

Are Humanitarian Aid Missions Helped or Hurt by Religion?

By Jimi & Cristi Cook

Yeah, that's a tough one! On one hand, religious groups are a prime source for humanitarian work of all types and people of faith are often the most avid and generous volunteers. On the other hand, there are certainly people who are turned off by religious do-gooders, don't want to be preached at, and want more of a "co-exist" approach to aid. Some donors will only support projects that are faith-based while others will only donate to non-religious causes. Many, many schools, health centers, orphanages, and feeding programs would never exist or flourish without the religious organizations that started and support them, but some of the most "toxic charities" are faith-based.¹ So, what is the right answer? How are humanitarian aid missions best accomplished?

From our perspective, the most important thing is not whether it is a religious-based mission or not, but whether or not the mission is effective. It is critical that the aid gets to the intended recipients for the intended purpose. The mission needs to empower those it serves and not create dependency. It has to address a true need and it has to be sustainable.

Whether they are coming from a religious basis or not, humanitarian aid missions are service projects that come from the heart, typically carried out by volunteers who sacrifice their time, money, and emotions to help others. So, how can they not be "effective"? How can they not have positive outcomes? Unfortunately, the answer is "all too easily and all too often!" You know all the sayings about "good intentions" right? And, these are certainly true with respect to local and foreign aid. More than 85% of the 1 trillion dollars of aid sent to sub-Saharan Africa never reaches the targeted areas of need.¹ And, many local aid agencies and projects create dependency and diminish self-worth, rather than empowering and encouraging those they serve.¹ So, it is critical that these projects, whether for religious purposes or not, are fully vetted for legitimacy, efficacy, and sustainability, that we don't "just send the money", and that we follow-up with assessments that truly measure impact.

We are people of faith. Locally, we volunteer for a faith-based organization helping at-risk children. But, our humanitarian aid organization is not religious-based. Religion is not part of our method for delivering international aid, but our personal faith is part of every mission we go on. We focus on education, empowering communities, building relationships and sustainability. We never preach or proselytize. We will build schools for Christians, Muslims, Hindus, or any other group of deserving people. We welcome anyone with a heart to serve on our teams, regardless of race, color, creed or religion. We accept donations from Catholics, Protestants, Jews and atheists. Is this hypocritical? Are we "selling our souls" to get what we want? We don't think so. We try to be transparent in both our organizational and personal motives, focus intensely on ensuring each project's efficacy and sustainability, provide information about the impact of our work, and let our volunteers and donors decide if that works for them.

So, choose whichever avenue you feel best about, or both, but do your homework on the organizations you support and figure out if you are comfortable with where your time, work and money are going, the intended purpose, and the results of the mission.²

¹Robert D. Lupton. *Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help and How to Reverse It*. Harper Collins, 2011.

²One good source for information on organizations you may be interested in supporting is Charity Navigator: <http://www.charitynavigator.org/>