

Mission for All the Wrong Reasons

May 2, 2018

I gave up adopting families for Christmas when the activity made me noticeably snarky. It started out innocently enough. By buying presents for a low-income family, I could supplement their gift-giving, bringing Christmas joy to the household.

At first, I felt pity for families that could not afford to lavish Christmas presents on their children. How hard it must be to hear a youngster asking Santa for a toy that was financially out of reach. I could fix that problem by shopping!

In my congregation, rather than select random gifts, we asked sponsored families to identify what they could use or wanted. My surliness began with the family's wish list: a PlayStation, an iPod, jewelry, and designer sneakers. I second-guessed their choices because, you know, "poor people" shouldn't need Play Stations and designer sneakers. I expected more humble requests like socks, a warm coat, or a frying pan. Nonetheless, I begrudgingly bought the requested items because I'd committed to sponsoring the family.

After festively wrapping presents, I coordinated their delivery. We came to the family's door with armloads of presents and were greeted coolly, "You can put them under the tree." The fully-decorated Christmas tree took up much of the living room, and, to my discomfort, presents were already spilling out from under the lowest branches. Here again, I grew critical. "Poor people" who were asking for gifts should not have a single other gift in their home; my gifts had to be the only source of Christmas joy.

After we received cursory thank-you's from the family, it became clear they wished we would leave. "Poor people" who have just received my beneficence should be profuse in their gratitude, inviting us to sit and chat for a spell.

Bleh. I was doing this mission activity for all the wrong reasons, and I had to stop. Specifically I was doing it for me, so that I felt good about my generosity. I didn't really care about the family and instead had objectified them to fit my stereotype of "poor people."

Studies about the effectiveness of charity have shown that often the families receiving gifts in this manner dislike the process as much as I did. They are pure transactions that can reinforce negative stereotypes, strip people of dignity, harm family dynamics, and deepen dependency.

This is one type of "toxic charity" we will examine in our [May 19 workshop](#) for mission and outreach leaders. Certainly not all Christmas family sponsorships are bad, but we need to be intentional about how we participate in God's mission to avoid the toxic habits I'd displayed. Our experienced workshop leaders will guide us to look more closely at the values we employ in our congregations' mission. They'll suggest practical ways to deepen what you're already doing...without adding more. Please join your Presbytery colleagues for this interactive workshop, as we learn together how to do mission more faithfully and effectively.