

## Is our Helping Hurting?

I have written this paper partly to address the failures in my intercultural relationships and what I have done to correct them. I also want to make sure anyone wanting to help with our twinning program understands the possible damage that a program that is not rooted in Justice can do to the people we are trying to help. This applies to the people on a mission and in direct contact with Holy Trinity's Haitian brothers and sisters, or to people who are helping with the planning or administration of the twinning program and may never visit a third world country. It is important that everyone be on the same page when it comes to a philosophy of helping.

To start, I want to relate a story an African Christian told to his missionary friend. *Elephant and Mouse were best friends. One day Elephant said, "Mouse, let's have a party!" Animals gathered from near and far. They ate, they drank they sang, and they danced. And nobody celebrated more and danced harder than Elephant. After the party was over, Elephant exclaimed, "Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!" But Mouse did not answer...*

I will finish the rest of the story in a minute, but as a participant in 21 short term mission trips, mostly as a dental provider, you would think that I would think highly of them and would argue that they:

- Empower those being served
- Engender healthy cross cultural relationships
- Improve local quality of life
- Relieve poverty
- Change the lives of participants
- Increase support for long term mission work

However: Let me finish the story about Elephant and Mouse

*Elephant cried out, "Mouse where are you?" Elephant looked around for his friend, and then shrank back in horror. There at Elephant's feet lay Mouse. His little body was ground into the dirt. He had been smashed by the big feet of his exuberant friend. Elephant.* "Sometimes, that is what it is like to do mission with you Americans," the African storyteller commented. "It is like dancing with an elephant."

Although it's possible that short term mission trips can, with proper attitude, planning and prayer accomplish the things I mentioned earlier, it is possible that if not done properly they can:

- Weaken those being served, even turning them into beggars
- Foster dishonest relationships
- Erode recipient's work ethic
- And deepen dependency

As the president of our Haiti committee, I do not want this to be the case with our sister parish Notre Dame de Lourdes. I feel a good way to look at a mission trip is for it to be more of a pilgrimage to meet God than for an opportunity to cure someone's "poverty. "

Since the type of person who is attracted to a mission trip is also usually empathetic and generous, it can be hard to know what to do without causing damage. A common question I get is: *Why is Haiti in such bad shape when they have been getting so much aid for so long?* A possible answer, I believe, just may be related to our good intentions to do all we can "for" them.

I experienced a glaring example of what not to do on my very first trip to Haiti. It was almost my last trip to Haiti. A dentist who said she would go with us only to back out at the last minute decided to assuage her guilt by putting dollar bills in 30 sealed envelopes with a salvation phrase in Creole in each envelope. Her goal apparently was to "help" 30 poor people by giving them a whole dollar and at the same time save their soul! She asked me to hand these out for her and I reluctantly agreed.

In order to get rid of these envelopes and fulfill my "duty" I started handing out the envelopes to people after mass the second day we were there. You would think that it would be a good

thing, but to my horror, when people realized there were dollar bills in the envelopes I was handing out, a riot ensued with me in the midst of it. People started fighting over the envelopes with most of them getting torn to pieces along with the dollars. I quickly noticed people were NOT reading the salvation phrase and falling to their knees in prayer. People were yelling, pushing, and rushing at me in a frenzy to grab the envelopes out of my hands. I had to flee for my safety to the iron gates of the rectory which I quickly slammed behind me.

For the rest of the trip, whenever I wasn't "down in the mouth" (doing dentistry) I had to hide, and I avoided going out in public after that. So many people were coming up to me and demanding "give me my dollar" it became a joke to everyone but me. Unfortunately, because of me, "give me my dollar" was the only English almost everyone now knew. After they realized I was not going to give them a dollar, they would say it anyway and laugh. I realized what a mistake I had made by making beggars out of almost an entire village.

I had even told the trip leaders about the envelopes and asked if it was OK to pass them out. At the time they didn't have any objections, but of course, I was told *what an idiot I was* afterwards. It would have been nice to have been given some do's and don'ts before the trip by someone who understood what damage could be done even with good intentions. Unfortunately, to this day "give me my dollar" is a common phrase in Baudin, Haiti.

I was already struggling with the concept of what good I could possibly be doing in the *unending sea of decay and infection*, and the "give me my dollar" blunder made everything worse. I kept thinking that what I was doing in the clinic was a meaningless drop in the ocean. This is a normal feeling for just about any charitable trip to Haiti but is exaggerated in the dental setting. I began to pray for an answer as to why was I compelled to be there and yet not really feeling I was doing any good. In fact after the fiasco after Mass, I probably did more harm than good.

Fortunately, at the end of the week they had a Mardi gras celebration in town that we were invited to. I celebrated and danced with the people from the village and experienced them in a different and more intimate way. At the celebration people stopped their begging and just had fun with us. We all had a wonderful time. The Mardi gras experience coupled with a comment from one of the patients, answered my prayer. Even though I felt compelled to go

on mission trips, it was not until this patient commented, “Thank you for coming, it makes us feel like we are not forgotten,” that I decided I would return. Ironically (or not) I found out later that Dr. Schubert who started the dental mission had the same feelings during his first trip regarding the never ending sea of decay and infection and the hopelessness of the situation. He told the priest his thoughts and the pastor brought him a farmer who said the EXACT same words to him. It was only at that point that he decided he would return.

Subsequent trips, however, added to my list of mistakes and lessons learned. After the books: *Toxic Charity* and *When Helping Hurts* came out, a lot of eyes were opened to the damage we had all done on our short term mission trips. The principles in the books quickly gained acceptance by most Twinning programs and even CRS uses this wisdom today.

I realized most mistakes were a result of the formula illustrated in the books.

***The Formula goes like this:***

MATERIAL DEFINITION OF POVERTY + GOD COMPLEXES OF THE MATERIALLY NON POOR  
+FEELING OF INFERIORITY OF THE MATERIALLY POOR = HARM TO EVERYONE

Yes, I had to read that over several times also and it was very humbling to me.

When the patient said, “thank you for coming, it makes us feel like we are not forgotten,” she was giving me her definition of poverty! In this case, ISOLATION. Notice she didn’t say, thank you for giving me my dollar, or for fixing my teeth. Her thanks was for showing up and being with her, being Christ to her, just as she was Christ to me. She also used the word “us” instead of me or I. Fixing teeth was actually secondary to just being there.

Our definition of poverty in the West is lack of material goods and services. Poor people talk about poverty in terms of social isolation, shame, hopelessness, voicelessness, and depression. To tell you the truth, there is more joy in the people I initially considered poor than here in the U.S. where we have more than enough. (They also grind their teeth less!)

I don’t think I have to explain what a god complex is or our feelings of superiority over the poor, how we “know it all” and “what is best” for them. I will give another example.

A local Catholic Church in Naperville started a parish twinning program with a Haitian Church many years ago. They were a large and wealthy Church with a lot of resources. The first thing they did was send experts in water, sanitation, engineering, and utilities to decide what

they needed to do to “fix” the village. They raised money, went back to Haiti with their solutions and started their projects. One thing THEY decided was a priority was electricity for the village. They bought a very large expensive generator and wired houses in town for the people who agreed to pay for the gas to keep the generator running. Then they turned it all on and went home. A year later they came back to a generator that was rusty and unused. When the gas ran out, that was it; after all it wasn’t their idea but the “Blancs” (white people’s) idea. They were not going to say no to the idea, but it wasn’t THEIR idea and once the gas ran out ,so did their motivation to buy more gas. They got along fine without electricity; they had little use for it since they had no microwaves, and flat screens hadn’t make it to the bush yet.

Feelings of inferiority among the poor can come from many sources. As a dentist in Haiti I do things *for* my patients. Doing *for* is good, but it is a one way street. I do *for* them, they receive. Not giving back can lead to an inferiority complex and a feeling of worthlessness. It does not lead to relationships, especially in a clinic situation.

Some patients do not show appreciation, and I even run into the occasional patient who is more demanding than my paying patients back home. They can also ignore me at times and attempts on my part at crude communications. Most are nice and grateful, and I think part of the negative attitude can be related to embarrassment that they are taking and not giving anything back to me. But I also think that after so many clinics they expect the free work and can’t understand my bad Creole anyway. This attitude has lessened after we started charging a small amount of money for the dental work, (about 50 cents U.S.) The money goes to the church. This attitude never bothered me much; I know I am doing the Lord’s work whether I get thanked or not.

Another thing we are working on more and more is to get the Haitians involved in the clinic. We hire some Haitian workers and have sent two of the brightest students from the village to Dental school in Haiti. One will graduate this summer and the other the following year. The students we sent to school have even started doing free dentistry on their own through the school!

Most of the so called Haitian relationships I developed in Baudin were with people who knew some English and wanted something from me. It was always related to money in some way and

I don't really blame them. But if I said no or stopped giving them money, the relationship was over, except for them to try and get me to change my mind. One young man was very good at English and courting sponsorship from the missionary groups. He was so good that when I told the interpreter I decided to send him to school, he laughed and said that he already had two sponsors already for school and did not even **go** to school!

When God put it on my heart to start a parish twinning program at Holy Trinity, I welcomed the opportunity to go beyond doing "*for*" and graduate to "*working with*". Working *with the* parish and community has been very rewarding and a lot more well rounded experience than just doing dentistry. When Jesus came He went beyond even that and into the realm of *being with*, walking in our shoes. *Being with* is actually experiencing what others do and feel. Being with is what the incarnation was all about. Jesus actually walking in our shoes and experiencing everything we do (except sin).

Part of working with or trying to be with our Haitian brothers and sisters is to realize we have different ways of looking at things. For example, I have a monochromic view of time. My time is a limited and valuable resource and I try to save as much time as possible and lose as little as possible. Time is money and I like to have a list and see how many things are crossed off the list at the end of the day. In a week of dental clinic in Haiti we should see at least 190 patients, do 550 extractions, and 110 fillings, or we are below average and Dr. Schubert is not happy! (He is monochromic also)

Haitians and a lot of other lower income countries have a polychromic view of time and understanding what that is like helps us understand them. To them, time is a somewhat unlimited resource... there is always more time and schedules and plans are mere guidelines. Tasks typically take a back seat to forming and deepening relationships. Even though to our eye, less might get done, people in such cultures often have a deeper sense of community and belonging.

A major difference between us and them is that in our society the concept of self is very heavy toward individualism, and in theirs it is more of a collective society. When that patient said "thank you for coming, it makes us feel like we are not forgotten", she said **us**, not me.

I was talking to a Haitian American on the plane once, and he sent a lot of his money back to Haiti to take care of his family and even neighbors. When I asked him further about this, he said whoever has any money helps the others, this way if someone is out of a job they do not have to worry about starving. When he was out of work and still in Haiti, his neighbors took care of him until he was able to get employment again; now he is doing them the favor. This is as close to welfare or a safety net as there is in Haiti. This is also the way Christians should be acting all the time, but rarely do.

When we asked what the priority was at our sister parish, the Bishop, pastor, and community agreed: “fix the earthquake damage to the church and finish building the church” This unselfish request showed an admirable commitment to community.

When we started our own parish twinning program, the Lord opened my eyes to the negative things about the parish twinning program between St.Tom’s in Lafayette Indiana and the village where the dental clinic is. There were a whole group of people who lived off of what they got out of the short term missionaries that came there. I wasn’t the only one who made mistakes, there was absolutely no training or guidelines for the people who went on the trips to Haiti at that time (January, 2005). Now, there has been an attempt in Baudin where the clinic is, to turn things around. They also read the books and reflected!

The Church in Naperville that failed in their attempt to provide electricity to their sister parish’s village also switched to a capacity building/solidarity approach to mission. In fact when we started our twinning program, they came to share their knowledge and mistakes with us. They are the ones who told me the story of the failed attempt to bring electricity to their twinning village. I vowed that I would try to avoid all the mistakes I had made and had observed in Baudin and not allow them to be made in LaVoute.

It is so nice to go to LaVoute where our sister parish is and not be pestered for money or asked for anything. I was determined to have a philosophy at the very start that would prevent this village from being ruined by well meaning charity without justice.

I decided we would do our best to follow the “**Oath for Compassionate Service**”:

- **Never do for the poor what they have or could have the capacity to do for themselves:** Personal responsibility is essential for social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. To do for others what they can do is to disempower them.
- **Limit one way giving to emergency situations** Giving that continues beyond the immediate crisis produces diminishing returns. *Anyone who has served among the poor for any length of time will recognize the following progression:*
  - 1 Give once and you elicit appreciation;
  - 2 Give twice and you create anticipation;
  - 3 Give three times and you create expectation;
  - 4 Give four times and it becomes entitlement;
  - 5 Give five times and you establish dependency

*Such charity implies the poor has nothing of value to give and so their self-worth is degraded.*
- **Strive to empower the poor through investing, lending, employment:** Lending builds mutual trust and respect. Investing with the poor is the ultimate method of sharing resources. It implies an ownership stake and accountability. Legitimate employment gives meaning to life and enhances human dignity. Right now we are not able to do this for our sister parish, but it is a goal to be able to get to this point.
- **Subordinate self interests to the needs of those being served:** When the agenda of a church is to create an inspiring, enriching mission experience sometimes the real needs of the poor are overlooked. Instead, look at the trip as more of a pilgrimage to find God.
- **Listen closely to those you seek to help:** We must learn to carefully observe behaviors, ask insightful questions, and hear what is not being said. Unfortunately in our case this is through an interpreter.
- **Above all, do no harm:** While we cannot foresee all the potential consequences of our service, we should at least make some attempt to predict its impact and try to learn from our mistakes. This in simplest terms involves never giving



anyone anything like money, trinkets or presents unless it is a specific part of the mission; it is best given to the church to distribute. This is the only way to prevent making beggars out of the community. We also have to make sure we are not undermining the local merchants with what we do on our trips.

- **So don't stuff your suitcases with stuff for the poor!**

**Community Development:** This is different from the model of *doing for* those in chronic need. You must have the philosophy that builds on their strengths and not their problems... Enabling the poor to create their own solutions is obviously a much slower process than fixing problems for them (painfully slow for high-capacity friends with resources who would effect a quick "cure") Here are some principles that guide this effect.

- **Focus on community** Economically, socially and spiritually
- **Focus on their assets** Build on strengths and resources not on needs or limitations.
- **Focus on "front-burner" issues** Begin with the important agendas of the community. It gauges their level of priority and commitment.
- **Focus on investing** This help grow local assets and create wealth-generating opportunities. Grants should be in the form of incentives rather than charitable gifts.
- **Focus on leadership development** Their leadership has the capacity to start the projects, sustain progress until completion and/ or maintain projects into the future.
- **Focus on pace- don't get ahead of the people** As outsiders we must resist the temptation to "take over" a project. Local people must remain in control of their own development. This creates true ownership and positions the community as being primarily responsible for the outcomes. Our best roles are catalysts, facilitators, and connectors.

### **Service with Dignity**

- Mission trips should conduct sensitivity training for volunteers in preparation for their service projects. This paper is one way of doing that. If caring people realized that their charitable efforts, though very important to the poor, took a toll on the self-esteem of those being helped, they would be more sensitive.

- Our perceptions about the community influence our expectations. What we believe about them will in large measure determine what we find when we arrive. Remember, God was there before we even arrived.
- During the Mission, take time for candid conversations with those in the communities being served. ( through an interpreter in our case) When residents have the opportunity to tell their stories, share how their faith has sustained them and pray with you, the volunteers' "pity factor" diminishes, and is replaced by respect and emerging understanding. We then can be Christ to one another!
- These are all lofty goals and ideals, but you have to start with a plan! When we get more people involved in our program and more resources we can do more of the things outlined here.

**There are three stages of help:**

**RELIEF-** Relief work occurs during and immediately after an emergency. It includes not only life saving intervention but also the relief of suffering. It includes food, shelter, medicine etc.

Unfortunately most charity is in the form of relief even though there is no emergency.

**REHABILITATION-** Rehabilitation follows and overlaps with the relief stage. It increases the capacity of a community to respond to future crisis and promotes projects that restore services or livelihoods to a preexisting or improved level.

**DEVELOPMENT-** This follows and overlaps the relief and development phases. Development is long term and seeks to improve the standard of living over many years. It includes microloans, schooling and community development.

As a disclaimer we do send Notre Dame de Lourdes, our sister parish about \$500 /month to run the parish. Helping parishes function is the main goal of the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas that we are part of. Their collections may run \$20 a month U.S. and at that level there is no money for food or gas for the pastor's truck etc. As far as I am concerned the money we give them to help run the parish is very small for a parish that also has 7 mission churches it is responsible for. Notre Dame de Lourdes parish's "mission" churches are diverse, ranging from actual churches to palm branch enclosures. Fr. Isaac the pastor is in charge of all of them and

our support also helps those churches. To be honest I don't know what category our monthly stipend to help them run the parish would fall under, but I consider it an emergency if there is not enough money for the church to run.

I believe the help we have given to repair the earthquake damage to the church falls under relief. The finishing of the church building, which is THEIR goal in Haiti and should be OURS also, would fall under development.

The ultimate goal, which we may never see, is for them to be able to provide for themselves and for us to move on to another parish that needs help. There are so many things we could do with our sister parish, we have not even scratched the surface. However if we do small things with great love, like Mother Theresa did, God only knows the limit of what can be done in His name.

Finally, don't just think of these principles as just for Twinning Programs or foreign missions, they can be applied to any charitable program anywhere. I think these principles can help explain the failure of the government to be able to fix certain problems just by throwing money at them.

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