

Chapter 9

Humanitarian Aid: The Challenge of Self-Reliance

Elder James O. Mason

THE STORY OF Peter and John's experience at the temple gate with the lame beggar serves as an introduction to my message:

And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple;

Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms.

And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us.

And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them.

Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. (Acts 3:2-6)

The man wanted a coin. A coin was not what he most needed. He needed to walk, to work, to earn his own coins. The gospel provides unfathomable riches and even eternal life to those who accept and live the Master's teachings. The gospel also provides a way out of spiritual and temporal poverty. Peter reached down, took the crippled man by the right hand, "and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength" (Acts 3:7).

Our responsibility is first to lift ourselves and then our brothers and sisters, those in and out of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To the extent we can, we must all stand on our own feet. In a revelation to the Church in 1831, the Lord explained: “Let every man esteem his brother as himself. . . . For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there—and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just?” (D&C 38:24, 26).

The goal is a sufficiency for all. However, the clause “and they serve him obediently” should be in bold type! It is a condition established by the Lord.

In 1832 the Lord presented the concept of independence to His newly established kingdom: “That through my providence, notwithstanding the tribulation which shall descend upon you, that the church may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world” (D&C 78:14).

Two years later, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation on exactly how the Saints were to assist the poor and needy to become independent and self-reliant. Section 104 of the Doctrine and Covenants reflects the mind and will of the Lord. We could spend the next hour on these four verses of scripture:

And it is my purpose to provide for my saints, for all things are mine.

But it must needs be done in mine own way; and behold this is the way that I, the Lord, have decreed to provide for my saints, that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low.

For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves.

Therefore, if any man shall take of the abundance which I have made, and impart not his portion, according to the law of my gospel, unto the poor and the needy, he shall, with

the wicked, lift up his eyes in hell, being in torment. (D&C 104:15–18)

The Lord expects the rich to help exalt the poor. However, the Lord has much more in mind than just filling empty tummies and clothing people. Much more is to be done, and the rich are to be made low in the process. Who are the rich? They are individuals with money, with experience, with sound ideas, or with a combination of the above. The rich are humbled and experience true joy when they get involved in helping others. Someone said, “The main difference in men and boys is the tone of their voice and the price of their toys.” Perhaps the rich are made low by giving up their time and some of their toys.

In providing humanitarian aid, we must be aware that no good turn goes unpunished. We must also be aware of the unbending, exacting law of unintended consequences wherein while attempting to help we may do harm. As a boy, I tried to help a hatching baby chicken out of the egg. I learned, to my sorrow, it must work its own way out. My well-intentioned help only left the chick weak. It soon died. The chicks left to struggle were slower in hatching, but they finally emerged from the shell strong and vigorous. Although this example has no direct application to people, the principle is applicable. President Brigham Young noted: “My experience has taught me, and it has become a principle with me, that it is never any benefit to give, out and out, to man or woman, money, food, clothing or anything else, if they are able-bodied, and can work and earn what they need, when there is anything on the earth, for them to do. This is my principle, and I try to act upon it. To pursue a contrary course would ruin any community in the world and make them idlers.”¹

During the Great Depression, the Lord spoke again to one of His prophets on the matter of the poor. In the 1936 October general conference, President Heber J. Grant said: “Our primary purpose

1. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. and arr. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1943), 274–75.

was to set up, in so far as it might be possible, a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift and self-respect be once more established amongst our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our Church membership.”²

Those principles guide us today. They apply to all Heavenly Father’s children both in and out of the Church. They highlight the great truth that sacrifice and obedience, rather than convenience and comfort, bring forth the blessings of both earth and heaven.

The intent of Church Welfare Services is to bless both giver and receiver. Each member of the Church has a welfare service responsibility. All members are expected to do all they can to be self-reliant and independent and to help in caring for others who have needs (see D&C 78:13–14). President Spencer W. Kimball stated: “The responsibility for each person’s social, emotional, spiritual, physical, or economic well-being rests first upon himself, second upon his family, and third upon the Church if he is a faithful member thereof. No true Latter-day Saint, while physically or emotionally able will voluntarily shift the burden of his own or his family’s well-being to someone else. So long as he can, under the inspiration of the Lord and with his own labors, he will supply himself and his family with the spiritual and temporal necessities of life.”³

The emphasis on strengthening the family was there from the beginning. Poverty and weak or disrupted families go hand in hand in all cultures. President David O. McKay, in sharing a missionary experience, observed that acceptance of truth is difficult when people were burdened by severe poverty:

In 1897 when I was on my first mission, I found myself, one morning, distributing tracts in a little undesirable district in Sterling, Scotland. I approached one door and in answer to the knock a haggard woman stood before me, poorly dressed, with

2. Heber J. Grant, in Conference Report, October 1936, 3.

3. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, October 1977, 124.

sunken cheeks and unkempt hair. As she received the tract I offered, she said, in a rather harsh voice, "Will this buy me any bread?" and as I started to tell her that it would buy her not only bread but something far more precious, a man equally haggard and underfed came up and said, "What is it?" She handed the tract to the man and said, "Gospel vendor! Shut the door!" From that moment I had a deeper realization that the Church of Christ should be and is interested in the temporal salvation of man. I walked away from the door feeling that that couple, with the bitterness in their hearts toward man and God, were in no position to receive the message of the gospel. They were in need of temporal help.⁴

When the term *humanitarian aid* is used, we generally have in mind those who are not of our faith. It seems to me that the same principles the Lord revealed to exalt the Saints must be applied if our efforts with members of other faiths are to bear the fruits of self-reliance.

The Church does not play in a minor league when it comes to rendering global assistance to the suffering, the poor, and the needy. I am certain that many others can give us an idea of the significant magnitude of Church Humanitarian Services that have been extended to the nations of the earth. With the scope of these activities being so great, it is that much more important that the outcome and results of our efforts be meaningful.

Analyses of humanitarian aid provided by some governments indicate that there is indeed a law of unintended consequences. Good intentions, proper motives, sincere generosity, and kindness do not guarantee that benevolent services will foster self-reliance or make a long-term, positive difference in people's lives. Fortunately, the U.S. government welfare program, administered at state and community levels, has been recently restructured. The dole was its foundation principle. Although well-meaning, it had predictable and serious unintended consequences. Recipients were not required to do anything

4. David O. McKay, in a Church Welfare Meeting, Salt Lake Tabernacle, General Conference, April 5, 1941.

for what they received. They soon looked upon their largesse as an entitlement, and the program's perverse rules led to dissolution of the two-parent family. Intergenerational dependency, moral decay, and single parenthood were the unfortunate harvests.

Bad welfare, if I can use that term, drives away *good* welfare. When government welfare was enacted, most of the poor stopped participating in religious-based charities that required able-bodied recipients to participate in character-building chores, such as splitting wood. Religious-based programs discouraged behaviors that encouraged idleness and irresponsibility, such as the use of alcohol. They could not compete, however, with the government's dole-based program and went out of business or were forced to adopt similar tactics. The idle poor began to be looked upon as *victims* rather than individuals or families who could be assisted to get back on their feet.

In Africa we found it advisable, in responding to conditions of chronic poverty, to separate humanitarian aid intended for those not of our faith from aid intended for the missions, stakes, and wards. Only in responding to natural disaster and war, where all segments of the population are involved, did they act as one. The establishment of Latter-day Saint Charities allows the Church to bring humanitarian aid and the ecclesiastic Church together at the top while maintaining an arm's length distance at operating levels.

The reason for this separation, except in responding to disasters, is to minimize the risk of inappropriate incentives for baptism. We do not want proselyting missionaries involved in rendering humanitarian assistance or mentioning in their missionary work that the Church might provide food, clothing, or other material things, even though it does. We desire spiritual and doctrinal conversion.

In the early days of the Church in Africa, when priesthood leaders were involved in used clothing distribution, contention sometimes resulted because members felt that leaders kept the best for their own family and friends. Neighbors of members often asked where the nice

clothing had come from. When “from the Church” was the answer, people became interested in the Church for the wrong reasons. We do not want to create a church of “rice Christians.”

Does humanitarian aid foster self-reliance? When people are suffering and need food, shelter, and medicine because of war, drought, earthquake, or flood, sustaining life is of primary importance. Perhaps sustaining life is the foundation of self-reliance.

In the past, the availability of humanitarian assistance from the industrialized nations has encouraged despotic national presidents and coup-leading opportunists to make unwise decisions and take irresponsible actions. They came to expect that humanitarian organizations would show up promptly and bail out the adverse consequences of their actions. Poorly supervised humanitarian aid has fostered an environment of graft and corruption.

Food, clothing, and medicine often fail to get to specified needy populations. Those in power see that resources go first to family, friends, and cronies. Goods are siphoned off to the marketplace. We have seen used clothing and sacks of beans with Latter-day Saint identification being sold in African markets. People in power use diverted humanitarian assistance to gain lucrative contracts. Maybe this is not so bad. President Brigham Young noted:

Suppose that in this community there are ten beggars who beg from door to door for something to eat, and that nine of them are imposters who beg to escape work, and with an evil heart practise imposition upon the generous and sympathetic, and that only one of the ten who visit your doors is worthy of your bounty; which is best, to give food to the ten, to make sure of helping the truly needy one, or to repulse the ten because you do not know which is the worthy one? You will all say, Administer charitable gifts to the ten, rather than turn away the only truly worthy and truly needy person among them. If you do this, it will make no difference in your blessings, whether you

administer to worthy or unworthy persons, inasmuch as you give alms with a single eye to assist the truly needy.⁵

However, in many Third World countries, following President Young's compassionate council could lead to twenty beggars, not ten, at your door the next day, and forty the next. Aid must address the root causes of poverty. It must undermine greed and corruption and build character and integrity. It must strongly embrace and require the work ethic. Doing for people what they can and ought to do for themselves is a dangerous experiment that will not work. The well-being of any people depends upon their own initiative. Whatever is done under the guise of philanthropy or social morality that in any way lessens initiative is a major tragedy. To give people that which they do not earn is to make them think less of themselves and of you.

The only way to help people is to give them an opportunity to help themselves. The only solution to the grinding, chronic poverty in Africa and other places is the gospel of Jesus Christ. President Ezra Taft Benson testified during the October 1985 general conference that the gospel changes the heart of men and women:

When you choose to follow Christ, you choose to be changed. . . . Can human hearts be changed? Why, of course! It happens every day in the great missionary work of the Church. It is one of the most widespread of Christ's modern miracles. If it hasn't happened to you—it should. . . . The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature.⁶

5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 8:12.

6. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1985, 4–5.

It is easy and quick to give things away, and it is difficult and labor intensive to create or identify projects that put people to work. The old saying “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him [and his family] for a lifetime” is precisely true but difficult to accomplish.

Humanitarian aid best helps build self-reliance in conditions of chronic poverty by helping to overcome idleness. It does this by teaching people how to fish; grow, harvest, and market crops; manufacture products; and attend school. It might provide venture capital to carefully selected entrepreneurs who will be enabled to employ others. Projects that create jobs are labor intensive for the sponsoring organization and require the provision of staff or volunteers for supervision and monitoring, in addition to money and supplies. This leads to two important questions: Can we find skilled people to assist? Are we willing to invest in supporting and sustaining them in the field?

Church Humanitarian Services can be proud of the accomplishments of their employment resource centers that have been established in many developing countries. They are worth their weight in gold. Many have been assisted to find employment, even in countries with high unemployment rates.

If humanitarian aid makes people feel only more comfortable in their poverty, it will prolong the status quo and build dependency. The industrialized nations must be careful about indiscriminate shipment of used clothing to areas of poverty. It is useful in times of disaster and helpful when small quantities of appropriate used clothing can be targeted at specific needy populations, such as shelters and orphanages. We must realize that except in disasters, used clothing does not attack root causes and may make local industry less viable. Some countries restrict importation of used clothing because much of it moves, one way or the other, into the marketplace, and it undermines local industry and reduces employment. Used clothing distribution by the many groups contributing clothing in Africa

contributes little to self-reliance because it is handed out with nothing expected in return.

Rarely do organizations that provide humanitarian aid develop well-thought-out plans or strategies with defined goals and expectations. They generally respond to the squeaky wheel, rather than assemble sufficient information about a population to use time and resources where they will do the most good. Sometimes efforts are targeted to a village where opportunity for meaningful, lasting accomplishment is meager. We must seek out people and local organizations that have the highest potential to succeed and become good employers. This kind does not initiate contact with those providing aid. Some squeaky wheels in developing countries are not worth greasing! Would you choose to target your humanitarian investment in the men and women who sit day after day near Temple Square with placards advertising that they are unemployed or homeless? There are better places to begin.

This reminds me of a story told by Elder Russell M. Nelson about the gentleman farmer. One day a friend visited this farmer and found him with a large pig under his arm. He was holding the pig as high as he could while the pig ate apples directly from the branches of the tree.

The friend inquired, "What in the world are you doing?"

"I'm feeding my pig," he replied.

"What a peculiar way to feed a pig," he said. "Isn't that a time-consuming task holding a pig while he eats that way?"

The farmer replied, "What is time to a pig?"

Humanitarian aid is a scarce commodity; resources as well as time must be used wisely! Plans for humanitarian aid need to include an objective assessment strategy. We know over time what we have sent or spent but little about how much self-reliance has been generated. We tend to believe success stories and discount criticism or complaints. We pat ourselves on the back but rarely admit failure, poor decisions, or the adverse consequences of our efforts.

It is like the entrepreneur I met in rural Tennessee. On the door of his office in big letters was the sign, "Veterinarian and Taxidermist." Underneath, in letters so small you had to get close to read, it said, "Either way you get your pet back."

I began my remarks with Peter and John, the Apostles. I will conclude with the Savior, Jesus Christ. He provided the pattern for helping others gain self-reliance:

(1) He went personally among the people. He was there; He breathed the same air; and He knew and appreciated the circumstances and problems of the people.

(2) He involved the people in making desirable changes and decisions by using provocative questions, illustrative stories, and parables to turn their minds in directions formerly closed by ignorance and tradition.

(3) He provided unique services and used inexpensive technology.

(4) He did not hesitate to ask those He helped to sacrifice and work hard. Development of character was basic to success.

(5) He performed miracles according to the people's faith.

(6) He was motivated by love, not self-aggrandizement, in everything He did, and love became the motivating power of His disciples.

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