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Summary

According to Marvin Olasky, Ph.D., successful charities have seven characteristics in common. These characteristics should be considered before one makes a charitable contribution because compassion without thought may turn a helping hand donation into a mere handout.

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“Helping others means fostering self-reliance and personal responsibility, not just giving away food free for the asking.”

When giving, give wisely

By Kurt T. Weber

Oregonians give generously throughout the year. And they give in ways that usually do not show up in reports on philanthropy, for example, a gift of clothes to a family whose house has burned down, or a meal cooked for a shut-in neighbor. A singular focus on dollars donated underreports the charitable nature of Oregonians.

That said, when charitable contributions of money are given, it is important they be used to foster a positive end. Too often contributions become a mere hand out instead of a helping hand, and the opportunity to change a life for the better is lost.

Marvin Olasky, Ph.D., a former *Bend Bulletin* reporter, is a noted authority on American charities and their history. His knowledge is of an academic and hands-on volunteering nature. Dr. Olasky knows non-profits can shine but, he notes, many charities must change their ways before they can help others.

While researching for his provocative book, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Olasky spent some time posing as a homeless man on the streets of Washington, DC. This gave him a first-person understanding of how the down-and-out were being helped. What he found was compassion without thought.

Olasky discovered that those who purported to be helping the needy were in fact fostering dependency. He found many programs merely prolonged the need, they didn't lift up the needy.

From his experiences and year of research in the Library of Congress, Olasky identified what he considers to be seven key characteristics of successful charities. The seven characteristics, in alphabetical order, are: affiliation, bonding, categorization, discernment, employment, freedom, and God.

The ABCs of successful charities are important to know. Helping others means fostering self-reliance and personal responsibility, not just giving away food free for the asking. That's what we do with pigeons in the park; we should not do that with human beings.

According to Olasky, effective charities share many of the following characteristics. They renew, establish, and strengthen ties between families, friends, and community (affiliation); develop close relationships between those being helped and those helping (bonding); tailor solutions to fit the individual (categorization); and distinguish between those who want a helping hand and those looking for a handout. This means helping individuals recognize and change behavior or decision-making processes that have put them in their predicament (discernment).

Olasky notes that effective charities offer job training that helps lead to self-sufficiency (employment). Skill training can include an exchange of work in return for benefits received. For example, individuals who eat at soup kitchens can purchase and prepare food. The goal of successful programs is to promote independence and foster self-sufficiency (freedom). Finally, Olasky states, faith plays a role in turning lives around; thus, successful programs attend to spiritual, as well as material, needs (God).

Three examples readily come to mind of successful organizations whose charitable programs embrace many or all of the above characteristics in some form: Goodwill Industries, Habitat for Humanity, and Portland's Union Gospel Mission. Countless other examples exist.

Too many people are merely sustained by well-intentioned, but ill-conceived, programs—compassion without thought. A charitable program should not simply sustain a body, rather it should enable individuals to attain their highest potential through the development of their respective abilities and the application of their talents. Further, charitable programs should give, but they should also ask something of those being helped. By doing so, programs will nurture personal responsibility and a respect for human dignity.

Dr. Olasky put it succinctly, "Giving, by itself, we need to remember, is morally neutral. We need to give rightly, so as not to impede the development of values that enable people to get out of poverty and stay out."

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