
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Help

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I enjoyed hearing about the service project that your friend, Philip, completed over his spring break.

I gather that Philip's church has been going down to the same neighborhood in New Orleans ever since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005.

It can be difficult to go into an isolated urban neighborhood and do what Philip did, particularly in just a week. Someone did a lot of organizing for that to happen. And, a lot of people did a lot of work to create the trust that a project like that requires.

I'm not surprised that Philip enjoyed the meals the most. New Orleans is known for its food; but, it's more than that. Eating together reminds us of our shared needs and the joy of meeting them together.

Things have changed since I went on my first mission trip.

Back then, we went into neighborhoods, picked up trash, planted flowers, gave away food and clothing, and painted houses. It was fun to do, and things did look better when we left.

When we actually got to know the people who lived there, though, they told us that we were making matters worse. They didn't want us to do things for them, as much as they wanted us to help them do things for themselves.

We learned over time that the best way to help was not to do things the way we normally did them. We stopped doing "for" and started doing "with."

So, now, people are much more likely to let local leaders tell us what they think needs to be done and then work shoulder-to-shoulder with the neighborhood on those projects.

People are looking for ways to build the capacity of people by starting up legitimate businesses – like food co-ops instead of free-food pantries, toy stores instead of adopt-a-family gift-giving programs, thrift houses instead of free-clothes closets. Businesses have a way of eliminating dependencies while restoring dignity.

And, people are looking for ways to measure whether things are getting better over time. Someone is always benefiting from the services offered. It's important that the beneficiaries not be just the service providers.

If you are interested in learning more about how all of this works, you might read *Toxic Charity*, by Bob Lupton.

It was painful for me to realize how easily we can hurt those we are trying to help, but every time I hear about a successful partnership like the one Philip's church has created with the neighborhood in New Orleans, I have renewed hope!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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