

Advocacy: Toxic Charity

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Each year the Advocacy team selects an area of focus from among the four members' deepest cares and concerns. This year, the Advocacy team is focusing on ending extreme poverty worldwide. Over the next year we will share how we can engage with this issue from various perspectives.

By Rev. Stacey Harwell-Dye

Just the words toxic charity may be enough to make you question the very premise of this article. After all, how can charity, which comes from a good place in our hearts, ever be toxic? But unfortunately, years of unexamined charity hasn't lead us to the success we've wanted. Instead of folks getting out of homelessness or extreme poverty, we still have a tremendous amount of poverty. In this article we will explore ways our unchecked charity can be toxic and more redemptive ways we can be about the work of God in the world.

The idea of toxic charity first hit me in college. I was doing an internship at Centenary United Methodist Church under the direction of Jeremy Gray. Jeremy had read an important book by Robert Lupton, whose later book "Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)" would become instrumental in the work at Centenary and in my life.

Centenary maintained a food bank. The food bank was sourced through the government and was required to collect personal information from those who received food. There were rules about how much food you could have and when you could get it. People had to prove how poor they were in order to be eligible. The food was supposed to be an emergency supply of food, used to help the person get through a short-term crisis.

But there were folks coming to the food bank who had been food

bank regulars for 17 years. That's no longer an emergency – that is a chronic need for food. These same people were living on next to nothing with little hope of coming out of their situation. Sure, Centenary UMC helped them eat (hopefully healthy) meals, but were they actually lifted out of poverty? No.

Instead of thinking of creative solutions to our areas' poverty, we instead were replicating a service three other faith-based groups in a two-mile radius were doing. We were not being good neighbors. We were in an awkward power dynamic with those who came to us from the community where they were forced to reveal the depths of their poverty. The food bank model didn't allow us to see them as assets. We were doing “for” instead of walking alongside or doing “with” those in need.

Robert Lupton says that when you have the for, instead of the “with” mentality, added to the “combination of patronizing pity and unintended superiority, and charity becomes toxic.” (Lupton, 35). How can we shift what we do away from charity that automatically creates an us/them power dynamic, and towards mutuality and parity? How can we recognize that we need our neighbors in need too? How can we take the good intentions of our hearts and pour them into walking alongside our communities so that we can take a “rising tide lifts all ships” approach?

Lupton says that for us as Christians, we must take the totality of Micah 6:8 into focus. God asks us in this verse to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly” with God. We need both justice, or fairness and reasonableness, alongside mercy, which is kindness and compassion. Instead of just feeding the person one meal, we try to figure out how that person can then go on to feed themselves and their families. We pour our resources not just into things that make us feel good, but into long lasting solutions to poverty so that our neighbors no longer have to return for assistance with bills, food, or medicine. We work on an individual level, yes, but we also consider the system that created the problem. Perhaps alongside supporting our local soup kitchen, we also pour money and time into our local school system to make sure kids have the support they need to stay

in school so that they will later be able to support their own families.

I think each church and every Christian has a different responsibility based on where they are in their communities and in their life cycle as a church. We will always have need for emergency food, but some churches are in a great position to support job training. Perhaps you could do like Centenary Church in Macon and put bicycles into the hands of folks in need, those who are trying to get to work. Yes, it's a giveaway, but it's a giveaway that helps folks get where they need to go without spending their money on a car or a bus ticket. It also promotes exercise and more bicycles on the road make the roads safer for cyclists. Perhaps your church has skilled business professionals who could make microloans and provide one-on-one coaching to folks interested in starting their own businesses.

Whatever you are able to do, check out the oath for compassionate service. Pick up Robert Lupton's excellent book on this topic, referenced above. You'll find the oath for compassionate service on page 128. Essentially it boils down to this: empower others. Don't set up unequal power dynamics where you are always the giver and "they" are always the receiver. Figure out ways to employ, empower, and invest. I guarantee you'll start to see a difference if you treat the person who is asking as a person gifted by God who has great capacity in this world.

If you have any questions or want to consider how asset-based community development might assist in thinking through how to reinvest your well-intended efforts towards sustainable solutions, feel free to contact me at stacey.harwelldye@gmail.com.

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