

[Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help \(And How to Reverse It\)](#)

by Robert D. Lupton

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★★★★★

Robert Lupton's new book is going to ruffle some feathers.

In [Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help \(And How to Reverse It\)](#) (HarperOne), the 40-year veteran urban minister "takes the gloves off" and argues that much of Americans' charitable giving "is either wasted or actually harms the people it is targeted to help."

The reason is that the "compassion industry" is "almost universally accepted as a virtuous and constructive enterprise," but its "outcomes are almost entirely unexamined." Years of charitable giving at home and abroad, Lupton contends, have made barely a dent in reducing poverty and often encourage dependency. Toxic Charity offers some statistics, but more stories, as evidence that both our philosophy and practice of charity are frequently misguided.

The news here is painful. Our self-centeredness contributes to the problem. We evaluate our giving, Lupton argues, "by the rewards we receive through service, rather than the benefits received by the served."

Short-term mission trips are a case in point. Such "junkets" involve expenditures of between \$2.5-5 billion annually, yet produce little lasting change, often displace local labor, and distract indigenous church leaders from more important work. We get more than we give when we go.

Meanwhile, our relief-oriented, commodity-based charity flourishes at home because even though its effects are irresponsible, it feels good to the givers. Lupton grieves that "our free food and clothing distribution encourages ever-growing handout lines, diminishing the dignity of the poor while increasing their dependency."

Lupton does offer some ideas for improvement. He proposes a new "Oath for Compassionate Service" for the charity industry to adopt, much as the medical community has adopted the Hippocratic Oath. Lupton's Oath offers six key guidelines: (1) Never do for the poor what they can do for themselves; (2) Limit one-way giving to emergencies; (3) Empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements; (4) Subordinate self-interest to the needs of those being served; (5) Listen closely to those you seek to help; (6) Above all, do no harm.

The Oath embodies the philosophy of "asset-based community development" (ABCD). This is a glass-half-full strategy that focuses on a community's strengths more than its needs. It takes seriously the gifts and talents of the poor, and seeks to do ministry in the community *with* them rather than for them, thus protecting people's dignity.

For example, Lupton profiles a church that replaced its traditional food pantry with a food co-op. Local residents pay \$3 in co-op dues for \$30 worth of groceries, and *they* buy the food, box it, and distribute it. Another congregation turned its free clothing closet into a revenue-generating thrift store that teaches job skills. Still another transformed its soup kitchen into an entrepreneurial venture for female recipients who had a vision for starting a catering business.

Lupton's critique is largely on target, but he might have mentioned a few more positive trends—like the growth of social entrepreneurship and growing interest in reciprocal short-term mission projects.

Lupton says hard things that need to be said, and he's earned the right to say them. Believers would do well to receive his words with the mindset that "faithful are the wounds of a friend." If we accept rather than resist his critique, the poor and non-poor will both be better off.

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