

Reversing the Cycle

In December 1997 Plant With Purpose's technical director, Bob Morikawa, and our new Haitian director, Jean-Mari Desilus (whom we called Dezo), traveled with me to the Haitian village of Kavanac. The sun beat down on us as we walked a steep, narrow path between hillside farms, their tiny fields separated from one another by loose rock walls. Ragged corn struggled through the rocks on either side of us. My lunch was not sitting well.

After we'd crossed one ridge and were on our way up a second long slope, I told the others I needed a rest. As I sat on a large stone, contemplating the hill in front of me, two elderly women came up the hill, five-gallon buckets of water balanced on their heads. "*Bon swa, blan,*" they greeted me. They asked where we were going, and Dezo told them we were headed to a village meeting in Kavanac. The older woman said they were on their way to the same meeting. "We'll let them know you will be along in a while," she said with a teasing grin.

At the top of the last ridge, I could see the Caribbean to the south, Haiti's tallest mountain, Pic La Selle, shrouded in clouds to the east, and the brilliant blue water of the Bay of Port-au-Prince to the north. A little farther along the ridge sat a group of

about forty farmers, men and women, in an open-sided lean-to made of wood and corrugated tin. When we reached them, several sidled up to me and discreetly held out their hands while rubbing their stomachs.

I shook my head, indicating I had nothing to give them.

The meeting convened and moved past pleasantries to a series of questions from the community as to what Plant With Purpose intended to do in the village. A woman stood and, in a confrontational tone, told me about the other humanitarian agencies that had worked in the area. She named two agencies that had brought food and clothes, then left and never returned. “How is Plant With Purpose going to be any different?”

After giving the question some consideration, I responded, “Well, first of all, we are not going to give you anything.”

She looked stunned.

“Second, we are not going to leave until you ask us to.”

The woman stood there, speechless.

Once we understand God’s heart for justice and the vicious cycle of deforestation and poverty that traps the poor, how do we respond? The desire to help is admirable in a world where far too many pass by on the other side of the road. But determining how to respond can be complicated.

I was originally drawn to the work of serving the poor and hungry because it seemed simple, unambiguous, and virtuous. I had studied political science and was often struck by the moral ambiguity and unexpected consequences of most policy choices. Well-intended programs often had the opposite effect of what their drafters expected. The most well-meaning projects could cause great harm. As I was to discover, humanitarian work can be nearly as complicated.

Many humanitarian organizations respond to poverty and injustice by giving surplus food, medicine, and clothes, and maybe starting orphanages and clinics. They focus on treating the symptoms of poverty—which sorely need to be treated. But others ask questions about the root causes: Why are people are hungry and sick? Why so many orphaned children?

The Bible seems pretty straightforward in its approach: give a cup of cold water in the name of the Lord. Our first response is often to give things away. The poor clearly lack things, and we have things, so what could be more obvious than giving out of our abundance?

Yet giving things often comes with unintended consequences. Without knowing the needs and challenges faced by local communities, our gifts can be inappropriate. In one community where we work, a relatively new bulldozer sat in front of a school yard for many years, slowly rusting. No doubt it was given with the best of intentions and was probably very expensive to ship. Yet it was completely inappropriate to the local conditions. It ended up serving as a germination bed for weeds and a few small trees before being sold for scrap.

Even when gifts are appropriate to the needs of the people, they can often create dependency. Haiti has received numerous donations and many short-term mission teams have come to share the gospel and build churches and school buildings. Yet there is a growing school of thought that much of our aid may be hurting the locals.

As we were establishing Plant With Purpose in Haiti, a long-time missionary sternly informed us that he wasn't sure Haiti needed another well-intended nonprofit agency. "We have created a nation of beggars," he said. "For years folks have been coming down here thinking they are helping by giving things away. But that just teaches people to beg." Another missionary told me that after citizens in one village received cracked wheat from USAID, few local farmers bothered to plant corn because they couldn't compete with free food.

Often, the problem is less with aid itself than with how it is applied. We tend to focus on short-term, immediate-impact solutions rather than long-term investments in people. Many Americans have at least a passing understanding of what handouts do to initiative, self-esteem, and motivation. We talk of how a welfare mentality creates dependency. When we see panhandlers on the street corner, most of us realize a handout won't change their lives. A gospel tract probably won't do much good, either—

though it may be better than handing them a dollar. Unfortunately, we don't always translate that understanding into our approach to the poor overseas.

Talents

An insight from Scripture comes in the parable of talents in Matthew 25:14-30. The man who received five talents put it to work and made five more; the man given two talents made two more. The individual who received only one talent buried it. Most sermons preached on this passage emphasize the need to utilize what God has given us. And that is an important lesson.

But there is something odd about the ending of the parable. The poorest man, the one who is given the least yet fails to take advantage of what he has, is thrown into the outer darkness. It has always struck me as strange that the poor man is the bad guy in this story.

Jesus could have conveyed the same message about using what we've been given if the man who received two talents were the one who buried them. Or he could have made the man receiving five talents the unfaithful one, which would seem in keeping with his other warnings to the rich. But for some reason he chose to make an example of the "one-talent man."

For the time being I have given up trying to decipher the justice of the parable. But I have come to realize that, fair or not, it actually fits my real-life experience. The poor are often unaware of their own talents, resources, and power. They have been labeled as helpless, backwards, and uneducated so often that they have begun to believe it. They have, in effect, buried their talents.

Just as the man in the parable believed a lie about the character of the master, many of the people we work with have come to believe a lie about who God is, about their relationship with him, and about what they have been given. Though many of them are Christians, they often believe they have little to offer.

When Jesus told the parable, one talent was worth a significant amount of money, so in fact the "one-talent man" was not actually poor. Similarly, the gifts that God has given to every one

of us—even the poorest of the poor—are of immense value when put to use.

One evening in the early days of our work in Haiti, several of us sat on the front porch of a guesthouse in Grand Colline, exchanging stories and watching fireflies. Pere Albert, the Haitian Episcopal priest with whom we partnered, came up the path from the vocational school building, where he lived, to join us.

The conversation turned to his testimony. He told us how happy he was that God had given him a task to do. “God gives each of us something to do for him,” he said. “It’s as if a boss gathered together a group of his workers, and he turned to each one and said, ‘I have a very important job for you.’” With childlike glee he exclaimed, “It makes me happy that God wants to work with me. I feel excited!”

Then he asked, “Can you imagine how you’d feel if, when the boss got to you, he skipped you because he had nothing for you to do?”

For the first time, it dawned on me how terrible it must feel to believe you have nothing to contribute, to feel you are and always will be completely dependent on the goodwill of outsiders. The good news, implicit in the Mathew 25 parable, is that everyone has been given talents they can work with. We all have something to contribute to the kingdom of God. Each of us has an important role to play. This is news we need to hear for ourselves and share with others, because it is significant and too often neglected.

The lie of the world, reinforced by the media and believed by millions, is that the poor are worthless. The global economic system measures worth in dollars—you are paid according to how society values your contribution. The message is that as a Haitian farmer, no matter how bright you are, and no matter how hard you work, you will never be worth more than a few hundred dollars a year.

We need to defeat the lie that says worth is measured in dollars.

Sadly, the poor and many of those who try to help them have unknowingly bought into this lie. For the poor, it is manifested in a lack of self-confidence, self-esteem, and initiative. For those seeking to help, it manifests itself in condescension and patronizing attitudes.

STEP ASIDE WITH **ROBERT LINTHICUM***Empowerment and Transformation*

I was in Chicago to attend a conference, and I decided to visit my former church. When I contacted the present pastor for his permission, he not only gave it but also promised to gather some of my former parishioners.

As I started up the street toward my old church, I was astounded by the changes in my old neighborhood. No more trash lay in the gutters, trees were flourishing along the once-barren street, new sidewalks had been laid, the businesses were obviously thriving, lawns in front of apartment buildings lay green and verdant, and apartments were painted and pointed. “This community no longer belongs to the poor,” I thought. “It has been gentrified!”

How wrong I was.

When I got to the church and greeted my former members, one woman who had been part of our community organizing effort asked, “Well, what do you think of your old neighborhood?”

“I’m blown away,” I responded. “What happened?”

I was thrilled by what she told me. That neighborhood hadn’t been gentrified at all. Instead, the community organization I’d helped found had pulled together the shops, businesses, churches, and the residents to reclaim that neighborhood. Those citizens had organized to push out the criminal element and to rebuild their neighborhood, by providing their own volunteer sweat and pressuring the city to bring in funding to renovate it. The people insisted that such renovation had to be green.

The interests of each person and every group in the community had been served, not by seeking anyone’s individual good but by organizing together to seek the community’s good. Thus, what had been a former slum had become a delightful place to live—because the members of that community were willing to use the significant people-power at their disposal.

Dr. Robert C. Linthicum is founder and president emeritus of Partners in Urban Transformation.

Unfortunately, when outsiders offer help, whether through foreign aid, short-term missions, or donations, we often reinforce this lie. We bring used clothes that put local tailors out of business and give away free food that undercuts the local farmers. We construct buildings for people, putting local masons and carpenters out of work and implicitly sending the message that it takes outsiders to get things done. We may even encourage small businesses based on models that work in the United States, but because we don't understand the culture and local economics, these businesses fail. And that failure reinforces the lie that the local people are incapable of succeeding.

The elders from an evangelical church in a small village in Mexico approached me about the construction of a new church building. A concrete foundation had been poured, and had been sitting there for years. When I asked why they'd not started building it, one of the elders told me, "We have been waiting for you to come do it for us."

I don't mean to disparage anyone who gives to the poor. We are commanded to do so. There are times when a handout is the most important thing a person can receive. People need assistance when they are sick, or after a disaster, or helpless. Children who have no families clearly need someone to care for them.

But if we do for others what they can and should do for themselves, we rob them of their dignity and reinforce the lie that they have nothing to offer. We create dependency.

A story is told of travelers who come into a community during a famine and ask for something to eat. They are told there is nothing. The travelers take out a pot and begin to make soup by boiling some stones. When asked about it, they explain that they are making "stone soup" and only need a bit of garnish to improve it. One by one everyone in the village brings something to contribute. In the end a fine stew is made, with everyone eating their fill.

Similarly, the members of a community often have the materials and resources needed to change their situation. Sometimes people just need a catalyst and a little organization to create something far better than any of them could have imagined.

To minimize the sense of dependence on outsiders, Plant With Purpose works through indigenous partner organizations, staffed

by local directors and teams. These indigenous leaders have taught me a great deal.

In Haiti, Dezo stressed time and again that we must not give things away, because the “peasants” weren’t helpless. In Mexico, I learned the importance of community participation and ownership. In Tanzania I discovered the significance of responding to community priorities. If we come in with our preconceived notions of what needs to be fixed, we inevitably fail.

This is a difficult lesson for Americans to learn, coming from our take-charge, can-do culture. Even when we understand our tendency to take charge, it is difficult for us to resist. Bryant Myers, in *Walking with the Poor*, talks about the temptation to play God in the lives of the poor.¹ We want to be heroes when that is not rightfully our role. The temptation to be “like God” led to the downfall of Adam and Eve, and it remains strong today.

The first step in our work is helping people understand their own power and their value in the kingdom. This is foundational. However, empowerment takes time. It requires patience and the participation of the local people. We need to get over our American tendency to be task-oriented and to think we know all the answers. The local people must take responsibility for the change they want to see in their communities. They need to participate in and own the plan. There are a host of participatory tools for making this happen.

When it comes to solving the problem of poverty, the poor themselves are our most important allies, yet they are probably the most overlooked. When it comes to issues of rural environmental degradation, the rural poor have the skills, insight, and vested interest to solve these problems. They have far more intelligence and initiative than most people give them credit for. Sometimes all they lack is self-confidence or opportunity.

Yet far too often, those who want to help view the poor as an obstacle. The temptation is to try to solve their problems for them without involving them. One of the most important things we can do is empower the poor to realize and use their God-given talents to change their communities and restore their land.

Rather than doing the projects ourselves, we outsiders need to facilitate the process. Only after the local community identifies what is holding them back, the barriers to their progress, should

we step in with what we can contribute. Too many times, I have seen this process reversed.

If you are giving things away, a poor community will almost always accept your donations, no matter how inappropriate. Even if you don't offer input up front, they may try to anticipate what it is you have to give away and match their needs to that.

There are a number of biblical examples of people being empowered to participate in their own development. For example, Boaz saw Ruth and took pity on her and her mother-in-law. But rather than simply offering her charity, he let her glean in his fields, preserving her dignity and giving her an opportunity to work.

Another interesting example is seen in the feeding of the five thousand. The disciples told Jesus the crowd was hungry. He could have responded in myriad ways, immediately providing the people with food. But his first response to the disciples was to tell them to feed the people. "You give them something to eat," he said (Mark 6:37). Jesus used what they could contribute as the starting point for a miracle. Stone soup plus the divine hand of God.

Unless we get to know people as individuals, we cannot know what will change their lives. If we don't invest ourselves in their lives, we won't be aware of what they need. When Jesus first sent his disciples out, he told them to take nothing and to depend on the local people for hospitality. By depending on the local people, the disciples formed a deeper connection, getting to know the people to whom they were ministering. This was the first short-term mission.

The relationships the disciples formed as they went out were much more equitable than those formed on most mission trips. In fact, our short-term teams are usually so laden with used clothes, surplus medicine, give-away items, and extras for our own comfort, moving the team to the field sometimes requires extra vehicles. Yet it is only when a real relationship is established that the good news of the kingdom can be shared.

Act as if . . .

God's kingdom is a mystery in many ways: at once within us and coming; now and future. The concept was confusing to the disci-

ples even though they had the benefit of being mentored daily by the very Author of the kingdom, so it is small wonder that the idea of the kingdom is confusing to us. We tend to over-spiritualize it, or confuse it with our own nationalistic conceits, or try to build it on our own, creating some sort of earthly utopia. These efforts almost always turn out badly. But we can model kingdom-type relationships in our work and in our programs. We can live as if we are already in the kingdom.

Our board chairman, a successful businessman, used to coach me to “act as if.” Act as if Plant With Purpose were already the organization we wanted it to be. Act as if we had the resources, reputation, and talent to be the best. His point was not to misrepresent ourselves, but rather that our actions become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Jesus tells us to practice the same in relationship to the kingdom. We can act as if our lives are rooted in the teachings of God’s kingdom. We can act as if it makes sense to turn the other cheek, to give away a shirt if someone asks us for a coat, to act as if we love our enemies and can trust our neighbors. We can act as if the curse has been lifted.

In Genesis 3:17-19 we read of this curse:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. . . . It will produce thorns and thistles for you. . . . By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.

The Scripture also speaks of a day when the curse laid upon the ground for Adam’s sin will be a distant memory. Looking forward to that day, we can act as if we were working *with* creation instead of against it.

Ultimately, the curse has already been broken through Christ’s work on the cross, yet we still live with its effects. Though we cannot create the kingdom, we can proclaim it and model it in our actions and relationships, including our relationship with creation. By so doing, we can begin to reverse vicious cycles, such as the cycle of deforestation and poverty.

From Vicious Cycles to Victorious Cycles

We have the opportunity to begin to transform these vicious cycles into virtuous cycles, where each change makes the next change more effective. A vicious cycle of deforestation and poverty can become a virtuous cycle of reforestation and economic empowerment. When the Holy Spirit is involved and kingdom relationships are modeled, a virtuous cycle can become a victorious cycle.

A virtuous cycle is created when we make environmental restoration profitable for the rural poor at the same time as we make poverty-reduction beneficial for the environment. The problems of deforestation and poverty, when taken by themselves, seem intractable. If you address only one of them, either the environmental or the economic, the one you ignore will beat you. However, when addressed together the solutions can be mutually reinforcing.

One of Plant With Purpose's key principles is that it is easier to address both problems together than to take on each one individually. Thus we simultaneously emphasize environmental and economic solutions.

But there is also a spiritual dimension to these problems. For lasting change to take place, we believe Jesus must be involved. We cannot succeed in our task unless Jesus empowers us and walks with us. In order for lives to be transformed, Christ must be working in people's lives.

That is not to say we force our faith or our witness on anyone. We serve the poor out of our love for Jesus, and it is our desire that people would come to know him, but we do not want to manipulate people in any way. To imply in any way that someone needs to convert in order to receive help from Plant With Purpose would be manipulative, so we go out of our way to make it clear to people that their involvement in the spiritual activities of Plant With Purpose is optional. Yet we believe only Jesus can take a virtuous cycle of economic opportunity and environmental restoration and turn it into something that truly resembles the kingdom of God—a victorious cycle.

We work to create virtuous cycles where economic development, environmental restoration, and discipleship intersect. We

begin by empowering the poor to make their own choices. It is the basis for everything else we try to do, including sharing the good news.

Back to Kavanac

After that first meeting in Kavanac in 1997, Dezo and our local staff began getting together with the farmers group on a regular basis. The staff facilitated planning, provided training, and organized a loan group.

Three years later, I again made the trek up the stony ridges to the tiny meeting house on the spine of Haiti's southern peninsula. This time I was met by a very different group. No one asked me for money. Everyone was eager to tell me all they had accomplished. A credit group had been formed and members were receiving loans. Trees had been planted. Rainwater harvesting systems and cisterns had been constructed. Families were buying land they had formerly rented or sharecropped. Fruit trees had been made more productive through grafting.

The highlight of the meeting occurred when a woman I knew as Madan (Creole for *Mrs.*) Forvil stood up and proudly said, "What you have given us is the knowledge that we are not helpless, but that God has given us talents we can use to change our community."

Seeing those talents emerge was exciting for me. The dejected group I'd met in 1997 turned out to be an extraordinarily gifted community. I often wonder what they could have done had they been given the opportunities so many of us take for granted and even squander.

The story of Kavanac has not been 100 percent smooth or successful. And it is not finished. But the first and most important steps have been taken. And we can be certain that transformation will continue long after we leave.