

MentorNet #27
Guidelines for Emergency Relief Work

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These guidelines have grown out of observation of relief workers' activities during disasters in which thousands of persons were left destitute and suffering, due to hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, drought, war and so forth.

1. Disasters bring out the best and worst in people, requiring wise discernment on the part of those who direct relief efforts.
 - Compassionate people respond quickly, giving generously to those in need, volunteering to serve on relief teams.
 - Selfish people also respond quickly, and are among the first to volunteer as relief workers.
 - Wise relief coordinators learn quickly to discern these two types of volunteers. This discernment requires vigilance and close cooperation with trusted local leaders. Without this precaution greed will soon become the greatest impediment to distributing relief supplies to those who need it most. Greedy people devise ingenious ways to get control of goods meant for those in need. Cases are innumerable of truck drivers, warehouse workers and other helpers who have pilfered huge quantities of relief supplies during disasters. No relief effort, it seems, is immune to this abuse.
2. Relief efforts coordinated by Christian workers can give better and longer lasting results, if they follow Christian principles.
 - Observations show that great numbers of people come to Christ because of disasters. The Holy Spirit uses the distress to force people to focus on ultimate realities of life and death.
 - Churches are often born or strengthened as a result of disasters. Christians, both local and outside helpers, often offer the most sacrificial service. Congregations of believers discover greater depth of purpose.
 - New believers in disaster areas can be formed into cells that will grow into congregations, provided that believing relief workers know how to do so and are not hindered by an organizations' restrictive policies and managers.
3. Relief coordinators must clearly discern the difference between emergency relief work and long-term development work, without confusing the two.
 - Relief workers are 'Good Samaritans' who show compassionate love in a practical way to those who might die if not cared for. They meet immediate needs in any way they can, without regard to the principles that should guide long-term work.
 - Long-term development workers, on the other hand, must foresee long-term results of their aid and take much more care not simply to give away food or medicine in ways that build dependency. They must work very closely with local leaders and see that community members take initiative and leadership in their

- development projects. Wise Christian community developers seek to integrate their efforts with other church ministries and church planting.
- Observations of Christian relief and development work show that some spiritual gift inventories confuse condescending pity with true compassion. People who scored high in 'Compassion' sometimes manifest unwise, condescending pity and are too quick simply to hand out money or goods to the needy, thereby building unhealthy dependency.
 - Emergency relief projects often evolve into long-term development, especially where poverty was severe before disaster struck. Workers who are experienced only in relief work may need more training to deal wisely with long-term development. Facing life-and-death emergencies accustoms them to meet dire needs of the moment quickly giving little thought to long-term results.
4. Poverty fosters greed and requires a spiritual response to overcome it.
- People born in painful poverty, when brought together with more affluent people, have an instinctive desire to spread out the wealth. From childhood they have consciously or unconsciously developed a habit of getting goods or money from those who are more fortunate, in any way they can. It does not bother their conscience to lie and cheat to do so, because they have been taught to grasp what they can when an opportunity arrives. Rather, it would bother their conscience not to steal or cheat to gain small amounts of money or goods.
 - Those who are born and raised in extreme poverty, including some Christians, commonly exhibit some form of 'communal greed'. Conscientious believers overcome greed with prayerful, biblical instruction.
 - Showing a condescending attitude towards victims of poverty inevitably stimulates greed.
 - Relief coordinators must discern the difference between condescending pity and helpful compassion. Mere, condescending pity builds unwanted dependency among the poor who come to depend on outside aid and on wealthy patrons rather than upon hard work and their own resources, thereby, over time, increasing their poverty.
5. Missionaries and denominational leaders must give relief to all who need it, and not limit it to their own people.
- During times of widespread emergency, most missionaries and denominational leaders put aside sectarian interests and provide aid to all who need it. As a result, thousands come to Christ and congregations grow rapidly.
 - Unfortunately, other leaders focus on their own people and channel food, medicines and other relief selfishly to the needy of their own organization. This has given a very bad testimony for Christ on a few sad occasions.
6. Wise Christian relief and development workers remain alert to opportunities to respond to spiritual needs where they are wanted.
- When Christians show compassion and equal treatment of all those in need, regardless of class, caste, ethnicity or religion, local victims often recognize that Christians are different from others. Matt. 5:16

- Christians' dependence on God and prayer, as well as their own worship times amidst disaster, that others observe, can have a powerful drawing effect. See 1 Cor. 14:24.
 - Disaster often provides the earliest opportunities for national and local congregations to become involved in communities where they used to be unwanted or that they used to neglect.
 - People in dire need are often much helped by the spiritual practices of Christians who pray with them, counsel them, show them love, and point them to a Power that is greater than their gods and religion. See Tit. 3:8.
 - Integrated relief and development have long proved more effective than single, specialty services to communities.
7. Wise Christian relief and development agencies make church planting and reproduction a stated part of their strategy, and they train their workers in methods that work in needy communities.
- Every relief and development effort benefits from co-operating with 'grass-root' organizations that are already part of their communities. Long-term development planners seek such organizations that have a capacity for community action. Churches do that very well, so that church planting is an important part of development planning.
 - Both development and church planting principles and practices should be part of all workers' training, even though some will specialize more in one than in another, according to their gifting and job requirements. Program personnel must be committed to help each other succeed in their efforts.
 - Just as local people should be the primary implementers of development practices, so they make the best church planters, after they come to faith. For that to happen, program personnel should make new churches a part of their vision, their goals, their objectives and their instruction.
 - As a general observation, church-planting missions that also do relief and development will do more lasting development than will community development agencies that focus only on development, and community development agencies that also do church planting will plant more churches than will a church-planting mission that focuses only on church planting.
 - Just as relief and development agencies often produce and provide simple, practical instructional materials for use of local populations, so they should produce and provide simple, practical evangelistic and church planting materials.
 - The apostle John summed up our responsibilities: **“Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”** 1 John 3:17-18

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