

WHEN CHARITY BRINGS ANYTHING BUT RELIEF

Is it possible that our best intentions can do more harm than good? Sadly, relief organizations tell us that well-meaning people don't think before they give. Some involved in humanitarian work after a natural disaster call the deluge of unwanted donations "the second disaster."

Juanita Rillig, director of the Center for International Disaster Information, described what happened after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004: So many donated clothes were piled on an Indonesia beach that workers had no time to sort and distribute them. The clothing pile became toxic and local officials had to destroy it all. They poured gasoline on it and sent it out to sea.¹ She related another example of unfortunate waste when contributors sent 100,000 liters of water to West Africa at a cost of \$300,000. Relief organizations with portable water purification units could have provided that same amount of water for \$300.

Following the December 2012 shooting tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, more than 60,000 teddy bears arrived from around the country, along with toys, bicycles, and clothes. Already overwhelmed, residents had to get a warehouse to hold it all.

Crisis Relief or Chronic Needs?

Because Americans are compassionate, they tend to respond initially with their hearts rather than their minds. Even Warren Buffett admitted that it is much easier to make money than it is to give it away wisely. The first step is assessing whether an event is a crisis or a reflection of ongoing chronic needs.

Crisis relief. Churches and people of faith offer the best immediate crisis relief when they make smart cash donations to trusted organizations. In most cases, sending supplies is simply not practical. Responding to a crisis with immediate relief is likely a month-long effort.

Chronic needs call for complex solutions, hard work, and long-term commitments. The commitment required when tackling these situations is likely an effort of years or decades.

When well-meaning people behave as if they are addressing a crisis rather than a chronic need, the long-term results are dependency, deception, and disempowerment.² Churches need to engage strategically in both types of charity efforts.

Making Meaningful Change through Mercy and Justice

Many congregations involve members in mission trips and volunteer opportunities in local service projects. Unfortunately, too many mission trips or local service projects are not a wise investment, do not significantly improve quality of life, and do not relieve poverty for the intended community. For example, the funds spent for one Central American ministry mission trip to repaint an orphanage would be enough money to hire two local painters, pay the salaries of two full-time teachers, and purchase new uniforms for every school student.³

The Bible contains the basic template for guiding us to holistic charity because it places equal emphasis on



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mercy and justice. Micah 6:8 instructs us: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” To act justly means that we treat others fairly, with reason, and *involve them in all decision making*. These acts engage our minds. On the other hand, merciful acts reflect heartfelt responses. To act with mercy in our work with others means that we show compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. Combining mercy and justice suggests that immediate relief comes with a future plan in mind and avoids long-term dependency.⁴ Showcasing these principles, one church closed their successful used clothes closet run by volunteers and reopened it as a clothes store (with modest prices) that employed people in the neighborhood, thus reducing dependency and providing agency to community members.

An Oath for Wise Compassion

Too often our intent contrasts sharply with the actual impact. Because every change has consequences, we must carefully examine outcomes. Robert Lupton draws on his forty years of urban ministry experience to suggest an oath for compassionate *and* wise partnerships similar to the medical profession’s Hippocratic Oath.⁵ Here are key guidelines for empowering those we assist.

- Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
- Be an encourager or partner rather than a caretaker.
- Use one-way giving in crises. Try partnership approaches when addressing chronic needs.
- Establish empowering partnerships through employment, lending, and investing. The micro-loans of Opportunity International (www.opportunity.org) and the community development approach of World Vision (www.worldvision.org) are two excellent examples.
- Always put the needs of those being served first, even if it makes your efforts less efficient and more frustrating.
- Listen closely to what is said and unsaid by those you are serving. The unequal power dynamic of the interaction can lead to harmful assumptions.
- Above all, do no harm.

Diversified or Focused Investment?

Attention to outcomes leads to a strategy shift. The size of the budget or the number of volunteer hours is irrele-

vant to making a difference. To effect significant change requires centered concentration on specific places and issues. When we define our service mission too broadly, we scatter our church’s energy and resources. Lupton recommends that congregations ditch the diversified, “balanced portfolio” and commit to measurable and lasting change by focusing investment in one person, one family, and one neighborhood at a time.⁶

Consistent with an asset-based community development model (<http://www.abcdinstitute.org/>), focused investors search for local residents’ skills and existing resources. When church partners flip their binocular lens to see community positives, like seeing the glass half-full, they catch sight of basic strengths that become building blocks for healthier communities. There is a universal desire to live in a healthy community. And the criteria for a healthy community is also universal: safety for everyone, good schools, economic viability, opportunities for employment, residential stability, community connections, and spiritual vitality.⁷

Located in a low-income community, the Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, exemplifies this type of a long-term, focused investment strategy. As a church, they strive to lift up the “diverse gifts of our neighbors and members, not their deficiencies.” They say, “We see abundance.”⁸ By having conversations and listening for opportunities, they find ways to connect and invest in their neighbors.

Final Questions

A community ministry worth doing is a ministry worth examining. Here are the key questions: Is your church engaged in community development ministry? If so, can you name your target neighborhood and the church’s transformation goals? Are your church’s efforts focused on efficiency or effectiveness? Are you focused on the rewards you receive from service or the measurable benefits received by your community partners?

1. Scott Simon (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/when-disaster-relief-brings-anything-but-relief/>). See donation guidelines (<http://www.cidi.org/wp-content/uploads/CIDI-Donation-Guidelines.pdf>).

2. Material drawn from Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2011), 56.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

5. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

6. *Ibid.*, 76.

7. *Ibid.*, 135.

8. <http://www.broadwayumc.org/pages/who.html>.