

Beyond benevolence – reawakening a call for Common Good

It's my pleasure to frame the day albeit with a cautionary note, as we launch a new coalition marking the beginning of a journey of understanding about faith and poverty in Northern Ireland.

The title for the launch **Beyond benevolence – reawakening a call for Common Good** was chosen to reflect two constructs – the first suggests a need for a paradigm shift to rethink benevolence in light of the second construct that a new biblical vision for society might shape a fresh faith response to poverty in Northern Ireland.

I may have drawn the short straw as the one invited to address the notion of moving beyond benevolence, but I am content to do so. **For in the face of unexamined benevolence, it is quite possible that the Church's charitable engagement, so generously given by so many Christian groups and organisations, may in the longer term hurt the very people being helped.**

In Christian theology, charity is considered one of the seven virtues. Thomas Aquinas declared it to be "the most excellent of the virtues".^[1] isuch that "the habit of charity extends not only to the **love** of God, but also to the **love** of our neighbour".ⁱⁱ

For Christians, love for God and love for neighbour are inextricably linked. When **love** is used in the New Testament it almost always refers to the virtue of *caritas*, the latin word for charity, 'love is charity, and charity is love' – and this kind of love is altruistic, it is noble, humane, and selfless. So, it is no surprise that this kind of benevolent love is recognised as a central strand of Christian DNA and deeply embedded in Christian discipleship.

Reflecting on the Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthian church - 1 Corinthians 13, he places the greatest emphasis on charity (love). "So, faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Reflecting on the Parable of The Good Samaritan – Jesus compels his followers to be moved by a love that pays no attention to race, religion, or socioeconomic categories such that the very phrase "Good Samaritan" is now synonymous with helping the stranger.

Reflecting on the Parable of The Sheep and the Goats, where the early Church saw the love of the poor as the crown jewel of the virtues. Through this story, Jesus explained that helping a person, no matter how low in status the person may be, is just the same as helping Jesus himself.

So, how can there be harm in helping 'a stranger' when it is an act of love? How can there be harm in doing good? Well, I want to propose at least three influences that distort benevolent love if it is left **unexamined**.

First issue:

Historically, charitable love demonstrated through the giving of alms, was always relational. It happened within the context of community where people knew and depended on one another. That relationship-making was crucial in balancing out the raw inequalities of life. More recently though charitable love and alms giving has become more transactional. We can donate to a charity bank account, we can donate surplus clothes or food, we can text in response to a TV campaign or swipe a card at a church door or in the pew.

I recently completed a study motivated by observation, I noticed the growing number of supermarket trolleys that were appearing in churches. They are in entrance vestibules and porches, bearing witness to the growing number of food redistribution ministries that exist across all denominations. They express a genuine desire to help others in need, and like icons of old, they've become a kind of visual 'code' for all who notice, that the Church has compassion for the poor. For me though, these trolleys feel like the starkest of reminders that the system that is supposed to care for the vulnerable and poor, is breaking if not irreparably broken.

Now, in the ordinariness of Christian worship, these trolleys could easily become impersonal vessels for charitable benevolence – a form of 'alms giving' of the food kind, but could they also represent a transaction between the haves and the have nots. The Christian scriptures suggest that the ethics of Jesus call for the building of relationships, then the challenge for faith based charitable giving will be for the Church to find creative ways to soften the transaction and bridge the gap between those with a lived experience of poverty and those who give from an abundance. Poverty is taking the Church into a liminal space, and in that unfamiliar place those

groups engaging in active listening and learning to those who use their services, are being transformed and are discovering new expressions of love and service.

I am reminded of the Poverty Truth Commission's striking refrain which is shaped by the voice of those with lived experience. They affirm **"Nothing about us, without us, is for us!"** This is the voice of those experiencing poverty saying that Christians doing things for 'poor' people is not helping – it's actually hurting!

"Nothing about us, without us, is for us!" is a compelling rallying call for the new Coalition – but let's remember that all paradigm shifts are complex.

Thankfully, there's much to learn from the wider Voluntary and Community Sector as well as from within faith – and conversations can start today – this Coalition is a network of people with expertise. So I encourage you to lunch with Thelma Abernethy from CRUSE, or Mark Houston from the Link Family & Community Centre, Louise Ferguson from The Larder Food Hub, or Chris Leech from Emmanuel, or Jonny Currie from Trussell Trust, Paul Livingstone from CAP & there are so many others I could name – there are many organisations now engaging in active listening, and shaping programmes through what is sometimes known as 'co-design' - they can tell you how they have been changed by the process.

Issue two

When projects and programmes are motivated by benevolence alone, over time a dark side can emerge. A kindness can backfire on itself and harm the people it was targeted to help. It's known as 'benevolence bias,' and this kind of kindness is, in fact, not kindness at all.

Benevolence bias occurs when our efforts to be kind or loving result in us making decisions on other people's behalf, decisions that take away their choices. In other words, benevolence bias is when limits are placed on an individual's autonomy by someone else presuming what's best for them. Benevolence bias is harmful when those assumptions are incorrect – and here's the thing, often they are.

Benevolence bias often occurs when we assume that we know what different 'types of people' want. Essentially it can reinforce the idea that the receivers core issue is that they "lack" things and therefore "need" someone to provide them.

There is such a need to upskill the faith sector in terms of the causes of poverty, and its impact on people's lives – that is why this coalition has an educative goal to challenge unexamined bias and support understanding before challenging public policies and government.

Lastly, issue three

Without 'big picture' thinking, charity can easily become toxic for those dependent on it. Let me illustrate with an adage or maxim regularly used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the outspoken antipoverty campaigner. It is often recounted, that **"there comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."** The adage is drawn from an old folk tale named 'The River', and Tutu articulated a claim that after a period of consistently 'pulling people out of the water', justice demands a journey 'upstream' to discover why people are constantly falling in. For Tutu, addressing poverty meant more than providing help in the face of poverty – he called for the deconstruction of unjust systems that keep people poor and oppressed. Tutu validated a 'dual strategy' of both helping and understanding the 'why' of poverty – and this Coalition hopes to make all of the local research on poverty available to help any group 'go upstream'.

Some of you may have encountered Bob Lupton, I met him back in 2008 when I worked in East Belfast Mission. He was sharing his experiences of 'ministry' where he worked in poor areas in Atlanta, Georgia. What he learned became a book published in 2011 – **'Toxic Charity'**. It and **'When Helping Hurts'** are 'must reads' for everyone involved in Christian charitable projects or programmes. Both books are hard reads, but their ideas are the 'upstream' kind enabling 'riverside rescuers' to discover the systemic causes of poverty and helping all of us discern the powers and principalities at work that perpetuate or are contingent upon people being poor.

Lupton pulls no punches declaring that, 'Christians have robbed those they wished to help of the imagination necessary to sustain the community processes that offer a new way of life'. He further argues,

"(Christians) ...cannot serve others out of poverty. What people living in poverty need, instead, are living-wage jobs and healthy, thriving communities. And that

requires two things: economic and community development” and that has to be about creating sustainable opportunities for people locked into poverty.

This is ‘big picture’ thinking...and it is my hope that this Coalition will contribute to a reimagining – and empowered by faith old ideas of ‘common good’ might topple the principalities. And may it be sooner, rather than later.

Lynda Gould

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ⁱ Aquinas, Thomas (1920) [1485]. "Charity, considered in itself". *Summa Theologiae*. Vol. Secunda, Secundae Partis. Q. 23.

ⁱⁱ Aquinas, Thomas (1920) [1485]. "The object of charity". *Summa Theologiae*. Vol. Secunda, Secundae Partis. Q. 25.