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When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself

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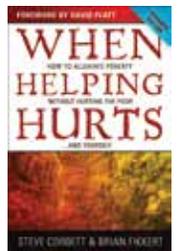
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constructive alternative to schoolies week. Such involvement by young Christians is highly commendable and would seem to fulfil well-known Christian teachings about loving our neighbours (Matthew 22:38–9), doing good for the ‘least of these’ (Matthew 25:40) and being good Samaritans (Luke 10:25–37). But is all this ‘do good’ activity actually doing good for the recipients *or us*? Could it in some instances be harmful, and worse still even counter productive by reinforcing entrenched situations of poverty? Is it enough to have good intentions when trying to help the overseas poor?

Very little attention has been given to the impacts—for good or ill—on the beneficiaries of these activities. However a couple of recent books targeting the broader Christian audience have focussed on the potential for harm of our western efforts to help those in need.²

The authors of *When helping hurts* are senior academics in a small US Presbyterian college and both have considerable personal experience in poverty alleviation in the inner city and the developing world. While the book targets North American Christians, it is highly relevant to Australian Christian schools planning overseas service trips. However a warning: this book may well disturb your world view and your good intentions.

The authors’ central concern is that our approach to helping the poor may not only waste our financial, human, organizational and spiritual resources but actually exacerbate the problems we are trying to solve. Part 1 is the core of the book and grounds its two central arguments in solid theology. First, westerners view poverty as material shortages whereas the poor see poverty as all embracing—humiliation, shame, hopelessness, inferiority, social isolation, rather than shortage of things. Our materialistic view is not the biblical view of broken relationships being the root cause of poverty. Rather it is an uncritical acceptance of the prevailing secular, material world view. This is a critical point as it governs our ‘solutions’ to make good the material lack and so we like to build things and provide handouts. In our doing we reinforce the secular message that all you need in life are money and things.



When helping hurts: How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor...and yourself

Corbett, S. & Fikkert, B. (2012, expanded edition)
Chicago: Moody Press. 274pp, paperback.

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Can doing good ever do harm?

Short term volunteer service and mission trips have captured the imagination of Christians in Australian Christian schools, often as a

Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

Second—and this is more difficult to accept—is that we often exhibit ‘god-complexes’ towards the poor: a subtle and unwitting superiority that we have the answers and they do not, that we can ‘save the world’ and that they have nothing to contribute to solving their own problems. Such attitudes demean and diminish the image of God that is present in all including the non-western, non-Christian poor. The authors’ comments about our theological syncretism and evangelical gnosticism are worthy of deeper consideration. It is disturbing to think that much of our helping is not only harmful to the beneficiaries but indeed theologically suspect! Hence the authors’ repeated call us to repent before we even think of helping the poor.

Part 2 provides some general principles for helping the poor which include: deciding whether relief or development is appropriate (relief is best used sparingly and only for dire emergencies otherwise it generates dependency upon others); hand ups contribute to helping people get themselves out of poverty whereas handouts invariably perpetuate poverty; never do for the poor what they can do, or have the resources to do, for themselves; and remember that social change is always long-term and can not be effected in a two week trip, whatever the promotional hype may suggest.

Part 3 provides some practical strategies for helping the poor. The chapter on short-term missions is particularly valuable for schools planning overseas service trips. A key issue is our real motivation: ‘Why do we wish to take our students overseas for service?’ Is it to ‘save the poor’? Is it—and I hear this often—to give *our* youth a life-changing experience³? Or is it to learn from the poor and show solidarity as we are all God’s children? If the primary motivation is to benefit *our* youth even at the expense of the poor then it is selfish and unchristian. This Part raises the question of our stewardship of scarce financial resources—would the high cost of sending a group overseas achieve more if the monies were sent directly to an agency that specializes in poverty alleviation? The book could have included the question of environmental stewardship as international travel makes a large

impact whether through the carbon footprint of flying or through the disposal of dozens of used plastic water bottles⁴.

Part 4 provides ‘how to’ guidance, though focussed more on activities with poor urban Americans and on mission relationships between US churches and poor-world churches. The important message however is universal: don’t stop helping the poor—rather, do it more thoughtfully and with a greater consideration of the potential negative impacts upon poor communities.

Christian schools are charged with educating the whole person—the mind, body and heart. Unfortunately there are too many ‘headless hearts’ around. It is imperative that in their service activities schools also educate the mind and not be driven solely by the heart (Matthew 22:37). This book provides a highly readable and Christian perspective that might just help your school, as well as the poor overseas. **TEACH**

Notes

¹ Harwood Lockton taught about issues of poverty and international development at Avondale College of Higher Education for three decades. Whilst there he initiated short-term mission trips to the Pacific (and wishes this book had been written twenty years earlier!). He also served as the director of the overseas aid program for a mid-sized church development agency. In retirement he serves on a couple of national committees for the non-government development sector and is an adjunct lecturer in international development in Australia and PNG.

² Lupton, R. (2012) *Toxic charity: How churches and charities hurt those they help (and how to reverse it)*. New York: HarperOne; and the book of this review. *When helping hurts* is a better written and more thorough treatment of the issues.

³ The research evidence is mixed as to the benefits for westerners. Research conducted during or immediately after the trip invariably suggests participants feel the experience was life-changing. However longitudinal studies suggest that impacts are not long lasting and that Christian commitment and involvement in the mission of the church is little different from that displayed by those who have never been on such a trip. See www.calvin.edu/academic/sociology/faculty/verbeek/short-term-missions/ and Friesen’s doctoral research at www.mission.org/files/staff/rfriesen/friesen_stm_thesis_summary.pdf

⁴ For an Australian Christian take on the stewardship question, see Jackson, L. (2008) “So you’re planning a mission trip...” *Zadok Perspectives* #99, Winter, pp13–4.