



LET THE POOR GIVE, TOO

“ It is more blessed to give than to receive. ”

Acts 20:35, NIV

Early one morning, a little lady in her late 50s stood outside the front door of a church. Gray hair jutted out from beneath her knit cap. She clasped a large shopping bag-type purse with one hand and pounded on the church door with the other. The church pastor and another church leader could see her through the Plexiglas window as they walked down the hall after a lively meeting about homelessness.

“The clothes closet opens at 10:00 a.m. You can come back and get some clothes then,” the busy urban pastor insensitively informed her as he rushed to his next meeting.

“No, no!” she reacted, her countenance fallen. “I’m here to help sort clothes.”

The damage was done. Her spirit was wounded and her self-esteem was lost. She had come to help clothe others and was not allowed to carry out Jesus’ words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35, NIV). Her face reflected the hurt of a blessing lost—the blessing of rising early to help others in need—a blessing marred by being stereotyped as a recipient of charity rather than a giver.¹

Your church probably has some type of helping ministry, an outreach to meet the needs in your community or around the world. Maybe you have donated to a food pantry, put money in the offering plate for the less fortunate, gone on a mission trip to a poor country, or volunteered at a soup kitchen. You have felt that you must do something; after all, helping the needy is the church’s responsibility, an important part of the job description of Jesus’ followers, and a major issue in the final judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

Most of the programs churches develop to help people are *relief* projects. This is easy to understand. If someone is hungry, feed him. If someone needs clothes, give her clothes. Matthew 25 and Isaiah 58 instruct God’s people to do that. Case closed. But wait! Is there something else to consider about *how* to follow God’s mandate?

The little lady at the church door shows us that there are dangers in one-sided charity. One-way giving erodes the dignity of the recipient. True, it often helps *givers* feel good about themselves. John Perkins, a renowned Christian champion of biblical justice, has committed his life to bringing reconciliation and development to broken communities in America. He believes that “somehow we have to disconnect what and how we give from our need to feel good about ourselves.”²

In our giving, we must focus on meeting the real needs of charity’s recipients. One of their deepest needs is to be empowered to give, too. Allow them that privilege.

Giving relief to the needy is appropriate, of course. The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 is an appropriate application of the relief mode, as is earthquake relief in Haiti. But one of the biggest mistakes many churches make is applying relief in situations where rehabilitation or development is the more appropriate intervention.³

“Rehabilitation” means working *with* the needy woman at the church door as she participates in her own self-improvement and recovery. “Development” is a process of *ongoing change* as the materially poor learn to work and support themselves and their families with the fruits of their work.

Our ministry to people in need should not focus on doing something *to* them or *for* them but *with* them.⁴

(For an example of how one small church helped develop and restore a whole community, see the story of Sandtown in Mark Gornik's book *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*).⁵

Several years ago, a church was mobilized to volunteer at a Christian homeless shelter for men. Once a month church members happily brought food, prepared and served meals, and cleaned up afterward. They came close to spoon-feeding the shelter residents, never asking them to lift a finger. A more empowering, developmental approach would be to allow the men to participate in their own rehabilitation: inviting them to plan the meal, help shop for food, prepare and serve food, and clean up. The church volunteers could have done supper *with* the shelter residents

rather than giving supper *to* them. The provider-recipient relationship confirms the giver's feeling of superiority and the recipient's feeling of inferiority. It strengthens the giver's "God complex" (the "I-am-here-to-save-you" attitude).⁶

Sure, it is easier and more efficient to give hand-outs and spoon-feed. But is it effective in the long run? Do the same people keep coming back, as helpless as ever? Churches involved in rehabilitation and development will, of course, need to be more deeply involved in people's lives. It will take more planning and personal involvement. But the joy of seeing people restored to God's ideal for them is worth it all.

Robert Lupton, a Christian community developer, coordinated an Adopt-a-Family program at Christmas. Urban families who could not afford to buy presents for their children were matched up with suburban families with compassionate hearts and plenty of material things. On Christmas Day, the suburban givers would deliver gifts to their adopted city families. This annual tradition enriched the lives of both the poor and affluent families.

A few years later, Lupton happened to be in the living room of one of his needy neighbors when the suburban gift-giving family arrived. He noticed something he had never seen before. The children, of course, were excited and overjoyed to see the colorfully-wrapped gifts, but the mothers, although gracious to their generous benefactors, were a bit reserved. If there was a dad in the home, he vanished. When he saw the gift-givers coming, he disappeared out the back door. While the children



When recipients remain content to remain givers, good has become the enemy of best. Perhaps the best giving is the kind that enables the poor to know the blessedness of being givers.



Robert D. Lupton

were thrilled, the recipient parents suffered from a loss of dignity and pride. Their failure as providers was laid bare before their children—right in their own home!

It became clear to Lupton that this charity system needed to change. The following Christmas, when caring people called his urban-ministries organization to adopt a city family, he asked if they would be willing to give an extra gift this year—the gift of dignity. Instead of delivering wrapped gifts directly to the adopted city families, givers were asked to bring unwrapped items to the organization's store, where a Christmas toy shop would be set up. A small price—somewhere between a garage-sale price and a wholesale price—would be placed on each toy or piece of clothing. Parents

from the community would be invited to come and shop for their family's Christmas gifts. Since a cash flow would be generated from the sale of the donated items, parents who had no money could work at the store to earn what they needed to buy gifts for their families. Imagine what it was like on Christmas morning as children opened gifts that their parents had obtained with their own efforts! Robert's organization renamed the Adopt-a-Family program "Pride for Parents." Thus a system for exchange was created that promoted interdependency rather than dependency.⁷

When your church considers service to its community, plan to let the poor give, too.



¹ Adapted from Robert D. Lupton, *Compassion, Justice and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007), 21.

² John M. Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 28.

³ See Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 104, 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For a summarized story of Sandtown, see *Elder's Digest*, July/September 2009, 7.

⁶ Corbett and Fikkert, 110-113.

⁷ Lupton, 48-51.

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