

Poor Children Deserve A Place At The Table

By John P. Asling

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Opening my Spectator to the Community page one recent morning, I was greeted by the sight of a generous Christian family surrounded by stacks of red and green Christmas shoe boxes stuffed with North American treasures destined for children in the developing world. The headline said it all: A box full of joy. But for whom? I know the experience of many of the well intentioned families as they fill the boxes with gifts is indeed one of joy. But, without casting aspersions on the motives of these good people, I have to ask: will the colourful boxes truly bring joy to the children receiving them in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean or Asia? I don't think so. When I read the Spectator article, I immediately thought of the story Rev. Lesley Harrison, a former global mission personnel from The United Church of Canada, told a group of us when she returned from serving in Nicaragua a few years ago. One day she arrived in Bluefields from her posting in Pearl Lagoon to a chaotic scene in the church yard. A group of children were locked outside the gates (the gates were never shut) and looking in on a select group inside the gates who were opening shoe boxes from somewhere in North America. Harrison picks up the story: "Inside the gates were more children, many more. These children were different from those outside the gate as they each held a box, a shoe box wrapped in Christmas paper. I got a church worker to let me in and I stood in the relative chaos: some children laughing, many upset, others beginning to cry, a few fighting over what was in their box, a couple passing small items through the gates to little hands reaching in. "Many of the things in the boxes these children had never seen before, which added to the confusion. There were few adults to guide this experience. Adults, usually mothers, are busy finding and preparing food, washing and minding younger children." Harrison then talked to two local ministers who were tired and frustrated from the whole experience. The shoe boxes landed on their door steps and they were expected to take the time and energy needed to distribute them in a fair way - an impossible task.

In addition, there were no boxes coming to Pearl Lagoon and the poor people of that community. Said Harrison: "There were not enough boxes. There would never be enough boxes for all the children! Was this what the children of Nicaragua needed for Christmas?" The experience of many in the churches and other organizations doing solidarity work together with the poor in places like Nicaragua has taught us a great deal about projects like the shoe box operations. We know, for example, that many cultures do not celebrate Christmas the way we do and therefore to send North American glitter is to impose a kind of materialistic North American value on these poor people. Of course, many recipients do not mark Christmas at all because they belong to other faiths which have their own celebrations. Some shoe boxes offer Christian materials meant to proselytize. Many churches no longer believe that is appropriate. Some of the gifts are just plain culturally inappropriate, such as Pokemon going to places where kids have never heard of it; toys that need batteries going to countries where replacement batteries either aren't available or aren't affordable; or other personal products, like shampoo or toothpaste, going to parts of the world where they aren't used. As already mentioned, it is

virtually impossible to distribute the boxes fairly. Another of our former United Church overseas personnel, Rev. Janice Van Aertselaer of Saskatchewan, and formerly of Kenya, said in a recent article, " There are many stories of some children receiving the gifts while others look on longingly, and even some stories of communities fighting over gifts because there weren't enough for everyone." In addition, she says, the shoe box operations are costly. The shipping, the publicity and distribution costs could be better spent on the helping the recipients meet their basic needs: clean drinking water, food, health care and education. "The recipients have minimal involvement in deciding whether or not this is the kind of help they want. It seems that this project is more effective at making us as Canadians feel good than it is at meeting the real needs of children in other countries," Van Aertselaer said. The bottom line is the shoe boxes offer a great opportunity for people from wealthier countries to feel good about themselves - and very little indeed for the many impoverished in the two-thirds world. In fact, these efforts keep us from looking at the fundamental issues of justice, fairness and re-distribution of the world's plentiful resources that are the only long-term answer for poor children here in Canada and in other parts of the world. Shoe boxes at Christmas are but another example of how we in the wealthier world are hooked on self-serving, short-sighted, individualistic, simplistic charity. David Hilfiker, a doctor working in inner-city Washington, D.C., poses this question after nearly 20 years of working in the charity world: "Hidden in every act of compassion toward the poor is the danger that it will perpetuate the underlying causes of poverty? How do we keep our charity from delaying the structural changes that justice demands?" He adds that after his years working in charity, he has begun to see some side effects to the kind of work he is doing and they concern the important difference between charity and justice. "Justice has to do with fairness, and with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. Charity has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people's good will and can be withdrawn whenever they choose. "To put the question most bluntly: Do our works of charity impede the realization of justice in our society?" One person who believes that is the case is Janet Poppendieck, a sociologist and author of the book, *Sweet Charity*. She argues that charity acts "as a kind of moral safety valve" which reduces the discomfort we feel as a result of the destitution found alongside great wealth and creates the illusion of effective action. "It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to injustice," Poppendieck says. So, what do you do if you are asked to get involved in one of the shoe box campaigns? You can and should say no and get involved in faith or community-based justice efforts that try to make change in the world. But if you just must get involved, consider these suggestions offered by Deborah Marshall of the United Church's Justice, Global, Ecumenical Relations Unit:

- * Try to find out what the purpose of the particular project is. Does it invite study to understand the global context in which the children live?
- * Ask if the project address the root causes of the suffering or need.
- * Make the contents of the shoe box appropriate to the country that will be receiving it.
- * Insist that there be input from the children and leaders abroad on the contents of the boxes.

But what we really need in the long term is a major shift in our thinking. We need to think, if you will, outside "the shoe box to the developing world" mentality, and start to change our local and international communities into places where there is enough (because there is enough) for all. That's what the best religious and community activists have always called for and acted on. To offer a slight rewrite of broadcaster Bill Moyer's recent introduction to a book by American activist Rev. Jim Wallis, shoe boxes (charity) offer crumbs from the table; working for change (justice) offers a place at the table." It's time the children of the developing world had a place at the table.

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