

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Charity Detox:*

## What Charity Would Look Like If We Cared About Results

by

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### THE BAD NEWS ABOUT GOOD WORKS

1. When you hear the word “charity,” what comes to mind? Are your associations mostly positive or negative? Why?
2. “The hard reality,” Robert Lupton writes, “is that it takes more than compassionate hearts and generous gifts to elevate people in need out of poverty. In fact, giving to people in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy them” (p. 2). Are you involved in charitable

work? If so, is that work empowering people in need, or is it holding them back? How can you tell?

3. Lupton describes two different approaches to charity in Knoxville, Tennessee: “compassion central” and Knoxville Area Rescue Ministries (KARM) (pp. 13–16). What can you learn about effective charity from this comparison? Why is KARM so much more empowering than “compassion central”?
4. Why do you think Lupton says that poverty alleviation requires us to “simultaneously address both the needs of individuals as well as those of the community” (p. 19)? Why do you think charities tend to focus only on the former?
5. **Taking Action:** Detoxifying charity means that we ask more, not less, of those we seek to serve. If you are involved in charity work, how can you begin to involve their gifts, insights, and abilities in the work you do?

## PARTNERING WITH BUSINESS

1. Lupton claims, “I have become convinced that the only thing that will enable the poor to emerge from poverty is a decent job” (p. 28). Before reading this chapter, had you ever associated job creation and poverty elimination? Why or why not?
2. People who work for nonprofit organizations often see profit as “suspect” and “coupled closely with greed” while people who work in for-profit businesses often

see profit as “essential, good, and highly motivating” (p. 30). How do you see profit? Who taught you to see it that way?

3. “If we are serious about moving the poverty needle,” Lupton writes, “we need to put forth a mission call for MBAs rather than MDivs. Those in our pews with expertise in creating successful, profitable enterprises are uniquely qualified to create life-giving jobs in underdeveloped lands” (p. 44). How could businesspeople in your own faith community become more involved in mission? What might be standing in their way?
4. Lupton calls us to examine results, not just the distribution of resources. What charities do you know that seem to aim only at meeting needs? What charities do you know that take on the causes of those needs?
5. **Taking Action:** Detoxifying charity means asking our business-minded friends, the wealth creators who tend to be seen only as donors, how they might answer the challenges we are facing. Who could you talk to who might offer fresh wisdom from their professional experience?

## SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

1. “My hope,” Lupton claims, “is that ... the wealthiest church in history will awaken to the reality that its job is not just saving souls, but also bringing economic wholeness to struggling souls too long resigned to

- unending poverty” (p. 52). Have you ever considered “bringing economic wholeness to struggling souls” as part of the mission of the church? How might Lupton’s claim here widen your understanding of that mission?
2. “It is time we brought theological balance to our understanding of wealth” (p. 51). Do you think Lupton is right that the church has had an imbalance in its understanding of wealth and that this imbalance has hindered effective charity? Why or why not?
  3. Lupton describes two companies’ approaches to social enterprise: TOMS and Nisolo (pp. 55–56). What can you learn about social enterprise from this comparison? Why is Nisolo so much more empowering than TOMS?
  4. “Making money *with* the poor, after all, is the highest form of charity” (p. 62). How do these words from Lupton resonate with you? What would be the implications for our charity work if we believed this?
  5. **Taking Action:** Instead of planning another mission trip, could your faith community plan an “investment trip,” in which business leaders explore “unexploited business opportunities in the region where the church has been involved” (p. 62)? Can you think of persons with business savvy from your community who could offer their gifts in this way?

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

1. “Let’s be honest,” Lupton writes. “Helping the poor to become self-sufficient, though certainly a desired outcome, is generally not our only (or even primary) motivation for giving. Charity is good for *us*” (pp. 67–68). How does being involved in charitable work make you feel? From what you’ve learned from this book so far, how much should your feelings matter when it comes to charity?
2. Lupton argues that we could change the charity paradigm if we began to calculate ROI—Return on Investment. In other words, we need to measure to what extent our efforts are directly reducing poverty and increasing self-reliance. Do you agree that ROI should be a core component of charity? If so, how do you think that could be applied to a charity you care about?
3. ROI should be measured, according to Lupton, not just by a materially poor family’s increase in income but also by the depth of relationships that are being formed between people who were formerly nothing more than service providers and recipients. How would a focus on becoming neighbors instead of providers change us?
4. “Just being a good neighbor, being available to lend a tool or watch a neighbor’s kids, being active in a neighborhood watch—this presence is a vitally important ministry that doesn’t lend itself to specific measured outcomes” (p. 88). Are you creating space in your life for this “ministry of presence” to those around you? How?

5. **Taking Action:** Detoxifying charity means learning the difference between measuring activity and looking at outcomes. If you are involved in a charity, schedule time with other key leaders to examine your charity's outcomes. Be honest about whether the volume of activity you measure is leading to proportionate results.

### MEETING MARKET DEMANDS

1. Lupton says that effective charity, like a successful business, pays attention to the market. In this case it means “adapting one’s mission to the priorities of the poor” (p. 93). Why do you think this is traditionally not done? How do you think charities could do a better job of listening deeply to the desires of the poor?
2. “And that’s what mission trips should be about—spiritual development, not saving the world,” Lupton suggests. “Not immediately, anyway. They’re about saving *us*. Preparing *us*. Once that is clear, we can venture into Haiti and other places of need with integrity” (p. 96). Have you ever participated in a short-term mission trip? If so, did your leaders describe the reason for the trip in the way Lupton does above? What were your thoughts about short-term missions before reading this book? What do you think now?
3. “The mindset of learners is very different from that of servers. Learners listen to others; servers do for others. Learners ask questions; servers offer answers. Learners marvel at the faith of the poor; servers pity the poor”

(p. 97). When it comes to your approach to charity, are you more of a learner or a server? How can you increase your ability to learn, instead of merely serving?

4. Lupton tells the story of Juan Iello in Nicaragua lamenting that U.S. churches are “turning my people into beggars” (p. 100). How do Juan’s words affect you? Do you think his concern is valid? What should be done differently to prevent this?
5. **Taking Action:** If you think your faith community has a mission or charity program that needs to consider moving from “toxic to transformative,” who could you talk to about these concerns (p. 108). How can you do it so that you are not offering criticism but inviting dialogue?

### RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE: FOOD

1. “It may seem compassionate at the moment to give out food boxes, but in all likelihood this type of emergency response will ultimately prove more hurtful than helpful” (p. 110). If Lupton is correct, why does distributing free food to those in need continue to be so popular?
2. Lupton calls the reality of food insecurity in America a “chronic problem,” not a “crisis issue” (p. 111). After reading this chapter, how would you distinguish between these two terms?
3. “Feed a person once, it elicits appreciation. Feed him twice, it creates anticipation. Feed him three times, it

creates expectation. Feed him four times, it becomes an entitlement. Feed him five times, it produces dependency” (p. 114). How does this progression strike you? Does it change the way you think about helping the hungry? How so?

4. Lupton describes two models of food ministry that highlight reciprocal exchange: Birch Community Services and Harvest Food and Outreach Center (pp. 117–20). What about these models is compelling to you? If you were facing food insecurity, would you prefer to work with these agencies or traditional food pantries? Why?
5. **Taking Action:** Lupton offers some guidance on how to go about changing a food ministry paradigm (pp. 125–27). Carefully go back through those suggestions, set a time to meet with a trusted ministry partner from your local food ministry, and see how you might help create a more dignifying and reciprocal model.

### THE THREE Rs OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

1. Lupton describes three ways to facilitate community development. He refers to these three ways as the three Rs: *reneighboring*, *reconciliation*, and *redistribution*. Start by discussing *reneighboring*: After reading about the benefits of mixed-income neighborhoods and of truly sharing life with one’s neighbors, what is stopping you from adding your name alongside John Perkins and Robert Lupton on a list of those involved in the *reneighboring* movement?

2. *Reconciliation*: In your own life, how can you more fully reach 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” (p. 142)?
3. *Redistribution*: How were you taught to view your possessions? Were you instructed, as Lupton was, that every family is “responsible for addressing its own needs” (p. 145)? How might you make the shift from “individual ownership to kingdom stewardship” (p. 145)?
4. The three Rs are about *community development*, Lupton’s insistence that we will not move the poverty needle simply by addressing the needs of individuals. Effective and sustainable poverty alleviation, according to Lupton, requires us to think about and participate in the health of whole communities. Now that you are farther into the book, do you find yourself agreeing with this perspective on charity?
5. **Taking Action**: Take time to talk with your family about how you view your money and other resources. Ask yourselves some challenging questions about valuing ownership versus stewardship. Make a decision together about some things you can do to begin shifting your approach.

## GENTRIFICATION WITH JUSTICE: EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

1. Lupton describes the necessity of both education and community development in the fight against poverty. Why is education alone insufficient?
2. “What causes me to be optimistic?” Lupton asks. “Two things: (1) gentrification and (2) a younger generation of professionals who view diversity as a good thing” (p. 164). When you hear the words “gentrification” and “diversity,” what comes to mind? Are your associations mostly positive or negative? Why?
3. “Gentrification is successful in alleviating poverty only when it is part of an intentionally planned strategy of mixed-income redevelopment that protects the interests of the poor” (p. 165). Have you ever seen or experienced the negative effects of gentrification? How might this approach to gentrification have different results?
4. When we think about creating mixed-income, diverse neighborhoods, we think about how it will benefit the materially poor. How might such communities benefit everyone?
5. **Taking Action:** Who do you personally know who has chosen to reneighbor an under-resourced community or participate in an intentionally mixed-income neighborhood? Set a time to talk with them about their choice to do this and how it has affected them. Be honest in sharing your own thoughts about your family making a choice to do this as well.

## FOR-PROFIT MISSIONS: INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. “Business growth is key to moving the poverty needle,” asserts Lupton (p. 172). If you have participated in missions in under-resourced contexts, do you find this to be true? Why or why not?
2. Lupton describes two successful businesses: Opportunity Nicaragua and Sea Farms (pp. 172–81). What can you learn about for-profit mission models from these examples?
3. Deuteronomy 8:18 states, “Remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.” Do you view the ability to produce wealth as a gift from God? Why do you think this gift “has been secularized and stripped of its divine significance” (p. 180)?
4. How might certain interpretations of Matthew 6:24, Matthew 19:24, and 1 Timothy 6:10 prevent churches from participating in for-profit missions? After reading this chapter, do you view those verses differently? If so, how?
5. **Taking Action:** Lupton says that we need “a new image for the missionary” (p. 184). Talk with a trusted friend or mentor about how you can begin to envision your own professional training as a call to missions. Discuss how your training and expertise could be used to move the poverty needle as part of a holistic community development initiative.

## CONCLUSION

1. How has reading this book affected your understanding of charity? How has it changed how you will pursue charitable work in your own community and beyond?
2. If you had to summarize Lupton's book for leaders of your faith community, what would you say? How would you help them understand how charity could actually empower those in need, transform communities, and more?

## GOING FARTHER

If your church or nonprofit is ready to transform its charity paradigm, reach out to Focused Community Strategies, the organization Robert Lupton founded in Atlanta. They offer training and consulting services in responsible charity and community development. Contact: [shawn@fcsministries.org](mailto:shawn@fcsministries.org).