

A Perspective on Generosity that Engages Heart and Mind

How can we ensure our giving helps those in need instead of hurting them?

Americans continue to give to charitable organizations at a record pace. Charitable giving in 2015 was over \$373 billion, according to The Giving Institute, surpassing the previous year's amount by over four percent.

Religious giving is the top category in that total, with over \$119 billion given. While much of that amount goes to internal church operations, a large percentage goes to help individuals and groups "in need."

It's that last phrase – "in need" – that has come under scrutiny in recent years, as churches consider how their giving to others is actually impacting their lives.

Is it possible that much of the money we give is either wasted or actually harming the people it is intended to help?

THE QUICK SUMMARY - [Charity Detox](#) by Robert D. Lupton

The veteran urban activist and author of the revolutionary *Toxic Charity* returns with a headline-making book that offers proven, results-oriented ideas for transforming our system of giving.

In *Toxic Charity*, Robert D. Lupton revealed the truth about modern charity programs meant to help the poor and disenfranchised. While charity makes donors feel better, he argued, it often hurts those it seeks to help. At the forefront of this burgeoning yet ineffective compassion industry are American churches, which spend billions on dependency-producing programs, including food pantries. But what would charity look like if we, instead, measured it by its ability to alleviate poverty and needs?

That is the question at the heart of *Charity Detox*. Drawing on his many decades of experience, Lupton outlines how to structure programs that actually improve the quality of life of the poor and disenfranchised. He introduces many strategies that are revolutionizing what we do with our charity dollars, and offers numerous examples of organizations that have successfully adopted these groundbreaking new models. Only by redirecting our strategies and becoming committed to results, he argues, can charity enterprises truly become as transformative as our ideals.

A SIMPLE SOLUTION

Robert Lupton again addresses the idea that much of current charity work, while done with the right intention, misses the mark of actually helping the recipients. He sums up *Charity Detox* with these sentences: "We cannot serve people out of poverty. Yet our massive service industry is based upon this false premise."

In this book Lupton asks us one of the most important questions concerning our charity

efforts: Do we care about results?

In other words: Are we interested in seeing families thrive or are we just interested in distributing resources to them? Are we content measuring volunteer activity or do we actually want to measure outcomes?

Dr. Lupton, speaking from 40 years of experience in neighborhoods experiencing poverty, is compassionate enough to tell us the bad news about traditional models of charity - they are not moving the poverty needle. People, families, and communities are not being moved out of poverty through our service efforts, programs, and mission trips.

Understanding this truth should change the way churches evaluate and respond to the needs in communities they are attempting to minister to. If we are not rooted in people's lives and in the contexts in which they live, then we are always going to be limited in how we understand the path ahead. The way we label the problems, define solutions, and build strategies will miss the critical elements that only the long, hard, work that neighboring will reveal.

In order to transform the neighborhoods where the poor live, we must reweave the very fabric of the community. There is a powerful impact that becoming neighbors can have on a community.

Three Rs of Community Development

Reneighboring

Without connected, involved, resourced neighbors, no neighborhood can thrive. Without a transfusion of new blood, troubled communities will continue to deteriorate as the capable exit in pursuit of better opportunities. An infusion of new life, rich with creativity, teeming with fresh ideas and energy, abundant with capacity – this is what invigorates a community.

Reconciliation

While the relocation required by reneighboring is the most radical R, reconciliation is the most challenging – though also potentially the most rewarding. Reconciliation involves reaching across the barriers of race, class, and culture, receiving as well as giving, and learning to respect and trust those from whom we have been estranged. When community works, when the neighborhood is blessed with a leaving of reconcilers, that very diversity gives life richness and flavor.

Redistribution

Exchange might be a better word to describe this outcome, because exchange assumes that everyone has something of value to contribute to the life of a community. Redistribution is the natural outcome of being neighbors in a diverse community. Because neighbors live in proximity to one another – and because they choose to

depend on one another – the opportunities for exchange (redistribution) become a normal part of community living.

Robert D. Lupton, [Charity Detox](#)

A NEXT STEP

Identify those in your congregation that have the greatest opportunity to live out the three R's. Look for individuals already living in diverse neighborhoods. Once you identify them, bring them together to start robust dialogue around the three "R's". Chances are they are either being very intentional about their community, they see it as something they need to escape, or they are unaware. Bringing them together on a regular basis for peer support, dialogue, idea exchange, and simply making the church more aware could reshape your culture.

There are different ways we measure success as church leaders: input, output, and impact measures. Are you looking at charitable giving and service as simply something you are giving to (impact) and measuring by how many people served, how many meals provided, etc. (output)? Or, does your church measure the impact it is having on the community or surrounding city?

Leverage this team to make a list of the sociological, relational, or spiritual needs in your community. Instead of looking at this through the lens of input or output, indicate which needs your church could most easily focus upon and see an impact. Outline key next steps to take and move forward with intentionality.

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*This is part of a weekly series posting content from one of the most innovative content sources in the church world: **SUMS Remix** Book Summaries for church leaders.*

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