Aid mission with ulterior motives

CHRIS HIGHLAND
HIGHLAND VIEWS

Chris Highland titled this photo, "It's good to know what's in the basket." COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

Several years ago I read that a local charity was collecting backpacks for public school children. They were seeking donations to fill the packs with school supplies. It sounded like a worthy cause.

Having an inquisitive mind, I clicked over to the website for this charity and found they were inviting children to attend a summer camp where they would each receive a free backpack. Great. Except — the stated purpose of the whole enterprise was clear as a mountain stream: leading kids to Christ. There were "testimonies" from children, how they "found Christ" at camp. The article in the local paper never mentioned that. I wondered why.

When I was a "missionary" for the gospel, seeking to spread the good news of salvation to anyone anywhere, the most important thing was to get people to listen. Some of our youth gatherings were advertised at schools and malls as cool music concerts or exciting events with speakers who were famous athletes or television stars.

We loved to entertain in order to preach. Whatever it took to bring in "lost souls" in order to "witness" to our faith, we would do it.

I've known many missionaries over the years. In seminary classes I knew a number of PKs and MKs (preachers' kids and missionaries' kids). One, who grew up in Japan, became a good friend.

I once gave a sermon in a local church and afterward, Ben Weir, a former hostage in Iran, came up to thank me for reading from both the Bible and the Qur'an. As a missionary in the Middle East he had never seen that done.

I have always found it enlightening to ask what motivates people to act, to help. It's not about being cynical and suspicious. Any honest person will admit they do good works partly for themselves, to make themselves feel better.

Nothing wrong with that — when we admit it. There are certainly "self-less" people who seem to do small or even great works without concern for their own comfort or agenda. I have respect and admiration for them.

What I find most troubling is the "hidden agenda" guiding some charities. Using the kind of marketing approach I remember from my missionary days, they may bring food or medical care, build houses or wells, teach language or other useful things. They may even use famous personalities or entertainment to attract people who need practical assistance.

It might not be obvious to observers or get reported, but a little research may uncover the real motive behind the work: leading people to a sectarian viewpoint.

One aid organization's website states: "We believe in God's calling to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ among all people. In all that we do, we strive to build trust and relationships with the people while honoring the name of Jesus Christ."

These folks are perfectly free to do that of course. No one — in this country, at least — says they can't spread their faith. Yet I always wonder about the "poor souls" who are receiving aid and assistance. Are they aware that those who seek to "build their trust" have a specific goal in mind?

I remember the wary looks I would get from jail inmates or homeless folks on the street when I first introduced myself as a chaplain. "Here to save our souls, I bet," one would say. "I'm not going to your church," another would emphasize.

Over time we did build trust and relationships, helping when and where we were needed. Because our team was interfaith and our "mission" was compassionate presence, most often we were the ones receiving assistance — through direct education.

Many see themselves as "fishers of men." There are a lot of fish in the sea who need to be caught and released as believers, carrying forward the "great commission" to fill the kingdom. "Go ye into all the world," says Matthew, "make disciples of all nations." This is the basis for the old mission model that forgets to listen and learn before "rescuing in order to regenerate."

Not every mission has an ulterior motive. Some may not intend to "make them like us" but don't realize they may be hurting more than helping. Thankfully, other organizations are committed to bringing practical assistance where truly needed, with respect and sensitivity to culture. They've learned from the disastrous missions of the past, especially among Africans and Native Americans.

One mission group, responding to the hurricanes in the Caribbean, proclaimed in capital letters on their website: "[We] trained local churches to distribute relief supplies and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ."

We're all free to support any mission we choose. It may be good to investigate first. The "true mission" may not always be evident.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.

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