



When CANNED-FOOD DRIVES ARE NO LONGER ENOUGH

A starter guide for congregations looking to do mission and avoid common 'toxic charity' mistakes

BY CHRISTINE COY FOHR

We all have participated one way or another: a canned-food drive here; a shoe collection there. In the midst of chaotic lives with ever-growing to-do lists, our mission efforts join the list of necessarily efficient tasks we hope to accomplish in a day. We go to church—check. We feel inspired and transformed—CHECK! We want to do mission, showing God's love in the 140 characters we've been allotted for this particular task—check?

While many church mission projects help express God's love in the world, increasing reflection has shown that these efficient, Twitter-length efforts sometimes fall short. Food

drives sometimes bring in canned goods that have gone well beyond their expiration date. On occasion the shoe drives actually send shoes to places where a flood of free footwear puts local merchants out of business. One misguided effort, 1 Million Shirts, shipped a million T-shirts to Africa—a very large donation sent to meet a misunderstood need, and which did little to affect the daily lives of an entire continent.

Christian and secular organizations alike are abuzz these days with discussion of the pitfalls of well-intentioned mission efforts. With texts like *Toxic Charity* and *When Helping Hurts* becoming common

church-group reading, the time is ripe for us to reexamine how we as Presbyterians do mission. And while this may add one more task to our to-do lists, it's a task that gets at the heart of who we are and how we are called to be together.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a long, rich history of mission involvement. We have been engaging in global mission since 1837, and over those years we have learned what is effective and what is not; what is faithful and fruitful, and what is not. Through it all, we have learned that mission is about relationship—about drawing together God's people into partnership, accompaniment, and

mutual respect. As the *Book of Order* says, mission is “God’s redeeming and reconciling activity in the world” (G-3.0103). It is not about quick-fix efforts or a bulleted list of accomplishments at a mission committee meeting; it is about God’s people coming alongside one another to transform the world.

Sounds simple enough, right? The trouble is, to our ears, those quick-fix efforts fit our efficient, Twitter-length to-do lists much more easily than the work of partnership. How much easier it is to search our overflowing closets for a few pair of shoes or our cabinets for some canned goods than to start a relationship with a community on the other side of the globe (or on the other side of our own cities). It can be easy to despair and thus try for the small if imperfect effort rather than dive into the work of relationship. But there’s no need to despair so quickly—sharing God’s love with our neighbor is our calling, no matter where or in what state of stress we find ourselves. So, in a world of Twitter-length to-do lists, here is one that you and your mission committee can try on for size.

1. Consider what success looks like. A lot of the baggage that ties us to ineffective mission comes from within. We want to report great successes—projects completed, numbers of dollars raised, initiatives taking off full-speed ahead. But success is a concept we ourselves define. It is not inherently one thing or another. Rather, it represents what we value. So, take time, as a mission committee and as a congregation, to consider what you value and what you hope to accomplish. Ask your minister to do a series on the notion of success from a Christian perspective. Start a book club on *Toxic Charity* or *When Helping Hurts*. Take a session retreat to reflect on how your church can live into its call to show “God’s redeeming and reconciling activity in the world” (*Book of Order*, G-3.0101). Listen to what you hear, let go of what you

don’t, and allow the Spirit to reshape success for you.

2. Look inward in order to move outward. With a new sense of purpose and success in mind, begin a process of discernment within your worshiping community. Ask these questions in your mission committee: What needs do we, as a congregation, have? What might we learn from a partner community? Then consider a couple more: What are we passionate about? How could we connect that passion with a partner? Maybe your congregation buys fair-trade coffee for fellowship hour. Connect that passion with a farming community in Guatemala. Perhaps your congregation needs to experience a vibrant worshiping community. Connect that need with a vibrant partner in South Sudan. We are each of us given gifts that build up the body of Christ. What will resonate with your community?

3. Begin the journey. After looking inward, begin the process of finding your partner. Your World Mission staff and over 180 mission coworkers can help you in this process. Invite a staff person or coworker to come speak with your congregation. Plan a “get to know you” trip with members of your congregation and your potential partner. Arrive with empty hands and open hearts, ready to receive what God is doing through this new relationship—remembering always the words of the western Ethiopian proverb, “We only embrace with empty hands.” Walk alongside one another. Learn of their lives, and tell of your own, allowing the Spirit to bind your stories and your footsteps together.

4. Home in on a focus. As your relationship develops, discern mutually how you can deepen your partnership. Perhaps your congregation has many educators and your partner aspires to develop schools—your focus may be training teachers. Perhaps

your community is passionate about evangelism and your partner needs pastors—your focus may be supporting theological education. Perhaps you are passionate about reconciliation and your partner has experienced structural and physical violence—your focus may be accompaniment and advocacy. As you discern a focus, write it down. But be flexible. Allow the Spirit to continue to inspire you as new possibilities are brought to light.

5. Engage your whole community. Through it all, find ways to connect this partnership with your whole worshiping community—even those who may never meet or experience the partnership firsthand. Encourage the children of your congregation to become pen pals with those of your partner community. Have a Skype conversation during a Wednesday night program or a minute for mission. Read books together. Hang art in your church. Engage with local organizations whose mission or purpose connects with your partner community.

Of course, these Twitter-ready to-dos are neither easy nor quick. They go beyond the drive for clothes or canned goods. They represent small steps along the long road of discipleship. They represent a way for following the one who proclaimed, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

In Christ, we have been shown the way of reconciliation, how we are drawn into redeemed relationship with God. As those claimed and sent by Christ, may we seek to embody that mission to which we and our brothers and sisters around the world are called: mutual love, reconciled diversity, and partnership in Christ’s service. May it be so.

Christine Coy Fohr is a teaching elder in the PC(USA) and Presbyterian World Mission’s consultant for mission leaders.