



A Practical Guide to  
**Sharing the Effective  
Charity Message**

# TRUE CHARITY BRIEFING GUIDE

In the charity world, it's common for people to focus so much on the people in need in front of them, that they forget to step back and ask the question, "Is my work making a real difference in this person's life?" Our good intentions are so obvious to us that we often fail to take a hard look at the effect of our actions.

Yet, this honesty and introspection reveals the way to more impactful service that moves people from poverty to flourishing. While there are no easy answers, some models and approaches work much better than others. We refer to the ones that work as "effective charity."

If you're reading this briefing guide, it is likely that you understand the need for effective charity. However, you cannot work alone. There are other staff, leadership, board members, church elders, volunteers, donors, or clients you need to communicate this message to. In most cases, the people you will be communicating with share some common ground with the True Charity perspective. There will be other ideas that are new to people. How can you explain these new ideas to others?

This briefing guide helps you do just that. It begins with a condensed explanation of the main ideas behind True Charity, so you can be sure you understand before you explain. It then reveals some of the best starting points for conversation as well as language and stories to share. It concludes with common objections and answers, with a special section for biblical support and objections.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Key True Charity Concepts.....4**
  - What is True Charity? .....4
  - Concept 1: Poverty is about more than a lack of material resources. ....4
  - Concept 2: We all have a personal duty to serve the poor. ....5
  - Concept 3: Different needs require different interventions. .... 6
  - Concept 4: Development requires challenge..... 8
  - Concept 5: Transformational programs see people in poverty as peers, not projects. .... 9
  - Concept 6: We must measure long-term results, not just activity. ....10
  - Concept 7: It is not possible to delegate charity to the government. ....11
  - Concept 8: Effective service requires cooperation but not centralization.....13
- The Best Starting Points .....15**
  - Provide specific examples of more effective programs. .... 15
  - Ask about root problems of clients and whether you are addressing them..... 15
  - Ask about the long run. ....15
  - Explain Relief vs. Development (Concept #3). .... 15
  - Explain outcomes (Concept #6)..... 16
  - Explore options for incremental program improvement. ....16
  - Explain the value of doing more for people most willing to change. ....16
- Key Terms.....17**
  - Phrases to Use ..... 17
  - Terms to Refer to Clients (in the context of a challenging program): .....18
  - Terms to Refer to Volunteers or Staff.....19
  - Language to Avoid.....19
- Stories..... 20**
- Answers to Common Objections .....22**
  - Why should we try a brand-new model, when this is the way people have always helped the poor? ..... 22
  - Won't fewer people be interested in our services if we require effort to receive them? ..... 22
  - Won't donors/volunteers be upset if we don't serve as many people? .....23

Isn't it unkind to "attach strings" to our charity? .....	23
What about people who are unable to work due to mental or physical disability? .....	23
What about people who aren't ready or willing to develop? .....	24
Isn't this another form of paternalism? .....	24
What about systemic barriers to the success of the poor? Doesn't the emphasis on private charity neglect this? .....	25
What about the psychology of poverty and scarcity? Doesn't exchange-based charity ignore that? .....	26
If the government subsidizes the rich, why shouldn't it subsidize the poor? .....	27
Aren't food, housing, and other basic needs human rights? .....	27
<b>Biblical Support and Questions .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Support .....	30
Questions .....	31
<b>Next Steps .....</b>	<b>35</b>
Once you complete your initial buy-in conversations with key stakeholders, how do you implement better practices? .....	35
<b>Learn More .....</b>	<b>36</b>
Other True Charity Resources .....	36
Recommended Books .....	36

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# KEY TRUE CHARITY CONCEPTS

## What is True Charity?

In brief, we believe the best form of charity is:

1. **Voluntarily Resourced**—provided by people who care
2. **Challenge Oriented**—leverages relationship and accountability to challenge recipients to help themselves
3. **Outcome Driven**—achieves long-term, measurable results

Below is a list of key concepts that underlie these three aspects of True Charity. Click on any of them to jump to a discussion of that concept.

1. [Poverty is about more than a lack of material resources.](#)
2. [We all have a personal duty to serve the poor.](#)
3. [Different needs require different interventions.](#)
4. [Development requires challenge.](#)
5. [Transformational programs see people in poverty as peers, not projects.](#)
6. [We must measure long-term results, not just activity.](#)
7. [It is not possible to delegate charity to the government.](#)
8. [Effective service requires cooperation but not centralization.](#)

## Concept 1: Poverty is about more than a lack of material resources.

The Oxford dictionary informs us that *poverty* is the state of “lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in a society.” While this is certainly the symptom of poverty, the root causes always run deeper. The

root cause may be a traumatic past, a lack of skills, or an inherited feeling of helplessness. Every situation is different. Some people need to reconnect with family, some need help with money management, and some just need childcare so they can pursue their education.

## IMPLICATION

One-size-fits-all solutions and simple transfers of money are ineffective as they fail to address root causes. Personalized, relational solutions are essential. Compassionate individuals in local communities are best suited to deliver them.

## SUPPORT



If poverty were simply a matter of lacking the money to get ahead, then every expansion of government welfare programs should result in a new segment of the poor permanently regaining independence and escaping poverty. Yet even though the government now spends about \$16k per poor person, per year, the poverty rate has held roughly constant.



*"People in economically disadvantaged areas appear to suffer doubly. They lack the material resources to get ahead, and they lack the social resources that might enable them to amass these material resources...If we lack that social capital, economic sociologists have shown, our economic prospects are seriously reduced, even if we have lots of talent and training (human capital)."*

**ROBERT PUTNAM, AUTHOR OF BOWLING ALONE**



The book [When Helping Hurts](#) lays out four fundamental relationships—a relationship with God, oneself, other people, and the material world. A breakdown in any one of these relationships results in dysfunction that may lead to a host of maladies, including material poverty.



This philosophy is summarized in this video: [A Deeper Look at Poverty](#)

**Concept 2: We all have a personal duty to serve the poor.**

We have a moral duty to help people in need. We respond to this deeply personal call by assisting those we know, donating to charities, and volunteering time. These acts of compassion can benefit both the giver and receiver—when they are structured to transform the recipient into a future giver, not merely remain in dependency.

Furthermore, this personal approach results in relationships which uplift everyone involved. Real relationships create accountability and inspire the action required to help the poor get ahead. The same relationships challenge the assumptions of the better off and spur the development of their own character. Nonprofits and other civic groups are key conduits through which many of these charitable interactions take place.

## IMPLICATION

Nonprofits and churches have a responsibility to mobilize supporters to be directly involved in service to the poor. Even if they could fund their outreach from a government grant or another source of “free money,” this would not fulfill their role as a link between the supporters and the assisted. Additionally, since effective charity requires authentic relationships to address root causes of poverty, mobilizing compassionate volunteers is not just a low-budget funding necessity, but an irreplaceable component of poverty resolution.

## SUPPORT



*"There are no shortcuts in fighting poverty... there is no good substitute for personal contact."* **MARVIN OLASKY, AUTHOR OF THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN COMPASSION**



While this belief in moral obligation stems from a Judeo-Christian worldview (echoed by most other major religions), it tends to be broadly accepted even by non-religious people. In the rare instance that someone sees no obligation to the poor, there is little you can say to convince them without altering their core worldview.

## Concept 3: Different needs require different interventions.

It is easy to imagine that all hungry people have the same need (food). But this reductive understanding misses the difference among relief, rehabilitation, and development.

- A temporary crisis, such as a natural disaster or unemployment, requires *relief*—characterized by temporary, one-way giving designed to alleviate immediate suffering caused by the crisis (i.e., not caused by chronic behavior or conditions that will cause the suffering to continue).
- Returning to the pre-crisis state, such as rebuilding a home or finding a new job requires *rehabilitation*—characterized by the recipient becoming an active participant in his or her own recovery.
- Advancing to a higher level of living that previously experienced, such as getting a better home or job, requires *development*. Development and rehabilitation require the same basic intervention, and both require active participation from the individual advancing.

## IMPLICATION

Most poverty in the US is chronic and requires rehabilitation or development rather than relief. Addressing a development need with a relief intervention (such as “no questions asked” handouts) is not only unhelpful, but often counterproductive.

## SUPPORT

“

*“I remember looking one day at the long line of people coming for food. And it dawned on me that I was seeing the children of those I had been giving food to for many years coming themselves now for food. And on that day, I discovered that I was a part of the problem, not part of the solution. I was helping keep people more or less well fed, but still in the bondage of dependency.”*

*ISMAEL HERNANDEZ, FOUNDER OF THE FREEDOM AND VIRTUE INSTITUTE*

“

*“One-way giving tends to make the poor objects of pity, which harms their dignity. It also erodes their work ethic and produces a dependency that is unhealthy both for the giver and the recipient.”* **ROBERT LUPTON, AUTHOR OF TOXIC CHARITY**

“

*“Because every individual's situation is unique, our help should be, too.”*

*JAMES WHITFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE TRUE CHARITY INITIATIVE*





Video synopsis of [Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development](#)

## Concept 4: Development requires challenge.

Development is not something that can be done *to* someone, only *with* them. By definition, developing your capabilities to a new level requires pushing the limits of your current capacity. In other words, development requires *challenge*. This challenge could include goal setting, employment or short-term work opportunities, classes, and other interventions that acknowledge the capacity of the individual. Challenges should be designed to stretch capacity, but must also be achievable.

In offering challenge, we transform our view of the poor from passive recipients to neighbors with something to offer. Challenge promotes the responsibility and ownership required to flourish—it acknowledges that people have assets, not merely needs.

### IMPLICATION

Unless your programs are exclusively for people in temporary crises completely outside of their control, they need a significant element of challenge. This means that some clients are going to look at what you offer and decide it is too difficult. However, this upward path will be exactly what others need to flourish.

Those who do not accept the challenging option are not yet ready to develop. No amount of “no strings attached” assistance would change that and such assistance would prove harmful by providing them with more reasons not to accept the developmental offer.

### SUPPORT



*“We have turned people into the objects of our charity instead of recognizing them as the protagonists in their own story of development.”*

*MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER, DIRECTOR OF POVERTY, INC.*



*“It’s not unloving to expect people to do their part. Just the opposite. It is cruel to send the message that a person has nothing of worth to offer.”*

*ROBERT LUPTON, AUTHOR OF TOXIC CHARITY*



A soup kitchen director recounted that she frequently tried to help a clever homeless client who lived in a cave find work. After several frustrating attempts to get him to go to a job interview, the man told her, "The cave is not that bad." Ineffective charity often baits people into prolonged misery by subsidizing their situation enough to make it bearable, but not providing a path to a flourishing life.

## **Concept 5: Transformational programs see people in poverty as peers, not projects.**

Many programs fail to make a true difference simply because they were initiated and designed by those who have no connection with the poor community. Job skills classes for single moms won't do much good unless those moms have childcare during work. What might seem like a lack of knowledge about why children should spend time outdoors might actually stem from a fear of neighborhood gang members patrolling the streets.

Our charity will never be effective unless we start with the desires, dreams, and knowledge of people living in poverty. Only then will our programs have the inherent buy-in from the community we are trying to help. People are more likely to attend a class, clean-up day, or facility that they or their friends had a hand in designing. This transformational charity requires authentically reciprocal relationships with our neighbors in poverty: teaching and learning, giving and receiving. We should realize in humility that imperfection is universal, and let that fact spur our compassion, which literally means, "to suffer with."

### **IMPLICATION**

Organizations and churches should always strive to begin with and incorporate the voices of the "helped," rather than deciding on a solution from the outside. Of course, resources, social capital, and knowledge from the outside is incredibly valuable, but the people living in poverty should always have a place at the table.

### **SUPPORT**



*"Until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do more harm than good. I sometimes unintentionally reduce poor people to objects that I use to fulfill my own need to accomplish something."*

**STEVE CORBETT, AUTHOR OF WHEN HELPING HURTS**

“Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.” *ROBERT LUPTON, AUTHOR OF TOXIC CHARITY*

## **Concept 6: We must measure long-term results, not just activity.**

Our goal is to see individuals move from poverty to prosperity. We want to see them productive and contributing to the people around them. We will never know if our programs accomplish this unless we measure results. Instead of only measuring output, or how much we give away, we should measure outcomes like stable housing, employment, education, and family reunifications.

With the right tools and program design, it is possible to measure even intangible things like knowledge, motivation, and social connectedness. If we're not measuring, we run the risk that our programs are either ineffective or even counterproductive.

### **IMPLICATION**

Every program should be making meaningful effort to gauge its impact. Those measurements then help shape the program design.

### **SUPPORT**

“Most of the giveaway volunteer efforts initiated by religious and charitable groups are working at cross-purposes with programs committed to moving people out of poverty. Such giveaway programs consider their existence proof of their success; they hardly ever evaluate their success in terms of moving the poverty needle.”  
*ROBERT LUPTON, AUTHOR OF TOXIC CHARITY*

“Feeling good about what we do is not a valid measure of the good we do.”  
*JAMES WHITFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE TRUE CHARITY INITIATIVE*

“Piety is no substitute for technique.”  
*ETIENNE GILSON*



*"It's no longer good enough to make the case that we're addressing real needs. We need to prove that we're making a real difference."*

*MARIO MARINO, AUTHOR OF LEAP OF REASON*



Video [synopsis](#) of this point

## **Concept 7: It is not possible to delegate charity to the government.**

Government is ill-equipped to dispense the tailored, relational help that effective charity requires. Poverty-alleviation programs optimized for fairness can only distinguish eligibility based on objective measures, such as low income and assets. Privately funded local charities have more flexibility to act on their relational knowledge. They can grant assistance to someone who is saving up for a future expense who would be denied government assistance due to "too many assets." They can also make assistance contingent on a willingness to improve one's own situation (evidenced by a form of challenge).

Additionally, the government's capacity to coerce "donations" means it is naturally less accountable to the givers than a charity would be. Moreover, it provides taxpayers with a false sense of having "done something" which tends to crowd out their other charity, yet it is ill-positioned to make a real impact. Finally, even the most just and appropriate redistribution (such as restitution extracted from a con-artist and paid to his victims) is not "charitable." By definition, charity involves a voluntary gift. While the government has a critical role to play, it cannot be charitable because it has nothing of its own to give away.

### **IMPLICATION**

While there are many worthwhile policy improvements that could improve the situation of people in poverty, even a perfect government cannot untangle the complex roots of poverty. This problem requires the engagement of people who care and work in the realm of compassion rather than compulsion.

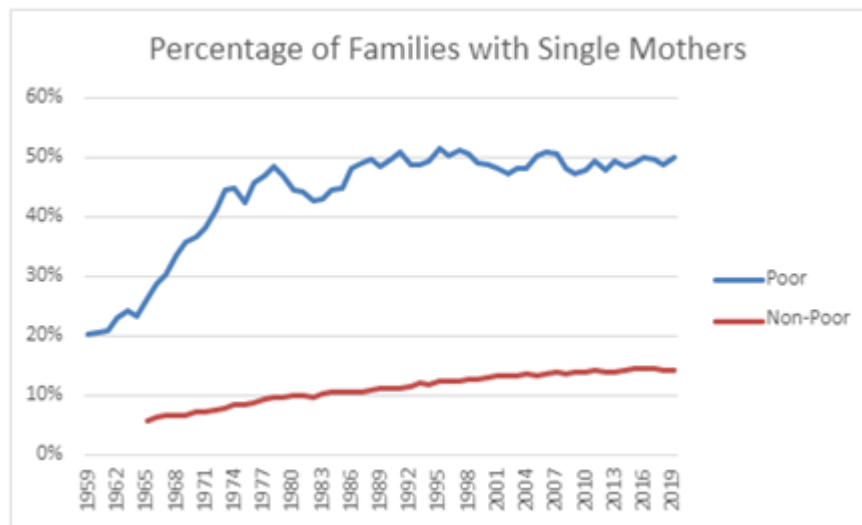
## SUPPORT



Since the beginning of the War on Poverty in 1964, government spending on anti-poverty programs has increased to around one trillion dollars a year and the poverty rate hasn't budged.



The government's well-intentioned efforts to treat the symptoms of poverty often worsens root causes. For instance, following the "War on Poverty" single-motherhood among the poor increased sharply as the state replaced the provision traditionally secured by the two-parent family



*"[There are some who would] substitute in [the Church's] stead a system of relief organized by the State. But no human expedients will ever make up for the devotedness and self-sacrifice of Christian charity. Charity, as a virtue, pertains to the Church."* POPE LEO XIII



*"Human beings are going to make mistakes, whether in the market or in the government. The difference is that survival in the market requires recognizing mistakes and changing course before you go bankrupt. But survival in politics requires denying mistakes and sticking with the policies you advocated, while blaming others for the bad results."* THOMAS SOWELL



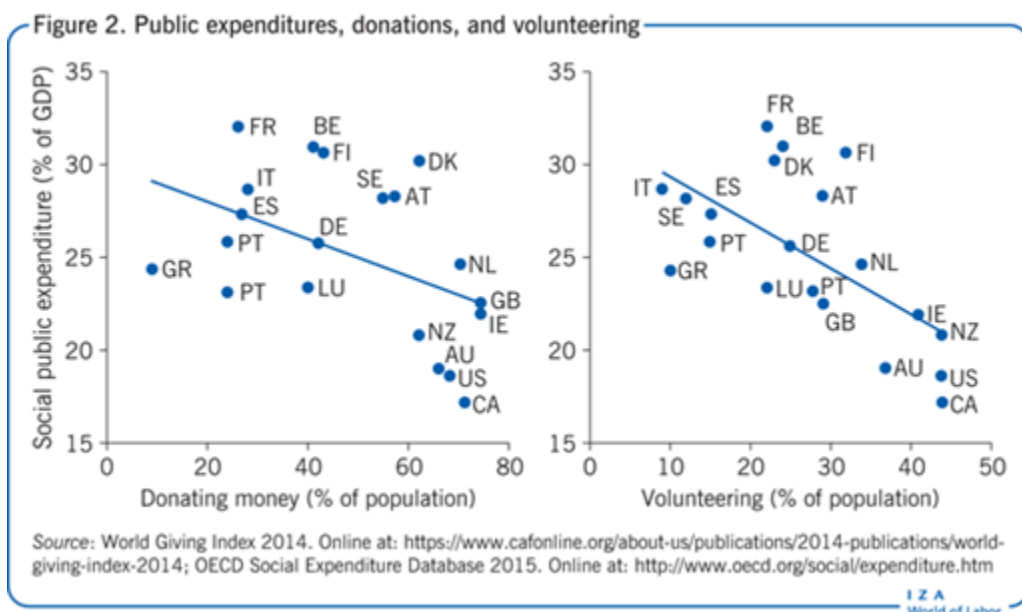
Read [True Charity articles](#) about the impact of government policy on the poor



*"Real charity comes from givers and the government has nothing to give but what it's taken."* JAMES WHITFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE TRUE CHARITY INITIATIVE



A negative correlation between government spending and voluntary donations of time and money (i.e. in places where the government does more, volunteers do less).



## Concept 8: Effective service requires cooperation but not centralization.

To effectively identify and meet people's needs, a community needs a broad range of resources. It is neither possible, nor desirable for a single organization to attempt to provide all the services necessary to help people leave poverty. Centralization requires standardization, which tends to decrease innovation and flexibility. Multiple organizations focusing on different needs, demographics, and neighborhoods can remain more responsive to rapidly evolving situations and simultaneously develop deep expertise.

However, for clients to benefit from the full range of services available, charities must share information about the services they provide and collaborate to

effectively refer clients to other service providers. Additionally, they should share information about clients to create an integrated system of benevolence that does not enable fraud or dependency.

## IMPLICATION

Churches and nonprofits should maintain a collaborative attitude and leverage web-based tools to share information about what they provide and the relevant details of client interactions. They may occasionally determine that organizational mergers will generate better client outcomes, but they should not assume that all centralization is inherently better.

## SUPPORT



*"Bureaucracy inevitably separates people with good intentions from people with needs, so that the people being aided become less and less personally known to those supplying the aid." REV. ROBERT SIRICO, PRESIDENT OF THE ACTON INSTITUTE*



[Kingdom Collaboration in a Competitive World: A Look at Rooting for Rivals](#)



There are several high-quality [tools](#) available for sharing information without the need to consolidate organizations.



# THE BEST STARTING POINTS

This section identifies some of the most successful ways to start conversations and raise issues with organizational stakeholders related to reshaping programs for the better. Keep in mind that all the ideas mentioned in our key concepts are interrelated. Regardless of where you begin the change, you will eventually find reason to incorporate all the ideas. For instance, challenge leads to better outcomes and funding without strings attached allows you to implement challenge. While all the ideas may surface eventually, here are some ways to broach the conversation:

## **Provide specific examples of more effective programs.**

Providing clear examples helps cut through misunderstanding. Check out our [article features](#) on effective programs or our [Model Action Plans](#) [Member Exclusive Resource] for relevant examples in your context.

## **Ask about root problems of clients and whether you are addressing them.**

For instance, "What are the most common root problems our clients face?" A typical response is, "Addiction, lack of education, and trauma." Then ask, "Do we have any programs that address those root issues? Shouldn't we?"

## **Ask about the long run.**

"How do we see our clients' situation changing 20 years from now?" If the answer is "not much" the response is, "Shouldn't we be trying something more impactful if we're so pessimistic about our current strategy?"

## **Explain Relief vs. Development (Concept #3).**

This concept is intuitive to most people once explained. Then ask, "What fraction of our clients are in a short-term crisis, and what fraction are in need of development?"



A typical response is “80% need development.” Then ask, “Are our programs meeting the development needs of the 80%, or just those few in a true crisis?”

## **Explain outcomes (Concept #6).**

This concept is usually uncontroversial once explained. Then ask, “are we measuring the outcomes of our clients, or just our activity? Don’t we owe it to our clients and donors to prove that our programs are having a long-term impact? And if they aren’t, isn’t that something we should address?” Also note that major donors are especially interested in outcomes.

## **Explore options for incremental program improvement.**

Total program redesign is not the only way to implement these concepts. You can add developmental elements to existing programs, add small pilot group developmental programs, or start measuring as little as a single outcome. You can test the concepts with these small steps and grow from there.

## **Explain the value of doing more for people most willing to change.**

Challenge models tend to attract a smaller number of people, who are more interested in their own betterment. Since no organization can work with everyone, this is a great way to ensure that your resources are concentrated on exactly the right people—the people most likely to see a real change because of your interventions. For those not yet willing to change, we don’t abandon them, we seek to motivate them. One of the best ways to motivate people is by showing them, through the example of your clients who are succeeding, that change is possible.

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*For Christian audiences, consider some of the elements in [the Biblical Support section](#) below.*

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# KEY TERMS

In poverty alleviation, terms can be contentious. For instance, some groups have specialized terms and taboos for how to refer to their clients. Some don't like the word "clients," others eschew "the poor," and yet others condemn over-complicated terms like "the socioeconomically disadvantaged."

We encourage you not to be dogmatic, but to find a range of words to explain effective charity that work in your context. Here is our recommendation of words and phrases that tend to be well received by stakeholders—both supporters of your mission and the people you serve.

## Phrases to Use

“ *Treating people with dignity means acknowledging what they can contribute.* ”

“ *Work awakens worth.* ”

“ *Challenging people implies they have something to offer; handouts reinforce a lack of control.* ”

“ *We don't want repeat customers—we should be working ourselves out of a job.* ”

“ *We want to do something with the people we serve, not just for them.* ”

“ *We want to empower clients to use their own gifts.* ”

“ *We don't think of the poor as any different than ourselves—we all have something to contribute.* ”

- “ *People feel like they are powerless to improve their situation; we want to encourage and equip them to overcome.*
- “ *Challenge develops.*
- “ *We need to put people in the driver's seat of their own lives.*
- “ *We need to treat people like responsible adults, and that includes giving them the ability to accept the consequences of their own decisions.*
- “ *Our charity needs to do more than subsidize people to stay trapped in misery.*
- “ *We want to equip people to be the champion in their own journey out of poverty.*
- “ *People are more than mouths to feed and bodies to clothe. They are human beings with inherent dignity and capacity.*
- “ *It's important for the poor to know that they are not only worthy of receiving, but also of giving.*
- “ *Charity should be less transactional and more transformational.*
- “ *Give a man to fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life. [This cliché does not fully acknowledge the complexities of poverty, but every analogy is limited. It does acknowledge the inherent limits of perpetual relief.]*
- “ *We would rather give a hand up than a handout. [Overused, but not incorrect.]*

## **Terms to Refer to Clients (in the context of a challenging program):**



*Partners, members, neighbors, leaders, students, friends, customers*

## Terms to Refer to Volunteers or Staff



*Allies, friends, intentional friends, mentors, support team*

## Language to Avoid



*Refrain from language that creates strong barriers between you and clients or dehumanizes them. (e.g. "Even the signs at the zoo tell you not to feed the animals—it causes dependency.")*



*Avoid language that creates an adversarial relationship between you and clients. (e.g. "We need to stop people from taking advantage of us.")*



*Do not infer you are superior to the people you serve. (e.g. "These people are just like little kids.")*



# STORIES

Sometimes the most powerful appeal is a concrete example. Here are stories about organizations that put these principles into practice and examples of how their clients have benefited:



Watered Gardens Rescue Mission learned that many people living in homelessness were willing to work their way to a better situation if given the chance: [Read more](#)



A decades old Christmas handout program transformed into a relational empowerment program and saw a seismic shift in their impact: [Read more](#)



How outcomes measurement facilitates healing at a transitional housing program: [Read more](#)



How a church learned to engage the root needs of its community: [Read more](#)



A scholarship program challenges its clients to grow and give back: [Read more](#)



When Fairview Christian Church found an alternative to a Christmas giveaway program, they noticed a stark difference in the shoppers: [Read More](#)



Denton Bible Church ran a food co-op (a food pantry alternative that provides members with a way to earn their food) for several years and had a handful of funerals among its members. In each case, the other co-op members showed up en masse to support at the funerals. In some cases, there were more co-op

members than family or friends present. The food co-op succeeded in building a connected community where the food pantry had not.

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*Check out our [Charity Features](#) archive for a growing collection of stories about effective programs*

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# ANSWERS TO COMMON OBJECTIONS

## **Why should we try a brand-new model, when this is the way people have always helped the poor?**

It turns out that the challenge approach is not a new model, it is one that has only recently been forgotten. Marvin Olasky's historical chronology, the [\*Tragedy of American Compassion\*](#), lays out that relational, challenging charity was standard practice at the dawn of the 20th Century. It was also standard practice in ancient times, as outlined in the Biblical support below. Of course, ineffective models are old as well, largely because treating symptoms is intuitive, yet ineffective. Neither approach is new. But one works much better than the other.

## **Won't fewer people be interested in our services if we require effort to receive them?**

Yes, but this is rarely a problem. More developmental approaches often deter 50%-70% of clients in the short-run, but then deliver better results (and more concentrated assistance) to those who express interest in development. Many of those people grow out of their difficult situation and make room for others who are ready to grow. Your program becomes a narrow ladder to a better place, instead of a high-capacity treadmill, taking many people nowhere.

Furthermore, every program is limited in its capacity to serve people. Typically, programs use limited hours, limited quantities of goods, and needs-testing to distribute services. These methods can all become adversarial and run counter to effective relationships. Using challenge as a self-selection mechanism ensures you are working with the people most likely to benefit from your assistance.

## **Won't donors/volunteers be upset if we don't serve as many people?**

If you explain the changes well and couple the decrease in quantity with a measured increase in quality, donors typically adjust quite well. In many cases, if you start measuring outcomes and showing success, donors and volunteers become far more enthusiastic. Almost everyone understands the value of quality over quantity.

## **Isn't it unkind to "attach strings" to our charity?**

The essence of charity is love—helping others for their own sake, with no ulterior motive. Such love requires that you care about the effect of your actions on others, not merely about your own "warm glow" from doing good deeds. If you are adding requirements to your charity that seek to benefit you at the expense of the recipients, this would be a problem. However, there are many endeavors in life that are mutually beneficial. Business, friendship, marriage, and many other human interactions are all built around mutual gain. Inviting the poor into accessible forms of reciprocity (such as the ability to purchase subsidized gifts for their children, rather than merely having strangers provide gifts to their children) gives them incremental access to the best experiences in life.

Meeting surface needs without providing paths to help people meet their own future needs is like tossing food to someone in a pit, rather than throwing them a rope. And yes, if you throw them a rope, they will have to grab it and hold on. Personal success requires some level of personal effort. Acknowledging this simple fact is not unloving. To deny it out of "kindness" is to doom people to stay where they are.

## **What about people who are unable to work due to mental or physical disability?**

As noted above, there is a legitimate case for relief when development is not feasible and would not solve the problem. So there is no issue with long-term provision for people who are legitimately not able to care for themselves. However, exchange does *not* require manual labor, it simply means there is some mutual contribution from everyone involved. In most cases, even people with disabilities can make some contributions to others in partial exchange. This is dignifying, rewarding, and gives people a sense of purpose. An elderly person may be able to



mentor a younger person, a mentally unstable person in permanent supportive housing may be able to contribute some income to his rent, and moderately disabled people can nearly always do something such as making phone calls to check in on other food co-op members. We acknowledge that in rare instances people have no capacity, but in nearly all cases they have some, and we should respect what they have.

Additionally, the proportion of working age adults claiming government disability benefits has steadily increased over the past half-century, despite large improvements in working conditions and medicine. At least some fraction of the officially disabled were working independently in the past, which suggests that they have at least some untapped potential in the present. We've talked to many individuals who never worked simply because others thought they couldn't. When they started engaging in exchange in an environment where people believed in them, they discovered a drive in themselves to seek after formal employment.

## **What about people who aren't ready or willing to develop?**

Treat them like an equal. As outlined previously, we believe you should assist people in a short-term crisis when not doing so will allow immediate harm. Even if they are generally in a chronic situation, such as long-term homelessness and addiction, it is appropriate to offer shelter in extreme weather. However, if someone has difficulty paying rent and refuses to work more than 20 hours a week when opportunities are provided, their overdue rent is not an immediate crisis, it is a chronic issue. To continuously pay their rent for them is to treat them like a child in need of protection from choices they do not understand. Treating them like an equal means letting them bear the weight of their own choices. We should always offer a ladder to a better situation, but since it is not possible to develop someone against his will, for those unwilling to develop, we should not subsidize their bad choices.

## **Isn't this another form of paternalism?**

In a strict sense, paternalism involves curtailing someone's liberty in their supposed best interest, as when a father snatches his child from playing in a road. If the government bans fatty foods, this is paternalistic, because they remove your choice to consume things that are potentially harmful. Effective charity is not paternalistic, because it involves purely voluntary interaction that does not curtail people's base

rights. It merely offers an additional choice. It stands to reason that any additional choice we offer people should be a beneficial one. One would never offer poison as a side dish at a soup kitchen or an optional pro-narcotic counselor at a rehab facility. Any additional choice we create for people in poverty should be a helpful one. This is why we need not offer paths to destructive dependence that rob clients of their agency alongside our developmental programs. Clients are free to exercise their rights without our programs, and they are free to use our programs, but it is neither unreasonable, nor restrictive, that our programs would only offer additional choices that we have reason to believe will help the clients who accept them.

In a broad sense, paternalism can also refer to the idea of looking down on others and imagining that you have superior knowledge and insight. We believe that no person is superior to another in all respects—everyone can learn something from her neighbor. This is why effective charity models invite people to use their gifts and contribute to the common good; we assume they have something to offer. However, the fact that everyone has something to offer also implies that everyone has areas of relative weakness in which they can benefit from an exchange of knowledge. By definition, people in poverty lack the tools or conditions necessary to create or sustain substantial wealth for themselves. To pair them with paths to boost their skill, knowledge, and access to wealth creation and sustainment is to acknowledge that the poor have areas in which they can learn from others, which makes them no different from anyone else.

## **What about systemic barriers to the success of the poor? Doesn't the emphasis on private charity neglect this?**

There are numerous barriers to the success of the poor which could be solved with government policy. Some might include undoing harmful government action such as perverse incentives created by the welfare state or regulations promoted by special interests that create barriers to employment and self-employment by the poor. In some cases, the government also needs to take some positive measures such as protecting the poor from crime or unjust punishment. However, though we take an interest in those barriers, we do not believe that a perfect government is the only thing needed for people to flourish.

The role of family, friends, church, community, and an individual's own character are all highly important to wellbeing. None of these are controlled by the state and national government. All of these are within the influence of effective charity. In

developed countries with consistent protection of rights to life, liberty, and property, government policy represents a small fraction of the total factors that influence one's life. Furthermore, federal policy is also the most hotly contested and least influenceable factor that affects the poor. Political awareness and action is important, but if we imagine progress is contingent on government action, we will be disappointed most of the time.

While we acknowledge that political power often aids one group to the detriment of another, in America, the magnitude of this injustice is rarely insurmountable. While the poor face many obstacles that the middle class do not, moving to the middle class is quite possible for Americans of all backgrounds and is routinely accomplished without government action or political power.

## **What about the psychology of poverty and scarcity? Doesn't exchange-based charity ignore that?**

New scientific research suggests that having insufficient funds and the stress it imposes can lead to poor decisions (such as stockpiling, excessive spending, showing up late for work, etc.). We acknowledge the existence of this vicious cycle and we think that our solutions are well suited to it.

Giving people access to consistent resources at only the cost of their time tends to reduce the feeling of panic and need for hoarding. Food pantries turned membership co-ops observe that their clients are less stressed and harried than when their food allotment hinged on being in the front of the line. Additionally, because the psychological taxation of poverty is so intense, it makes sense to pair people with mentors, case managers, and other caring people who can be intentional friends and help people think through their decisions with the clarity of an outside perspective. Furthermore, one of the key attributes of poverty is a lack of hope. Developmental programs with clear outcomes give clients a sense of momentum. When combined with caring relationships, this is a perfect recipe for an antidote to the psychological impacts of poverty.

However, we don't think that the vicious cycle is the only root cause of poverty. If it was, then giving people a one-time shot of money would be the solution. We have many government programs that do this (such as the earned-income and child tax credits), and yet, a significant portion of the population is unable to break the cycle.

## **If the government subsidizes the rich, why shouldn't it subsidize the poor?**

The government certainly does subsidize businesses and the well-connected with special tax breaks and direct transfers. While this is not our area of focus, we oppose any zero-sum transfers and protections of special interests. However, misuse of government power to favor one group does not justify the same misuse to favor another. Furthermore, for reasons outlined above, we don't think wealth transfers to the poor are doing them any favors. Regardless of the justifications, the outcome is distinctly unhelpful.

## **Aren't food, housing, and other basic needs human rights?**

Although the words "human rights" are tossed about lightly, the concept is worth examining more deeply.

For a right to have any moral weight, it must have a moral source. Consensus does not constitute a moral source. If it did, then any rights agreed upon by the majority of a population would be moral, and there would be no cause to protect the "rights" of minority groups, since those rights would not exist once dismissed by the majority opinion. For instance, a society could decide one had a right to be a Hindu, but not a Muslim and thereby persecute Muslims. Any right that the government, or the United Nations, or a court can grant, they can also rescind.

For this reason, the Declaration of Independence asserted that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." By appealing to a higher moral authority, less fickle than the whims of culture or politics, they were able to anchor rights to something that could bear their moral weight. Namely, the Creator of the universe and the Scriptures he revealed.

We also hold that for rights to have any meaning, they must derive from such an immutable source. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that food or housing is a right. In his letter to the Thessalonians (2 [THESSALONIANS 3:10](#)), the apostle Paul specifically taught that people were not to provide food to one unwilling to work (though they were to provide it voluntarily to those unable to work).

But suppose you find some other moral source for rights. Perhaps another religion or philosophy that declares basic needs are a right.

Such a philosophy creates no end of problems because it jumbles together diametrically opposed conceptions of rights. The first type is a right of protection from the actions of others—such as “the right to life,” “the right to personal property,” or “equal treatment in criminal justice.” Call this type of right a “liberty.” The second is a promise of provision—such as food, housing, or financial security in retirement. Call this type of right an “entitlement.”

Liberties can be universal since your protection from crime or toxic waste does not hurt your neighbor. Your neighbor need not do anything for you, he must only refrain from harming you. Entitlements are zero-sum since they require forced transfers of goods from losers to winners. If you enjoy a comfortable retirement that you did not save for, then it must come from your neighbor’s retirement.

Every right enshrined in the American Constitution is a liberty (based on the moral source of God). Freedom to speak our minds, make an enforceable contract, and own property can be protected equally for all. These protections give American businesspeople of all backgrounds the confidence to create, save, and invest.

The Soviet Constitution of 1936, by contrast, was brimming with unconditional entitlements (with the sovereign State as the all-powerful moral source). The Soviets guaranteed a job, rest and leisure, a comfortable retirement, education, paid maternity leave, and free childcare. To provide these, the Soviets had to dispense with liberties. Each new entitlement brings with it a corresponding violation of someone else’s liberty. Your liberty to own and rent out a house at a market rate is in direct conflict with my entitlement to “affordable housing.” Unfortunately for the Soviets, the breakdown in protections led to a disincentive to create goods and services in the first place, and they eventually ran out of other people’s stuff to give away.

In addition to the production disincentives that entitlements create, they incentivize more class warfare and special interest cronyism. Liberties are not open to much interpretation; they boil down to the right to be left alone. On the contrary, entitlements establish the government as the arbitrator of boundless human rights. If a person is entitled to free food, education, and transit, why not organic food, Master’s degrees, and new cars? Because of the massive power that these new “rights” grant the government to pick winners and losers, they inevitably result in more people and businesses lobbying the State for special favors and privileges.

Organic farmers, university faculty, and the auto industry would all love for their products to be declared "human rights." To add another layer of chaos, people in developing countries who lack the funding for food and education, would have just cause to declare war on richer countries and "take what is rightfully theirs," by the same logic that they would have just cause to fight to protect their land from foreign invaders.

We can find no moral source that would cause us to believe that food, housing, and equivalent needs are rights. If you attempt to create one, you will soon find that the entire system breaks down, because such entitlements put all "rights" and therefore all people in conflict against each other.

This analysis does not preclude us from providing these basic needs to others, nor does it preclude the fact that we may occasionally have a moral obligation to provide them (we believe that in many cases we do, as outlined above). A moral obligation for givers to share what they can is different from a moral right of recipients to take what they need. However, based on the moral source that underlies our beliefs, we also do not see that obligation as a universal imperative to provide all the goods necessary for a comfortable life to all people, regardless of their willingness to participate in society. Such a belief is both unmoored from a stable source in theory and a wellspring of bitter contention in practice.



# BIBLICAL SUPPORT AND QUESTIONS

## Support

1. The Bible commands that Christians care for the poor.  
[1 JOHN 3:17](#) | [JAMES 1:27](#) | [MATTHEW 25:40](#)
2. The Bible assumes that this care is conducted in a personal, relational way.  
[ISAIAH 58:7](#) | [MATTHEW 25](#)
3. Though poverty in Scripture usually refers to physical destitution (i.e., living on the verge of starvation), Scripture still supports the idea that the root causes of poverty are complex and different interventions are required in different contexts.
  - a. The widow of Zarephath's poverty was caused by famine and solved by miraculous relief. [1 KINGS 17](#)
  - b. The poverty of the prodigal son was caused by reckless living and solved by a change of heart and a restored relationship with his father.  
[LUKE 15](#)
  - c. Some poverty was caused by unjust employers who refused to pay wages or people who defraud and rob the poor through the legal system [JAMES 5:4](#) | [ISAIAH 10:1-3](#)
4. The Bible teaches layers of responsibility.
  - a. People have an obligation to take care of themselves.  
[1 THESSALONIANS 4:11-12](#) | [2 THESSALONIANS 3:12](#)
  - b. Then, people should provide for their families. [1 TIMOTHY 5:8,16](#)
  - c. Then, churches should assist people more broadly. [GALATIANS 6:2](#) | [ACTS 2:45](#)

5. In the Old Testament, God's mandated provision for the poor required significant effort on the part of the poor. [LEVITICUS 19:9-10](#) explains that farmers were to leave some crops in the field, and the poor were allowed to harvest and process it themselves.
6. In the New Testament, Paul taught Timothy ([1 TIMOTHY 5](#)) that the church was not to provide for every widow with needs. Only widows who were unable to provide for themselves, who did not have family to provide for them, and who were contributing to the community in what ways they could.
7. Paul instructed the Thessalonians that they were not to provide for people unwilling to work. [2 THESSALONIANS 3](#)
8. Nowhere in Scripture is there an example of institutional charity that gave to all without questions.
9. According to the Scriptures, Jesus had the capacity to meet physical needs. Yet, other than restoring health (the capacity to work) only twice did Jesus provide the general public with food. When he did, it was a one-time event which rewarded their faithful attendance of his teaching. ([MARK 6](#)) While God did provide manna to the Israelites in the desert, this was sustenance for what was intended to be a short journey to the promised land, where they would then work for their food.
10. Jesus spent much of his limited time investing in intensive relationships with 12 men, rather than attempting to always speak to and influence as many people as possible. This is a model of the power of deep relationships, rather than high-volume churn.

## Questions

***Q1: If challenge models mean we will see fewer people, doesn't that mean we will have fewer people to share the gospel with? Isn't the gospel more important than trying to get people out of physical poverty?***

As previously explained, more focused intervention with a smaller number of more motivated people consistently has better results than distributing shallow interventions to many people. What is true in the physical realm is true in the spiritual realm as well. The model Jesus laid out for evangelism is discipleship. Preach the word to many, but spend most of your time with a few. By focusing energy on the few, we create spiritual depth, and equip those few to make more



disciples in their own circles. This is a much better model than perpetual broad outreach with no cultivation of depth. Relationship and accountability create excellent contexts for discipleship. It is not uncommon for more developmental models to see more people come to faith in Christ, because the ministry model melds better with discipleship. The unconditional, institutional handout model does not exist in Scripture.

Additionally, Jesus was unafraid to use self-selection to deter people who were not truly ready to follow him. In his first encounter with the rich young ruler, he gave him the “next step” of selling everything he owned and giving it to the destitute ([MATTHEW 19](#)). He said many hard things to many people. The people who stayed past the introduction were ready to listen.

***Q2: Doesn't the Bible say we don't control the outcomes of our efforts? Shouldn't we just do our best and leave the rest to God?***

Paul does teach in [1 CORINTHIANS 3:6-7](#) that we do not control the outcome of evangelistic efforts; “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” However, this lack of control did not prevent Paul from concerning himself with effective evangelism in [1 CORINTHIANS 9](#); “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” While this is about evangelism, not poverty alleviation per se, there is a broader principle that overlaps the fields. At the individual level, we can never guarantee success, but at the group level, some methods are more effective than others. The same is true in medicine. A surgeon cannot guarantee the survival of any single patient, but better surgical technique will result in better average patient outcomes over time. We can and should do our best and leave the rest to God. But we must also ensure that what we call “our best” is not mere cover for a half-hearted and thoughtless effort.

***Q3: Doesn't the Sermon on the Mount teach us not to ask questions in our charity?***

In [MATTHEW 5:42](#), Jesus teaches “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” This is in the context of “going the extra mile” for a Roman soldier demanding you carry his pack for a single mile, giving your cloak to the one who sues you for your tunic, and “turning the other cheek” to the one who slaps you [which was considered an insult, not an assault]. The context is about not being concerned with “getting your fair share,” but rather being concerned with the needs of others—even if they take advantage of you to some degree. We think this rule is completely applicable to charity, and generally means we should err on the side of grace. There are situations when someone's

claim to a need for relief can neither be confirmed nor denied, and in such situations, this passage suggests that giving is the right response.

In the context of first century poverty, the vast majority of beggars would have been living on the edge of starvation with minimal capacity to improve their situation. Most beggars mentioned in Scripture had a clear physical disability preventing them from working. In this context, Jesus instructed his followers to default to generosity over their right to their own property.

However, throughout the whole passage, this bent towards good will is limited by other obligations and virtues. Jesus does not instruct his hearers to offer to carry a soldier's pack all the way back to Rome, or to give their house to the one who sues for their cloak, or to let someone who slaps you stab you. In the same way, one should temper the desire to trust with the admonition of [ROMANS 13:10](#) that, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." If you have a significant degree of confidence that giving money to someone will harm him, such as an American panhandler, who has an addiction in [90% of cases](#), then not providing him with fuel for his addiction is justifiable. Jesus opens the passage with a call to "not resist the one who is evil." Yet Jesus often resisted the religious authorities verbally and sometimes physically. Clearly Jesus was concerned about a particular category of situation where the threat was limited and personal, not making a universal claim.

The early church did not think that this command entailed an infinite liability to beggars and borrowers (even ones with very legitimate cause to beg and borrow). If they had, then beggars would have quickly caught on, and the early disciples would have been beggars themselves, rather than having the capacity to pool resources for deliberate distribution to the most deserving, as we see the church doing in [ACTS 2:45](#).

***Q4: Jesus said, "the poor will be with you always." Doesn't this mean poverty alleviation is not something we should spend much energy on?***

There are two important context considerations in interpreting Jesus' statement in [MATTHEW 26:11](#).

First, this oft-cited phrase is only half of a sentence—the other half is "but you will not always have me" (referring to his physical departure from earth). The back half of the sentence is clearly a time-bound remark, directed only at his disciples and referring to their lifetime. The "you" is specific, not universal. Given that no Christians today claim the back half of the sentence applies to them, it seems sensible that the "you" in the first half of the same sentence was addressed to the same specific "you"

of his disciples and referred to their lifetimes. Regardless of whether the statement was a 1<sup>st</sup> century observation or one that referred to all time, there is a second consideration that is vital to its application. Jesus was referencing [DEUTERONOMY 15:11](#), which elaborated on the idea in the context of the Israeli nation. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"

Even if we take Jesus' statement to be a guarantee of poverty at all times, this passage demonstrates the biblical response to perpetual poverty is not apathy, but perpetual generosity. Furthermore, a cursory evaluation of history will observe that people are many times richer than they were in Jesus' day, and the spiritual good news he has delivered has traveled much farther as well. Progress may be limited, but it is certainly possible.



## NEXT STEPS

### Once you complete your initial buy-in conversations with key stakeholders, how do you implement better practices?



The [True Charity Network](#) is the access point for most of the resources we offer to help you implement these principles. Once you're a member, all our benefits are accessible through the member's portal.



[Model Action Plans](#)\* are detailed implementation plans for more effective charitable models.



[Toolkits](#)\* are packages of detailed guidance and digital tools to help you with common tasks that affect some or all of your programs.



Our [Recommended Classes and Programs](#)\* help you find vetted developmental classes that you can implement for clients of your program(s).



Get buy-in from others charity leaders in your community through an in-person [Foundations Workshop](#) provided by our Community Initiatives program.

\*Available exclusively to True Charity Network Members



# LEARN MORE

## Other True Charity Resources



Explore [True Charity University](#) for a deeper understanding of these principles in action (network [members](#) have free access)



Attend the [True Charity Summit](#) to connect with effective programs in person ([members](#) attend at a discount).



Listen to True Charity Founder James Whitford give an [overview](#) of our philosophy.



This [series of articles](#) explores topics related to effective program design.

## Recommended Books



[When Helping Hurts](#): A foundational Christian perspective on poverty alleviation that simultaneously convicts and compels. It provides a framework for understanding when helping hurts and how to make a real difference by "walking with the poor in humble relationships."



[Toxic Charity](#): A story of transformation from a 40+ year poverty fighting veteran who realized his original methods weren't making any headway.



[The Tragedy of American Compassion](#): This book provides historical context to our charitable methods and makes the case that civic society abdicated its role in favor of government action. It also unpacks how many concepts like

"challenge" that seem new to modern practitioners are actually time-tested and only recently abandoned.



[\*Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard\*](#): An effective and approachable method for making the case for change when you need the buy-in of others. This is a general approach, not unique to charity, and is optimized for people who need to convince people that they have no formal control over.