

Givers must rethink how they give, 'Toxic Charity' author Bob Lupton says

By Lesli Bales-Sherrod

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“Never do for others what they have the capacity to do for themselves.”

This is the “golden rule” for Bob Lupton, author of “Toxic Charity” and the second speaker of the collaborative educational series Rescuing Charity. Some 350 people attended Lupton’s afternoon seminar on “Effective Charity Methodologies” March 3 at Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, and approximately 1,200 showed up for his keynote address at the church’s Global Mission Conference that night.

“Bob is very direct and doesn’t pull any punches,” said Daniel Watson, co-founder and executive director of The Restoration House of East Tennessee, one of six Rescuing Charity sponsors. “I hope it was a wake-up for a lot of folks, but that they also left with a sense of hope and inspiration to go and do things a different way.”

Lupton has more than 40 years of experience as a Christian community developer in inner-city Atlanta, but admitted that when he first moved his nonprofit FCS Urban Ministries into a former church building in the city, he did what a lot of churches do: he started all sorts of benevolence programs such as a food pantry, a clothing closet and a popular adopt-a-family program that allowed families to buy Christmas gifts for children in need.

It was during one of those Christmas Eve gift exchanges when Lupton noticed something, he said.

“The kids were excited, and the moms were gracious, maybe a little bit embarrassed, but if there was a dad in the household, he just disappeared,” Lupton said. “These parents were being exposed in front of their children for their inability to provide.”

Lupton later read a quote from philosopher Jacques Ellul that spoke to this very thing: “Almsgiving ... 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.”

“That hit me right in the heart,” Lupton said.

Lupton saw in his ministry what he called a downward spiral: if you give someone something once, you get appreciation; twice, anticipation; three times, expectation; four times, entitlement, and five times, pure dependency. It is this formula Lupton

deems “toxic charity.”

The solution? The correct response to need.

Changing the response

“A crisis need demands an emergency response,” Lupton explained. “Development is the right response to chronic need.”

He used as an example Hurricane Katrina. Even eight years after the storm, groups continue to go into New Orleans with emergency response for the “victims” of Katrina, he said. This has created, he said, a victim culture.

“When you address chronic poverty needs with an emergency response, it harms people,” Lupton added.

Lupton and FCS Ministries changed the way they looked at their neighbors: not as people in need, but as people with resources.

“I believe no one is so poor that they have nothing to contribute to the community,” he said.

The next Christmas Eve, Lupton amended the adopt-a-family program so that families who wanted to buy gifts for children still could. However, instead of wrapping the gifts and delivering them to families in need, FCS Urban Ministries set up a store with the donated gifts, priced them at a discount, and invited parents to come in and shop for their own children. That, in turn, gave the parents the gift of dignity by being able to provide for their own children, Lupton explained, and the ministry used the money to move parents into job training programs. The program now is called Pride for Parents.

“What we learned is that parents would rather work to earn money to purchase a toy than to stand in the free toy line with their proof of poverty,” he said.

FCS Urban Ministries took a similar approach to other benevolence programs, closing its clothing closet and opening a discount thrift store where, instead of giving away clothes to those in need, people could come into the store and buy what they wanted for a very cheap price.

“It is a universal truth: everyone loves to find a bargain,” Lupton said.

The new store had the added benefit of creating jobs for formerly unemployed neighbors, who were trained in retail and worked to make the shop a place people would want to come back to.

FCS Urban Ministries also transformed its food pantry into a food co-op, where members contribute \$3 per week, allowing the co-op to purchase \$30 worth of groceries from the food bank. The co-op members are using their individual God-given gifts, Lupton said: doing the shopping, collecting the money, deciding the rules and even providing a hot meal on food day, which eliminated the need for a suburban

church to come into the city and provide a meal.

“They’re making the decisions,” he said. “How different it is when people have a sense of ownership.”

Doing no harm

These experiences led Lupton to pen an oath for helpers based on the Hippocratic oath that physicians take:

1. I will never do for others what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
2. I will limit my one-way giving to emergency situations and seek always to find ways and means for legitimate exchange.
3. I will seek ways to empower the poor through hiring, lending and investing and use grants sparingly as incentives that reinforce achievements.
4. I will put the interests of the poor above my own (or organizational) self-interest even when it may be costly.
5. I will take time to listen and carefully assess both expressed and unspoken needs so that my actions will ultimately strengthen rather than weaken the hand of those I would serve.

“And above all, to the best of my ability, I will do no harm,” Lupton said.

This concept of doing no harm — particularly with short-term mission trips — resonated with Piers van der Merwe, one of the pastors of Cedar Springs Presbyterian.

“Our members are generous in many respects and do a lot in the community, but sometimes we can do things that may not be wise,” he said. “We need to begin thinking about the various things the church does to ensure we’re not doing harm because that would be self-defeating.”

The Rescuing Charity series — www.rescuingcharity.com/ — is a collaborative effort between Cedar Springs Presbyterian, Compassion Coalition, Emerald Youth Foundation, Girl on the Roof, Hardin Valley Church of Christ, Knoxville Leadership Foundation and The Restoration House of East Tennessee. No additional speakers are scheduled at this time, but the partners will be meeting soon to evaluate how the first two events went and deciding how to move forward, Watson said.

Related videos:

Robert Lupton: [The Church is Too Generous to the Needy](#)

Robert Lupton: [Re-Thinking Christmas Giving](#)

Robert Lupton: [The Oath of Compassionate Service](#)



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