

Charity becomes toxic when it robs people of dignity, psychologist asserts

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HOUSTON—Compassionate acts become toxic when they strip people of dignity and foster unhealthy dependency rather than empowerment, psychologist Bob Lupton told a conference focused on meeting needs.

Lupton, author of [*Toxic Charity*](#), drew a sharp distinction between crisis need and chronic need.

“Crisis need demands emergency intervention,” he said, citing disaster relief after Hurricane Harvey as an example. “Chronic need requires development—to put lives back together. If we address a crisis need with emergency intervention, lives are saved. If we address chronic need with emergency response, people are harmed.”

When churches and charities respond to chronic need with one-way giving, they can end up hurting the people they want to help, Lupton told the No Need Among You Conference. The [Texas Christian Community Development Network](#) sponsored the Oct. 25-27 conference at Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston.

Problem with ‘one-way giving’

One-way giving may prompt appreciation the first time it is offered, he noted. But repeated gifts create a downward spiral—from anticipation, to expectation, to entitlement, to dependency.

Likewise, paternalistic top-down ministry to the poor rather than alongside

the poor feeds feelings of superiority by the giver and creates resentment among recipients, he observed.

Lupton, a Christian community developer, recalled a conversation with his inner-city Atlanta neighbor, Virgil, who told him he hated it when groups of church volunteers arrived in his community for mission projects.

“They mean well, and they want to do good. But they insult you, and they don’t even know it,” he said.



Bob Lupton of Focused Community Strategies chats with Lisa Cummins of Urban Strategies during the No Need Among You Conference in Houston. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Volunteers’ comments about the surprisingly clean homes and well-behaved children of families whom they adopted as “projects” revealed condescending and paternalistic attitudes, he noted.

Similarly, Lupton, founding president of [Focused Community Strategies](#) urban ministries, remembered a popular “adopt-a-family” program in which he had been involved.

Church groups purchased toys for children and delivered them at

Christmas. Typically, the children responded with joy and excitement. Mothers normally were gracious but reserved.

“The dads disappeared,” Lupton recalled, recognizing the fathers could not bear to have their economic impotence and inability to provide exposed in front of their families.

In time, “Pride for Parents” replaced the “adopt-a-family” program. Instead of outsiders delivering donated toys to children, the ministry invited parents to purchase donated toys for their children at a discount. If parents had no money to purchase toys, the ministry hired them to work in the toy store.

Similarly, the ministry’s clothes closet developed into a thrift store, and the food pantry became a food cooperative in which consumers paid a small membership fee and had a voice in grocery selection.

Focus on community assets

Christian community development demands a change in perspective—focusing on assets already present in the community instead of assessing needs and looking for resources outside the community to meet those needs, Lupton said.

“Instead of seeing neighbors as people with need, it involves seeing our neighbors as people with resources, talents and abilities,” he said. “There is talent in every community. Everybody has something of value to contribute to the community.”

Instead of one-way giving, development creates systems of reciprocity, he explained.

“At every level of humanity, there is capacity,” he said.

Oath for Compassionate Service

Lupton offered a six-point Oath for Compassionate Service, inspired in part by the Hippocratic Oath physicians follow.

- Never do for others what they have the capacity to do for themselves. “It weakens them,” he said.
- Limit one-way giving to crises. “Seek always to find ways of legitimate exchange,” he urged.
- Empower by hiring, lending and investing. Offer gifts sparingly as incentives to reinforce achievements. “Hiring is an honorable exchange. Lending brings accountability. Investing opens up new opportunities,” he said. “The highest form of charity is making money with the poor—not on the poor and not for the poor.”
- Put the interests of the poor above one’s own self-interests or the interests of one’s organization. That includes setting aside personal agendas, he added.
- Listen carefully for spoken and unspoken needs. “Know that many clues may be hidden,” he noted.
- Above all, do no harm.

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