



THE CHRISTMAS STORE

Why The Christmas Store?

Through extensive research and reading on the topic of helping those in need, we believe a Christmas store where people can purchase Christmas gifts for their children at a greatly reduced price is a great way to restore dignity and ensure some personal responsibility to those we are trying to help by allowing them the ability to provide Christmas for their families.

Books like [When Helping Hurts](#) by Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett and [Toxic Charity](#) by Robert Lupton have strongly influenced and helped shape this opinion. These questions from Toxic Charity, “Is giving to support ‘lifestyle’ poverty really helping recipients or is it enabling them to remain in their present condition?” and “Is there a way we can bring more human dignity to the process of exchange rather than simply using one-way giving?” have us reconsidering how we help those in need.

Consider these quotes from Toxic Charity:

- “To effectively impact a life, a relationship must be forged, trust built, accountability established. And this does not happen in long, impersonal lines of strangers.”
- “While one-way giving may seem like the “Christian” thing to do, it can undermine the very relationship a helper is attempting to build. Such charity subtly implies that the recipient has nothing of value the giver desires in return. To the extent the poor are enabled to participate in the systems intended to serve them, their self-worth is enhanced.”
- “Limit one-way giving to emergency situations.”
- “Personal responsibility is essential for social, emotional and spiritual well-being.”
- “Sometimes when we work so hard to develop efficient systems to dispense charity, we overlook the cost in human dignity.”
- “The hard part is rethinking the entrenched giveaway mentality and restructuring an established one-way charity system.”

The idea behind a Christmas Store is that we are providing an opportunity for parents to choose gifts for their children at a greatly reduced price. This allows them to be part of the process and experience the same joy on Christmas morning as most other parents across the nation- seeing their children opening gifts they had purchased through the efforts of their own hands.

Personal shoppers accompany each parent through the store assisting in the process which allows time for a relationship to develop between a Still Waters member and a shopper. Parents will be encouraged to bring their children with them, and while parents are shopping and wrapping the gifts, the children will be having fun in the children's area where they will hear and participate in the story of Jesus' birth, make a craft gift to give to their parents on Christmas morning so they too can experience the joy of giving, and enjoy fun and fellowship with members of Still Waters.

The store concept allows for greater participation from the members of Still Waters. There will be plenty of areas where volunteers can be utilized from sorting toys, setting up the store, being a personal shopper, helping at the gift wrapping station, helping with the children's area, and much more. This is an event for the church family to really come together and love on those in need during the Christmas season.

The money collected at the store can then be used to give back to either a charity or in some way benefit the community whatever we determine that to be. This is not about collecting money for Still Waters.

The idea of paying for their gifts restores dignity because they have something to offer and they are no longer just getting a handout, which can lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Shoppers then are not only getting gifts but also making a charitable contribution as well.

This idea is not our own. It has come from several resources, and there are multiple churches that already do this that we have gained insight from on the logistics of it all. Below are excerpts from When Helping Hurts and Toxic Charity specifically about Christmas gift giving. While these are more urban settings, I think the same principles apply in our area. Please take a minute to read through these.

When Helping Hurts by Brian Fikkert
Pages 62-63

And now we have come to a very central point: *one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich –their god-complexes- and the poverty of being of the economically poor – their feelings of inferiority and shame.* The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates – albeit unintentionally – that we are superior and they are inferior. In the process we hurt the poor and ourselves. And there is a clincher: this dynamic is likely to be particularly strong whenever middle-to-upper-class, North American Christians try to help the

poor, given these Christians' tendency toward a Western, materialistic perspective of the nature of poverty.

This point can be illustrated with the story of Creekside Community Church, a predominantly Caucasian congregation made up of young urban professionals in a downtown area of an American city. Being in the Christmas spirit, Creekside Community Church decided to reach out to the African-American residents of a nearby housing project, which was characterized by high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy. A number of members of Creekside expressed some disdain for the project residents, and all of the members were fearful of venturing inside.

But Pastor Johnson insisted that Jesus cared for the residents of this housing project and that Christmas was the perfect time to show His compassion. But what could they do to help? Believe that poverty is primarily a lack of material resources, the members of Creekside Community Church decided to address this poverty by buying Christmas presents for the children in the housing project. Church members went door to door, singing Christmas carols and delivering wrapped toys to the children in each apartment. Although it was awkward at first, the members of Creekside were moved by the big smiles on the children's faces and were encouraged by the warm reception of the mothers. In fact, the congregation felt so good about the joy they had brought that they decided to expand this ministry, delivering baskets of candy at Easter and turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately after several years, Pastor Johnson noticed that he was struggling to find enough volunteers to deliver the gifts to the housing project. At the congregational meeting, he asked the members why their enthusiasm was waning, but it was difficult to get a clear answer. Finally, one member spoke up: "Pastor, we are tired of trying to help these people out. We have been bringing them things for several years now, but their situation never improves. They just sit there in the same situation year in and year out. Have you ever noticed that there are no men in the apartments when we deliver the toys? The residents are all unwed mothers who just keep having babies in order to collect bigger and bigger welfare checks. They don't deserve our help."

In reality, there was a different reason that there were few men in the apartments when the toys were delivered. Oftentimes, when the fathers of the children heard the Christmas carols outside their front doors and saw the presents for their kids through the peepholes, they were embarrassed and ran out the back doors of their apartments. For a host of reasons, low-income African-American males sometimes struggle to find and keep jobs. This often contributes to a deep sense of shame and inadequacy, both of which make it even more difficult to apply for jobs. The last thing these fathers needed was a group of middle-to-upper class Caucasians providing Christmas presents for their children, presents that they themselves could not afford to buy.

In trying to alleviate material poverty through the giving of these presents, Creekside Community Church increased these fathers' poverty of being. Ironically, this likely made the

fathers even less able to apply for a job, thereby exacerbating the very material poverty that Creekside was trying to solve!

Toxic Charity by Robert Lupton
Pages 31-33, 38-39

It was my first Christmas living in the inner city, the first time I had the luxury of relaxing on a Christmas Eve in the living room of a low-income family. Usually I was rushing back and forth from the suburbs with vanloads of presents and food for the poor, organizing toy parties, coordinating adopt-a-family gift deliveries. This year was different. I was no longer a commuter. I was a neighbor.

My decision to live in the city came after a decade of counseling struggling inner-city families. Over time it became apparent that the best chance for these families to build hopeful futures lay in the effecting change from within their neighborhoods. When our organization, Focused Community Strategies, decided to direct the work more locally, several of our staff committed themselves to move in, become neighbors, and join the community in this transformational effort.

That's why Christmas Eve of '81 I celebrated the season as a newcomer to this urban neighborhood, sipping coffee with one of my new neighbors.

When the knock finally came on their front door, their mom greeted the visitors – a well-dressed family with young children- and invited them to step inside. A nervous smile concealed her embarrassment as she graciously accepted armfuls of neatly wrapped gifts. In the commotion, no one noticed that the children's father had quietly slipped out of the room – no one but their mom.

Not until the guests were gone and the children had torn through the wrappings to the treasures inside did one of the little ones ask where their father was. No one questioned their mother's response that he had to go to the store. But after organizing these kinds of Christmas charity events for years, I was witnessing a side I had never noticed before: How a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family, how a wife is forced to shield her children from their father's embarrassment, how children get the message that the "good stuff" comes from rich people out there and it is free.

Only after becoming a neighbor was I able to see what we had done. Christmas Eve in that living room, I became painfully aware that not all charity is good charity. Even the most kindhearted, rightly motivated giving – as innocent as giving Christmas toys to needy children – can exact an unintended toll on a parent's dignity. Inadvertently I had done just that. Not just this time but many times.

This kind of charity has to stop, I vowed. The cost was just too great, the emotional pain too severe. There had to be a better way.

The following Christmas, we terminated our adopt-a-family gift-giving program. When well-resourced families called to contribute to a family, we asked if they would be willing to give an extra gift that year- the gift of dignity to the dads. Instead of delivering toys directly to the homes of the poor, donors were directed to bring unwrapped gifts to the Family Store where a large section was decorated as The Old Toy Shop. A bargain price was placed on each toy, and parents from the neighborhood were invited to come shopping for the special gifts sure to delight their children. Those who had no money were able to work at the store, earning what they needed for their purchases. In this way parents in the city experienced the same joy on Christmas morning as most other parents across the nation – seeing their children opening gifts they had purchased through the efforts of their own hands.

That second Christmas our predictions proved spot-on: our low-income neighbors would much rather work to purchase gifts for their children than stand in free-toy lines with their “proof of poverty” identification.