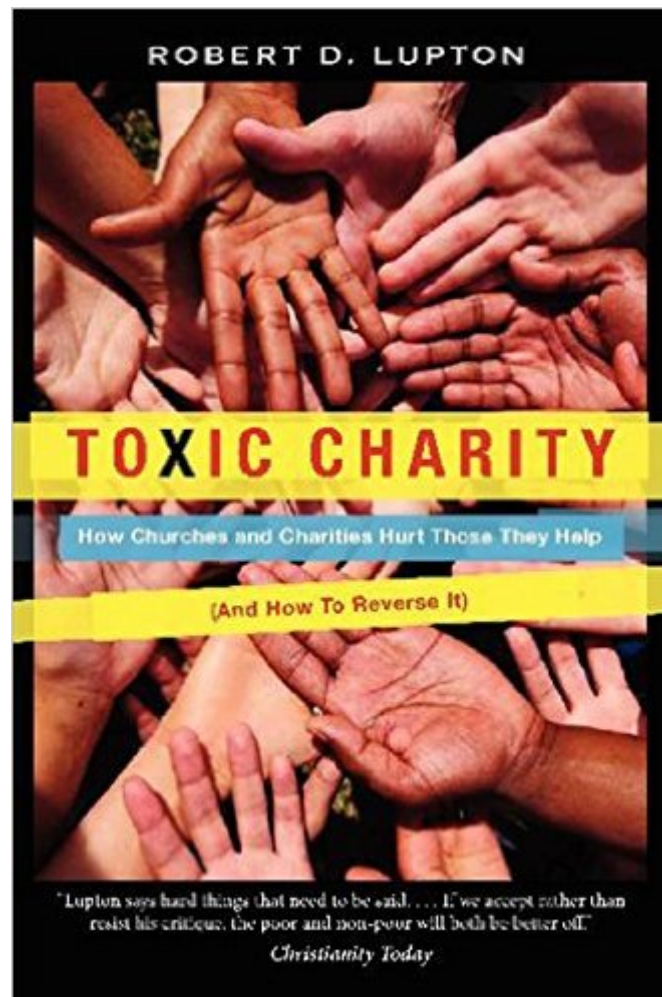


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# Toxic Charity: How Churches And Charities Hurt Those They Help, And How To Reverse It



## Synopsis

Veteran urban activist Robert Lupton reveals the shockingly toxic effects that modern charity has upon the very people meant to benefit from it. *Toxic Charity* provides proven new models for charitable groups who want to help "not sabotage" those whom they desire to serve. Lupton, the founder of FCS Urban Ministries (Focused Community Strategies) in Atlanta, the voice of the Urban Perspectives newsletter, and the author of *Compassion, Justice and the Christian Life*, has been at the forefront of urban ministry activism for forty years. Now, in the vein of Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty*, Richard Stearns' *The Hole in Our Gospel*, and Gregory Boyle's *Tattoos on the Heart*, his groundbreaking *Toxic Charity* shows us how to start serving needy and impoverished members of our communities in a way that will lead to lasting, real-world change.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Its title notwithstanding, this book is not a case for stinginess. Its author has four decades' experience of faith-based charitable work to his credit and draws on this experience as well as a host of anecdotes and research (which, however, he does not cite - the book does is one of advocacy, not scholarship). His is also not an argument against voluntary or faith-based giving in favor of public welfare or rights-based claims on the state. Rather, with multiple and compelling examples, from weeklong 'missions' of church youth groups to poor countries through inner-city charitable initiatives to the enormous Kroc grant to the Salvation Army, Lupton argues that this work needs to be rethought and reoriented. As Brooks (*Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About*

Compassionate Conservatism) has shown, giving by religious Americans, both to church-based charities and secular agencies like the Red Cross, is extraordinarily generous by any measure, in time, treasure, and talent, compared with that of secular Americans and citizens of other affluent countries. Lupton does not disparage these efforts or their (mostly) good intentions, but argues that most of this activity does more harm than good. Given the author's own commitment and credentials in the field, anyone engaged in this work will want to pay attention to his critique. In some ways, Lupton echoes those 19th-century critics of "sentimental charity," who sought to replace random handouts with organized charity based on a relationship between giver and recipient that offered "not alms, but a friend" (the motto of the Charity organization Societies). Those charity reform efforts, which gave rise to the profession of social work, are widely disparaged today, not least by professional social workers. But the problem of how to help those who need help, whether through government programs or private charity, in ways that do not shame, demoralize, sap initiative, and create dependency remains, as Lupton shows, as big a challenge today as ever. Lupton's approach, that of asset-based community development, aims to empower and partner with those helped, recognizing and engaging their capacity to contribute to their community with their own resources, knowledge, and wisdom. Instead of flying in with a team of eager young missionaries to build a well for a poor village whose women have to carry water long distances on their heads - and coming back every year to fix 'their' well - Lupton argues for an approach that facilitates engaging the skills and energy of the local people to fund, build, and manage their own well. It is not a matter of being stingy rather than generous, but of helping in ways that truly help, without the enervating, dependency-creating disempowerment of much current charity in practice. Lupton's argument is not against charity as such, but for charity in its true sense of willing the good of the other. This implies, Lupton shows, a consistent focus on results rather than intentions, on the good of those helped rather than the supposed benefits to the giver (e.g., the 'life-changing experience' of young participants in expensive mission junkets or the warm feelings of congregations that want to help.) The virtue of charity in this view cannot stand alone. It requires the exercise of other virtues like justice and prudence, and full engagement of the head as well as the heart.

Focus on outcomes, not activities. Not all giving is good. In fact, much giving is toxic. This is the basic message in this book. Lupton in one sweep exposes the scandals both intended and unintended. He explains the reasons behind the flawed thinking behind conventional giving. He explicates the various alternatives to transform charity from toxic handout to healthy helping out. This book can be summarized in three ways. Firstly, Lupton exposes the scandal of conventional

giving. He questions why the poor remains so poor despite the huge aid given to them over the years. He wonders why handout lines continue to stretch. He probes the flaws of current giving models. Secondly, the author re-calibrates the basic philosophy of good charity being learning to take the oath of compassionate service. Such an oath puts the development of the recipient's potential as primary, and the fulfilment of the giver's emotions as secondary. Thirdly, the author tries to provide alternatives that redeems the whole giving process. Readers will be shocked by the many revelations of how giving has not only not improved the conditions of the receivers, giving has become toxic instead. Thankfully, Lupton is able to articulate very practical and workable models for us to re-think and to restore good giving. What the poor and the vulnerable needs most are not more handouts or more problem solving. They need a helping hand to help themselves, and for the rest of the world to enable them to reach their highest potential. All good giving does precisely that. I strongly recommend that all givers, both present and future read this book.

In *Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton embarks upon the much needed task of alerting the church to the pitfalls of poorly informed charitable giving, and showing how short many charitable efforts come in bringing real lasting positive change. He shares hard-won lessons and wisdom from years of work in inner-city service. The author does this with easy-to-follow and interesting stories that quickly show the reader how well-intentioned efforts have unintended results, and presents many great ideas for better ways forward. However, while important warnings are raised, unfortunately *Toxic Charity* seems to fall short on solid research, leaning heavily on anecdotal stories and intuitions. While rightly rejecting that all giving works great, the book frequently falls into an almost equally simplistic ideology, that can be summarized, "avoid dependencies". Citations of research on the topics discussed are rare, and range from hearsay to simply false data, such as citation of a World Bank study that quoted the wrong region, wrong intervention, and wrong data. Again, Lupton has some great suggestions, and certainly the focus on doing a better job of listening to recipients and seeking to understand and research what they truly need to be empowered is wise. But too much of the book fails to follow this advise, instead relying on following the intuitions of the anti-dependency ideology. Sometimes these intuitions are good, but often times they lead to poor conclusions. For example, anti-dependency mentality recommends always preferring microfinance over direct cash transfer. Microfinance has worked well in some situations, yet much of the most recent and best development research has shown very disappointing results in many others areas with microfinance, with remarkably promising results with direct cash transfers or free access to medicines. Such reality can't be explained by a single principle; human behavior and development

economics are far more complicated. As a theological book, this book uncovers nothing new and draws very little upon the real theological teachings of scripture on giving, rarely even referencing the Bible. As an economics book, the assessments seem to ignore the wealth of research and literature on behavioral and development economics. Combined, the economic and theological principles are weak. But Lupton's warnings about the pitfalls of giving are important wake-up call and his experience from years of working with churches in inner-city should prove invaluable to churches seeking to also bless and empower their communities by humbling listening and focusing on what recipients truly need. Hopefully this book will push readers to reconsider how they give, but hopefully readers will resist the urge to settle for a single ideology and instead take up the admonition found in these pages to continually invest seriously in listening and researching what types of giving and interventions really work in their area of interest.

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