

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Toxic Charity

by

Robert Lupton

1. What motivates you to become involved with charitable social service in your church community? What needs are you hoping to address? When you think about charitable outreach reflectively, have you considered the possibility that it might actually do more harm than good? Let's explore that idea.
2. Lupton asserts that "giving is no simple matter" (p. 31). What accounts for his belief that giving toys to needy children at Christmas is toxic? (p. 33). Do you agree or disagree?
3. On page 34, Jacques Ellul is quoted as saying: "It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Almsgiving 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.” These are strong words that condemn the idea of almsgiving. Do you agree or disagree with Ellul’s assessment? What do you perceive to be the distinction between “truly free” giving and almsgiving?

4. The prophet Micah, as noted in the book, defines a way of life and generosity that is truly balanced: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. . . . To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, *NIV*). Lupton then lists modern equivalents of these attributes: Immediate care with a future plan; emergency relief and responsible development; short-term intervention and long-term involvement; and heart responses and engaged minds (pp. 41–42). Do you agree that these elements reflect Micah’s view of acting justly and loving mercy? If not, why not?
5. Lupton suggests “due diligence” is required of anyone desiring to live charitably (p. 49). What does he mean by this? What is his suggestion for those who feel they can’t invest the kind of commitment he calls for?
6. Why does Lupton consider food pantries destructive? What does he propose as a workable alternative?
7. On pages 117 to 120, Lupton offers several questions that communities and individuals ought to examine before developing a strategy for charitable work. Look again through these elements and discuss what you perceive to be the underlying principles that drive his

approach to community development. Do any of these questions surprise you or introduce ideas you had not before entertained? Are they helpful when thinking about your own charitable strategy? If so, how?

8. What does Lupton mean by “transformative charity”? (p. 165).
9. What distinction does Lupton make between “betterment” and “development”? How does he suggest the two can work together to bring about effective community development?
10. Lupton asserts that “timing is everything” (p. 175). What does he mean? What factors determine whether the time is right for development to begin in any given neighborhood?
11. Lupton outlines the points necessary for success in community development (pp. 176–177). Do you agree with this assessment? Or is he asking too much of a faith community? How does one live up to this level of commitment on a personal and familial level? Is a little “betterment” better than nothing if such a commitment is not possible?
12. What is the author’s distinction between “pity” and “respect” (p. 190)? What are some practical ways we can show respect to people whom we’re helping, without seeming patronizing? Is “pity” patronizing?
13. What is a faith community to do if a neighborhood does not welcome its presence?

14. Why does Lupton consider the “compassion industry” toxic (p. 189)? Is there a way to advance “compassion” that would bring needed services to desperate people without breeding dependence? What might this look like?
15. In what ways could “compassion” prove to be more self-serving than other-serving? What forms of “compassion” have you experienced that could be understood as more self-serving than other-serving?
16. Having read Lupton’s analysis of this complicated issue, do you feel more inspired to perform charitable work? Discouraged? Has it changed your thinking about how to give? If so, how? Where can the average committed social advocate go from here?