**What is charity?**

An enormous amount of energy and money in wealthy South African communities goes toward charity. Food baskets, winter clothes drives, and gifts at Christmas are familiar acts for many of us. While well-intentioned, there is often little recognition of the damage that can be done when we engage in acts of charity rather than restitution.

Charity may be understood as:

* Giving out of our surplus
* Non-relational
* A one-time act
* Giving what the giver thinks is needed rather than what the recipient has identified as a need
* An act that makes very clear who the giver is, and who the recipient is.

Too often, well-meaning Christians rely on charity to put a Band-Aid plaster on a gaping wound. Charity does not work at understanding why the situation exists as it does, nor does it seek to set it right in the long-term. It is a short-term answer that does as much or more for the giver as for the recipient.

Charity can also be an assault on the dignity of the recipient. She has not been asked her needs, but rather had her needs diagnosed *for* her. She has not been asked why she is in the situation she is, why her community is suffering, and what she thinks the solution is. She is simply reminded again that she lacks, while others have plenty.

Bob Lupton runs an urban ministry in Atlanta, Georgia. For years he engaged in the kind of Christmas charity that is common: a family who wanted to help a less fortunate family would purchase Christmas gifts for them and take the gifts to the family’s home—a family who, prior to that day, they had never met. Lupton started to notice a familiar dynamic: the man of the house would always disappear when the gift-bearers arrived. Lupton realised that what was intended as a kind act was in fact stripping men of their dignity, showing them up in front of their children as people unable to provide for their own families. In conversation with the community, Lupton created a new model, in which gifts were donated to the ministry and parents could come and shop for their own children at deeply discounted rates. It preserved the dignity of the parents and let them celebrate Christmas in their own way. Too often, our charity is well-intentioned but thoughtless, and we do not stay around long enough to notice the damaging effects it may be having on the people who are the recipients.