

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Toxic Charity**

Forty-two years ago I experienced the call of God on my life to leave my business career and work with delinquent teenagers. I had no idea of the implications of that call, how it would change my life and that of my family, and certainly that of a community that we became involved with. It started with 12 kids referred by the Juvenile Court.

It didn't take long for me to figure out that you're not going to work very effectively with troubled kids apart from their family situations. I went back to school to learn how to work with families, and expanded our work to include parents and siblings of those troubled kids, only to realize that you can't work very effectively with a struggling family apart from the environment that impacts them every time they step out the door. That pushed me to get more involved with what was going on in the street and with the police and in the schools. In time, I became convinced that the most effective way to change a community was to become a part of that community and to work from within for change.

That is not an insight that one shares quickly with one's spouse, particularly when we are in the process of building her new dream home a little further out of the city, and I kept it to myself far too long. We were five weeks away from moving into our new home. If you've ever built a house, you know that's a high energy time. That's when you are picking out the carpet and the light fixtures and the cabinetry. I remember when it happened. We had gone to bed early and Peggy just wanted to talk. I said, "I don't think you want to talk to me tonight" and she said, "Oh, no, what's wrong?" I said, "Well, I don't think God wants us moving farther out of the city. I think He wants us moving *into* the city." That was a bad night!

In the morning Peggy said, "Is this your idea or God's idea? Because if it's your idea, I'm not interested at all. I want this in writing. From God if I can get it." That was the first time I articulated in a seven-page letter what I felt was a calling of God on our lives. She took that letter around to her girlfriends and our small group leader and our pastors to get their opinions, and eventually concluded that I believed that this was the call of God. And she said, "If it really is, what choice do you really have but to follow God!" It's a tribute to Peggy's spiritual depth that she let go of her vision for a new home and of raising our two elementary-age boys in a safe environment with quality schools and good friends, the kind of upbringing she experienced, to move into a neighborhood that seemed very strange and in some ways dangerous. We had no idea how that would impact not only our lives, but the lives of those we were serving. This was about a 10-year learning curve for me.

During that time, I started a lot of different programs. We had gotten an old Presbyterian church that was closed and set up shop there. We were doing some wonderful ministries out of there. Probably the most exciting time of the year was at Christmas with our Adopt-a-Family Program. That's where you give the names of kids who aren't going to get much, along with their ages and sizes, to caring families from around the city who adopt the kids in those families. Then on

Christmas Eve, they come to the children's homes and deliver the toys and it creates an awful lot of excitement and joy.

The first Christmas that we were living in the inner city as neighbors, I saw something that I had never seen before. I had time to be in the homes of some of the recipient families when the gift-bearing families arrived. Of course, the kids were all excited. Santa Claus was coming. The moms were gracious and a little reserved, maybe a little embarrassed. But if there was a dad in the household, he just disappeared. He was gone out the back door. It dawned on me that what was happening was that these parents, in front of their children, were being exposed for their inability to provide. The moms would endure that indignity for the sake of the kids, but it was just more than a father's pride could handle. It was like his impotence was being exposed in front of his wife and kids in his own living room. It was killing him. I had never seen that before and it made me wonder, are the low-income people in our other programs having to pay such a toll for the kinds of services, the kinds of ministries, we were doing?

It was very disturbing to me, so I started to look at the different things we were doing. In those days, I was reading everything on urban ministry I could get my hands on. Frankly, there wasn't a whole lot written, but I came across the writings of an author, a French philosopher and lay theologian by the name of Jacques Ellul. He was writing about urban issues and there was a quote in his book that literally jumped out and hit me right in the heart. Ellul says,

It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Alms-giving is Mammon's perversion of giving. It affirms the superiority of the giver, who thus gains a point on the recipient, binds him, demands gratitude, humiliates him and reduces him to a lower state than he had before.

Can you see why that hit me right in the heart? That wasn't why we were there, to reduce anybody to a lower state. It was just the opposite. Our motivation was to elevate people, to build honorable and trusting relationships with folks, to make a positive difference, not to reduce anybody to a lower state. You can see why it was very distressing to me.

When I looked honestly at my own motives, it was certainly obvious that I did enjoy the position of superiority. I would much rather be a giver than a recipient, although I certainly cloaked that superiority in a façade of humility. Nevertheless it was there. I started to notice that our one-way giving tended to *dis*-empower rather than empower people. There was a downward spiral that I observed. When you give somebody something once, you create some real excitement, appreciation. "Thank you so much. This is a surprise. What a delight!" But when you give somebody something two times, then you create a little bit of anticipation. "Oh, if he does *this*, I wonder if he'll do some more." By the third time, it's become an expectation. "I think he does this, he does it a lot." Now it is expected. By the fourth time, it's become an entitlement, a kind of a right. "I would rather have a ham than a turkey for Thanksgiving this year, thank you. I have a voice in this." This is his entitlement. And by the fifth time, it's pure dependency. "You can't stop now. We're counting on this." I saw that downward spiral repeat itself often enough to make me believe that our one-way giving was largely toxic, and so we said, we better change. We've got to stop this.

Our Clothes Closet—that was an easy thing to work on. In this culture, you've got caring people with plenty of clothes. In this culture, we don't wear out our clothes, except the men tend to a little. But it's easy to gather them in and we did and we opened the doors and said, "These are

the free gifts of God's people. Help yourself. Freely they've been given. Freely receive." It was a beautiful spirit until we actually opened the doors. Folks came charging in and grabbing up as many armfuls of clothes as they could carry out. But I'd find the clothes scattered around the community. No place to try them on. It was not a good stewardship system and I said, "We've got to change this."

So we hastily drew up some rules. We've got to limit the number of garments that folks can get. We've got to limit the number of visits per month. We posted the rules and they looked very much like, let the games begin. "Can we get some garments for our kids who are in school?" Well, that's reasonable. "Can we get some garments for our sick uncle who can't get in here today?" You just see where it's going. In no time, we are behaving like temple police, guarding the resources of the Kingdom against the very folks we are there to serve. It set up an adversarial relationship almost overnight. That was not what we had in mind! We had in mind sharing resources, sharing life, together improving the quality of the lives of our neighbors, but it wasn't turning out that way.

We did lots of service projects. You know, if you are an inner city ministry, partner churches from all over the city love to do service projects with you. Their youth groups do some marvelous things and we did some marvelous things together. We built houses. We cleaned up parks and playgrounds.

I was sitting on my porch one day while all this was going on in my head and Virgil, my neighbor from across the street, was sitting there with me. We were talking about the neighborhood and a 14-passenger church van came down the street in front of the house, going real slow. Kids were looking out the windows waving, obviously a youth group coming in to do service, and Virgil said something that really surprised me. He said, "I hate it when those volunteers come down here." I said, "Really?!!" I said, "I thought you liked volunteers. They built your house!" He said, "Oh, yeah, they do good," he said, "but they insult you and they don't even know they are insulting you."

He told me about one volunteer who was in his house and was just going on and on about how neat and clean his house was. He said, "I know she meant it as a compliment, but I kind of knew what was behind it. She was surprised that a black family living in the inner city wasn't living in a hovel." He told me about another woman who was a volunteer who raved about his children, how smart and well behaved they were. "I know she meant it as a compliment," he said, "but I also know what was behind it. She was surprised my kids were not dumb and rowdy, like her perception of most of the inner city kids. They insult you and they don't even know it."

Well, we said, we've got to get out of this giveaway business. From now on, we're going to draw a line. Going forward, the only way we're going to do one-way giving is to those in crisis, whereupon the incidences of crises skyrocketed. Everybody had a crisis. So we said, "Wait, wait, wait! Time out! We've got to distinguish here between what is a real crisis and what is a function of chronic poverty." A crisis demands an emergency response—get in there with food, clothing, shelter, clothing, medical supplies. Stop the bleeding! That's when an earthquake hits Haiti, and that's the right response. But after the immediate crisis has passed, that's the time to start rebuilding. Now it becomes a chronic issue. Now it's time to rebuild houses, rebuild roads, rebuild schools, rebuild jobs, rebuild lives. You're switching from a crisis intervention to development strategy. When you address a crisis need with an emergency response, lives are

saved. On the other hand, if you address a chronic need with an emergency response, people are harmed.

Let me give you an example of that. Remember when Katrina hit New Orleans and we watched it on television every night? People were stranded on tops of buildings. That was a crisis and as a nation we responded. It wasn't very organized, but it was the right response. Get in there with life-saving supplies: help and medical treatment. Save lives. What was that, eight years ago? I was in New Orleans last fall. You know something that rather disturbed me? There are caravans of caring people still flooding into New Orleans with emergency supplies, food, clothing, and all sorts of things to minister to the *victims* of Katrina. Did you get that? Victims! We've created a victim-class of people, who are dependent on the compassion of caring people to come in to give emergency supplies to a poverty situation, which long ago has moved from crisis into chronic. That should have stopped within six months after Katrina. An emergency response to a chronic need hurts people.

What about hunger in our country? Is that a chronic or crisis situation? Starvation! We know what that is. *That's* a crisis! But in 42 years of serving in inner city Atlanta, I have never seen one starving person. I've seen folks miss meals. I've seen folks eat peanut butter sandwiches for the last three days of the month. I've seen homeless guys dumpster dive. I've seen bad nutrition, but not starvation. Hunger in our culture is a function of chronic need and the right response to chronic need is a development response. It's like that old adage: *Feed a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime.* The right response to hunger in our culture is a teach-him-to-fish response, but for some reason we haven't made that connection. Most of our giving churches as well as non-profits that provide food in our culture are emergency responses to chronic poverty issues. There is a reason why the poor are remaining poor in our culture.

So what do we do? Well, we said, we've got to narrow our focus. We can't meet the needs of all the poor on the south side of Atlanta. We've got to narrow it down to our own neighborhood. That way we can have more accountable relationships. Get to know our neighbors. Our giving, our interacting, can be much more personal. And then we have to change our idea of how we view our neighbors. Instead of seeing them as poor people, as folks in need, we've got to begin seeing them as people created in the image of God with talents and abilities and resources, so that no one is so poor in our community that they have nothing to give. Everybody has something to contribute to the exchange in our community.

Then we adopted what I would call the golden rule of effective caring. It's this: *never do for others what they have the capacity to do for themselves.* When you do that, when you give to folks who have the capacity to do it for themselves, you disempower them. You weaken them. You erode their work ethic. You diminish their dignity. And so we changed our model.

In the Adopt-a-Family Program, the second Christmas we were there, as folks called in to help, we said, "Would you give an extra gift this year? Would you give the gift of dignity to the dads and here's how you do it. Go shopping. Buy the toys, but don't wrap them. Bring them in and we'll set up a little store front and call it The Old Toy Shop, and we will put prices on those toys somewhere between a wholesale and a garage sale price. We'll invite the parents to come in and go shopping, and even if they don't have any money, even if they are unemployed, we are creating some cash flow here. That means we can hire parents so that everybody has money to buy toys. On Christmas morning, the parents in our community will have the same joy as most

of the parents in our city have, of seeing their kids open gifts that they have purchased, that they have picked out and purchased through the efforts of their own hands. And there will be dignity in the process of exchange.

Well, that's a quantum leap. Getting folks to let us sell toys that they want to give. But when we explain, do you know what a kid needs, really, more than a toy for Christmas? What kids need is an effective parent and so we're going to take the money, the proceeds, from these toy sales and create an employment training program that will move unemployed parents out into the economic mainstream so they can support their children. "That gift of yours will continue to give all year long." When folks got that, they bought into it and that little store—we called it our "pride for parents promotion."

We learned two very important things that first year. One, that parents would a whole lot rather work to purchase the toys that they knew would delight their kids, than they would stand in the free toy lines with their proof of poverty identification. The other thing we learned was a universal truth, meaning to all people at all times. It's this: everyone loves to find a bargain. It's universal! Peggy came home this past Christmas after a long day of shopping. She spread her treasures out all around the living room for me to admire, and said, "You know what? I saved more than I spent!" I'm not an economist, but this I do know, she was excited about finding bargains! Why do we think it would be a blessing to the poor to exclude them from the process of finding bargains?

That Clothes Closet! I was explaining this adversarial relationship to a Methodist men's group, and they said, "Well, there is a simple answer." You know those who aren't there always have the simple answers. They said, "The simple solution is the economy. You put a fair rate of exchange on a desired commodity and it cuts all that out." I said, "Really?!!" And they said, "Oh, yeah!" I said, "Would you help us set that up?" and they took it on as their men's mission project that year. They set about doing what they can't help doing in their sleep anyhow. Have a business plan. Analyze traffic flow patterns. Do real estate research. You've got to be on a bus line. Shop the competition. Bring this in right underneath a Goodwill Industries thrift store. They said it takes about two years for a small business start-up to break even and they were pretty accurate.

About 18 months later that little thrift store moved into the black and has been a bright spot in the community ever since. It totally changed the dynamics between giver and recipient, where you have to guard against the recipient getting too much, and the relationship between merchant and customer, where the merchant wants the customer to spend all they can possibly spend because they *need* the customer. The merchant *values* the customer. That's how he pays the light bill. That's how he makes payroll.

As we hired the trainees for the store, the question was, how do we keep our neighbors coming and shopping in here? How do we make this a desirable place? The first thing they said was, "We've got to get everybody's name down. Find out something about them. Write it down so when Ms Jones comes into the store, you say, 'Good morning, Ms Jones. How are you this morning? How is your mother?'" Everybody likes to go where people know their name." You could do a sitcom on that. So then we jumped in a van, went out to a shopping mall, shopped the real stores and we took notes.

The debrief was very fascinating. They said all the stores were very friendly. They had the sale racks right there. Big signs, all the hangers going the same way, latest fashion arrivals. One of the women said, "And those stores smell nice, too." When you're dealing in used clothes, sometimes the smell is a little stale; you can't dry clean them all. We said, "What can we do to make our stores smell nicer?" One of the women said, "We could have a pot of fresh-brewed coffee going in the morning. That would help." Another one said, "Yeah, we could have some microwave cookies, too. That would help. You come walking into the store and the aromas of fresh coffee and cookies greet you."

This is about valuing people. This is about communicating, we really need you! That is a totally different dynamic from guarding against folks getting too much. We learned something. We learned that the economy is a gift of God and it happens in every culture. It's where *exchange* takes place. You've been growing tomatoes and you've been growing corn and you've got a surplus. You bring the tomatoes and corn together and work out a deal. How many ears of corn for how many tomatoes? If it's a deal done well, you both go away feeling like you got more than you brought. That's magic. It's why Peggy was so excited. According to her, she got more than she brought!

The question is, why do we think it would be a blessing to the poor to exclude them from the process of exchange? I think it becomes the responsibility of those of us who are stewards of resources to figure out the methods of exchange where everybody in the community has something of value to contribute. I think that is a part of our God-given responsibility. If dignity, if community relationships, are a part of God's plan, certainly harnessing economic forces for justice is as well.

To finish, let me circle back to service projects. I said to Virgil, "Should we just cut these service projects out? Is it just too hard on our neighbors to bring these volunteers in?" And he said, "No, they do *good*." But he said, "I'll tell you what would be helpful. It would sure be helpful if we were the ones deciding on what projects to do." Got to write that one down! **Community initiated!** He said, "I'll tell you another thing. If we were the ones doing the organizing for this and managing the projects, it would be a whole lot better than outsiders coming in telling us what to do!" Write that one down! **Community led!** He said, "I'll tell you another thing. Some of those church folks come in here and treat us like we are pagans, like we don't know anything about God." He said, "Those people have no idea what it's like to live by faith. What it's like when your resources run out and you have only God to cling to and God does miracles." He said, "They don't know anything about that. It sure would be good if we had time to sit down and share how God is at work in our community and in our lives." Write that one down! **Time for mutual sharing!** Time for mutual evangelism to take place.

I realized that as helping people, we need a code of conduct like physicians have the Hippocratic Oath. Hippocrates said all the physicians need to swear to this and they do to this day. We need something like that for those of us doing service and so here is my attempt at it. I'll leave you with this.

No. 1 is the golden rule, *I'll never do for others what they have or could have the capacity to do for themselves.*

2. *I'll limit my one-way giving to true emergencies and always seek ways for legitimate exchange.*

3. *I'll empower people by hiring, lending, and investing, and use my giving as incentive to reinforce achievement.* The Opportunity International partnership that you are working together with here do some of the best lending and investing in the lives of the poor of any ministry on the globe. It's a wise choice for you to hook up with them. They do it well.

4. *I'll put the interests of the poor ahead of my own self-interest or that of my church's self-interest even when it means setting aside my own agenda.*

5. *I'll listen carefully to the spoken and unspoken needs of the poor, knowing that a lot of needs are not expressed, they may be hidden. Unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service.*

And then No. 6, it's the same point Hippocrates admonished, *above all, to the best of my ability, I will do no harm.*

Amen?

[All:] Amen!

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.