signs of God’s grace have you witnessed lately?” This is perhaps the most valuable asset starter question of all and one that is sure to open up our thinking.

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What signs of God’s grace have you witnessed lately?

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Dig Deeper

Some gifts are so central, immediate, or widespread that we take them for granted. And yet these are sometimes the most valuable assets.

Halfway through an asset discovery process in a gorgeous rural community, one person thought to identify the scenic view of town. The light bulbs went on for other participants, who lifted up the natural resources in their area. In an inner-city church, someone recognized the value of the church’s location. That got other people thinking about the value of the church building being visible to traffic and accessible to public transportation. It might surprise you to know how many churchgoing participants forget about all the Bibles their congregations have! But once people recognize that asset, ideas emerge for creative ways to share the Word.

Are there things that are so close to you that they are harder to see at first?

Other gifts are out of sight, out of mind. These are gifts we overlook because they are out of the ordinary or we just don’t come across them very often. As a result, these are often the most interesting assets, the ones that create a spark when people are thinking of ways to use their gifts.

I worked with a rural congregation that initially overlooked their other church building! This second church building was located in the countryside near a beautiful old cemetery, a remainder of a previous merger between two congregations. Recognizing this overlooked asset got that congregation thinking about ways to build on their history and culture by having special services in the old sanctuary. They started thinking they could reclaim and use assets that they had overlooked before.

What are some gifts you take for granted?

If you asked someone what some of your gifts are, what would the person say?

What are some strengths and assets that you don’t often see or use?

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Think Bigger

Some gifts we miss because we think they “don’t go here.” We associate certain things with our personal lives, for example, and certain other things with our work or public lives. We might put church in a whole category of its own, with its own day of the week, circle of people, and activities.

But intriguing possibilities come alive when we connect our gifts across the circles of our lives. Several people in one congregation liked fishing. They used that asset to create a series of Bible studies, social events, and worship services around stories of fish in the Bible! The energy this gave the congregation surprised everyone. Opportunities can emerge from assets drawn from unexpected places.

■ What are some gifts that you might have thought don’t go here?
■ What are some gifts you have that people in your family, circle of friends, congregation, or community don’t get to see very often?

Find the Assets inside Needs

Now you might be asking, But what about needs? Thinking of gifts and assets is all very fine, but there are real hurts out here. We feel strong needs in our own lives, and more than that, we know some people have needs more desperate and severe than our own.

Asset mapping does not stand somehow in contrast to compassion or care. On the contrary, asset mapping is a way to put compassion and care into action. Every need points to something we care about. That thing that we care about is always an asset. Here are some ways to think about those assets inside the needs.

See What You See in a Crisis

Assets are easiest to see in a crisis. If a family is burned out of their home by a fire, for example, don’t people pull together around them? The crisis makes the community remember that every family is important. That’s an asset. People rush to protect that family. They provide clothing, food, money, work, a place to stay—whatever assets they can think of. And in the process, the community rediscovers some of those assets they take for granted. They see the gifts of community they share with each other in faith.

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Think about a crisis you have seen or experienced. What assets did the crisis bring out?

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Look inside Needs

Inside every need is an asset. Members of one congregation thought they were in need of private tutoring for kids until they realized that they were gifted with both children and people who care about children. They were able to start their own after-school program in their church, which strengthened the congregation in many ways.

When you think of a need, deficiency, or obstacle, don’t simply disregard it because it is negative. Transform your thinking about needs. Flip it around. Find the valuable asset it represents. Consider, what is the thing that you care so much about?

What gifts do you sometimes see as needs?

When you focus on a specific need, what is the asset you are caring about?

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Sense Power from Abundance

What have we started here? So far all we have done is identify and list gifts and assets. The real power of asset mapping is in taking practical, immediate action.

If you are like me, you are starting to feel this potential already. Look at all the assets you’ve listed. Do the number and variety surprise you? And this list isn’t even the end. It’s only the beginning.

More and different gifts come to us as we consider them over time. Indeed, we may take our whole lives learning to count our blessings. Surely, there’s not room here to list even a large portion of our gifts. And that’s all right—asset mapping isn’t meant to produce a whole list, or even a representative one. It’s really about practicing a way of thinking, looking at our half-full cup, appreciating God’s abundance—and using it.

Already you can get the sense of this mindset, the strength that comes from asset thinking:

● You are not caught in a negative trap. You can choose to see the positive.
● You have been given an abundance of gifts to use. Recognizing all these gifts, you feel empowered to act.

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Now let’s look at where asset recognition takes us. Asset mapping isn’t something we do for its own sake. Identifying assets gives us the opportunity to act. We act by connecting our assets with other assets—that means connecting with other people.

**Widen Your Circle**

As you’ve been identifying gifts and assets, you might have been asking yourself, “Which assets am I considering? My personal assets? My family’s assets? My congregation’s? My community’s?” Yes, this is a Personal Asset Starter. But you belong to many groups of people. In a sense, your family’s assets are your assets, as are the assets of the congregation or the community you belong to.

When you ask which assets to consider, you have had an insight into the power of asset mapping. Asset mapping widens our circle of identity and interest, from mine to ours to all of ours.

Try thinking again about your assets, this time stretching your focus. Reconsider the topics addressed in any of the asset starter questions—surface assets, signs of God’s grace, gifts we see as needs, and so forth. Only now, think about these assets in widening circles. Consider yourself and the groups you connect with.

■ What are some personal assets that are yours alone?

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■ What are some of your family’s assets?

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■ What are some of your congregation’s assets?

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■ What are some of your community’s assets?

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Connect the Dots

As you identify your assets and widen your circle of vision, two simple but powerful points become clearer:

- You have gifts and interests.
- Other people also have gifts and interests.

We soon discover that our own gifts and assets are made valuable by connecting them to the gifts of others. Asset-building pioneer John McKnight once said to me, “Development is about creating a new link between two or more existing assets.” Asset mapping isn’t just looking at our gifts and feeling good about them. God didn’t give us talents to bury in the backyard.

We are all stewards of God’s gifts. Asset mapping provides us with a clearer understanding of our gifts. We can then connect our gifts with those of others and make something new. Connecting the Dots is a simple yet profound expression of active stewardship.

Connecting the Dots is like the old-fashioned barn raising. When early settlers set up a farm or ranch, they did not have the luxury of focusing on their needs. They had to use the gifts they had to get things done. One neighbor had some timber and another neighbor had some carpentry equipment. Several people had individual skills in carpentry. Some could lift and carry. Some could cook. The farmer had an economic asset—the farm. The people put these things together and had a barn raising. They connected several assets to get things done, and created a new asset in the process.

These days, we might do something very similar to build a Habitat for Humanity house or even build a church addition. In a larger sense, connecting the dots like this represents the way we get things done together in faith and life.

Connecting the dots is an excellent group experience, but there is one way you can try this for this personal asset starting experience. Let’s try that now.

Think back.
Think about some of the successes you’ve experienced. Consider the good things that have come about in your personal life, family, congregation, or community.
Deconstruct one or more of those successes. Think of the pieces that were put together to make things happen.

What assets got connected to make that success?

We all have gifts and interests. When you and I connect our gifts and interests with each other, we create something new. Your gain is my gain is our gain. When we map our assets, we find the grace between our gifts.

The strength behind congregational asset mapping isn’t new to any of us. Asset mapping models a way of thinking and acting that we know and feel almost instinctively. It’s how we exercise our faithfulness with other people. Asset mapping lifts up the power of our faithfulness in community and helps us exercise it.

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