

## **Elizabeth Berridge on voluntarism and good neighbourliness**

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- **There is a deep-seated - God-given - human urge to help others in need.**
- **Christians should give their time and their money - but the proportions may differ throughout their lives.**
- **We should place more value on the unseen work done by so many individual volunteers. They should receive more public recognition and support.**

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### **Time and Money**

"Somebody has to pay the innkeeper," Ann Widdecombe said recently, referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan. But why did he decide to be the one to foot the bill? Why would anyone volunteer for more work, more responsibility? The parable raises some searching questions.

Many people are familiar with the story of the priest and the Levite, respected members of society, who ignore the plight of the injured man. The Good Samaritan is different. He gives emergency practical assistance at the scene of the crime - and then financial support. This illustrates the balance we need to strike in voluntary work. Our giving of time and skills needs to go hand in hand with our giving of money.

If we only give financially, we forfeit the immense reward of actually witnessing someone benefit from our care, and, of course, the trials and difficulties experienced along the way. If we only give practical help, on the other hand, we can fall into the trap of believing that nothing more is required of us. Whether we provide practical care or the money to finance it, both are equally valuable uses of the resources and gifts that God has given us. Neither is more "spiritual" than the other. Perhaps the church needs to make it clear that earning more money than we need in order to finance caring (and clergy) is service to God and the community. Our time and our money are both required of us, but in different proportions at different times in our lives.

### **Why do people volunteer?**

Members of the Conservative Party have a long history of performing voluntary work and raising funds to enable organisations and charities to fulfil their functions. However, we have all been struck by the enormous energy that individuals who have no political or church affiliation will plough into voluntary work. Eventually we all wonder what it is that motivates them.

Perhaps a few do it for self-glorification, or because it is the right thing to be seen to be doing. But that simply does not explain why truck drivers use their holiday time to drive a lorry thousands of miles to Romania. Most voluntary work probably does have an indirect Biblical basis. It arises from relationships. "Honour your father and mother," and the marriage vow "for better ... for worse; in sickness and in health" are quietly lived out in the lives of many who care for sick relatives and spouses. They seek no glory and receive none. Their relationships are not based on feelings but on their commitment to the other person. Care like this can never be replaced by a welfare state.

It is not unusual to hear of people performing extraordinary feats to raise funds for a charity. Often the impetus springs from a desire to support an organisation that has been of help to a friend or relative with a particular illness or problem. The relationship spawns the desire to stop those difficulties affecting the lives of other people in the same way.

A good example is that of Mr. and Mrs Betts, who have toured the country highlighting the dangers of drug abuse after the death of their daughter, Leah. As for our lorry driver, he hears of children in other countries that he has never considered before, and knows virtually nothing about. These children do not have the same blessings his own children enjoy and this spurs his heart into action. The potent mixture of love for his own children and the images he receives through the media make these people his neighbours. As he acts, he fulfils the Biblical mandate to care for widows and aliens and, of course, the injured man by the roadside. Such is the strength of relationships, that they can lead ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

### **Value beyond money**

This power should come as no surprise. The God of the Bible is a relational, trinitarian god. It is scandalous that those who care for the sick and seek to help their neighbour can end up as some of the most undervalued and vulnerable members of society. It is right and encouraging that the Honours List now reflects the contribution of people who faithfully help others, through their job or in their spare time.

Those who put in the overwhelming hours needed to care for relatives need a fairer deal, starting with a statutory entitlement to four weeks paid holiday a year.

The Gross National Product, Gross Domestic Product, Balance of Payments, the strength of the pound, the level of money supply and the rate of inflation are all appropriate indicators of the value of our economy. But when these are the only yardsticks that politicians acknowledge, our nation is evaluated solely in terms of money. We should seek to recognise the hidden economy of those who provide voluntary care or raise funds to remove the burden of care from the welfare state. We should seek to develop indicators that measure the value of all aspects of our economy. The fact that the "hidden economy" remains hidden leads to isolation and undervaluing of many people who devote their lives to doing what is unquestionably the "right" thing.

### FACTFILE

- There were over 185,000 registered charities in England and Wales at the end of 2000
- Their total annual income at the end of 2000 was £24.6 billion
- The bulk of that was generated by a few very large charities; 336 charities earned 42% of the income.
- A recent survey showed that 66% of respondents had given money to charity as part of an in-the-street collection, whilst 24% of those polled had given up their time on a voluntary basis to support a charity.

(Source: The Charity Commission and MORI)

### POSTSCRIPT ON CONSERVATIVE POLICY

The 2001 election general manifesto contained a commitment to establish an Office of Civil Society, to help voluntary and faith-based organizations to reinvigorate local communities and tackle social exclusion and poverty.