

When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert. 2009. Chicago: Moody Publishers. ISBN 978-0-8024-5705-9, \$14.99 (paper).

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Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert provide a fresh perspective on how churches, especially wealthier churches in countries such as the U.S., can engage in ministries that address poverty while remaining true to biblical teaching and sound community development principles. *When Helping Hurts* aims to assist its audience of church leaders and members in understanding the principles and approaches of holistic witness and healthy partnerships with the poor and with their churches and parachurch ministries. Corbett and Fikkert did not write this book primarily for economists or economic researchers. Nonetheless, it will be of value to the many Christian economists, including those members of the Association of Christian Economists who are active in their churches in leading efforts to address and fight poverty.

The book sets out to provide a discussion of the “appropriate ways for a North American congregation—and its missionaries—to participate in poverty alleviation at home and abroad, taking into account the God-ordained mission of the church and the typical church’s organizational capacity” (p. 15). The intended audience for *When Helping Hurts* is a general church audience, including leaders and church members and others interested in the church’s faithful response to poverty. The book includes discussion or reflection questions and can be used for individual reading or group study.

The authors cite their motivation for the book as both “the resurgence in church-based, holistic ministry to the poor” and also the “need to offer a corrective lesson to churches using poverty alleviation strategies that are grounded in unbiblical assumptions about the nature of poverty and that violate ‘best practice’ methodologies developed by theorists and practitioners over the course of many decades” (p. 15). Further, Corbett and Fikkert mention being motivated by their conclusion that North Americans are “simply not doing enough” about poverty, and that the church does not display a widespread and deep concern and level of action about poverty (p. 28). They also describe the phenomenon of North American Christians attempting to do something about poverty, but employing approaches that actually cause harm to both the “materially poor and the materially non-poor” (p. 28).

This 230 page book contains nine chapters and a foreword written by John Perkins, a founder of the Christian Community Development

Association. The book also includes a preface and an introduction as well as a brief section with concluding comments at the end of the book. Chapter one presents an analysis of the meaning of Jesus' incarnation and ministry and resurrection and its implications for the church's understanding of poverty and holistic ministry. The chapter lays out an argument against ministry approaches that separate ministries of word and deed from each other. The authors ask:

What is the task of the church? We are to embody Jesus Christ by doing what He did and what He continues to do through us: declare—using words and deeds—that Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords who is bringing in a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. And the church needs to do this where Jesus did it, among the blind, the lame, the sick and outcast, and the poor (p. 42).

The second chapter presents a definition of poverty and it emphasizes how poverty results from broken relationships and the fall. Citing the work of Bryant Myers, the authors write

Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or are not enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings (p. 62).

In this second chapter Corbett and Fikkert write that we are all broken and “until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low income people is likely to do far more harm than good” (p. 64). They assert this plays out through god-complexes of the rich when working with the poor. They state

And now we have come to a very central point: *one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame* (p. 65, emphasis in original).

They also point out the uniquely devastating dimension of material poverty, especially its being characterized by the lack of meaningful choices and agency. They present the biblical teaching on the special love and concern of God for the materially poor.

Chapter three asks what the goal of Christian efforts to alleviate poverty

is. They assert that addressing poverty means to set relationships right and point out the teaching of Colossians 1:19-20. In chapter four they distinguish between different contexts for relief and development, arguing that often North American churches err by providing relief when what is called for is a development process. An appropriate development process will allow the people involved to become closer to what God intended them to be. They lay out a relief, rehabilitation, and development paradigm. Simply by introducing these categories and making their application clear to popular audiences, the book makes an important contribution. Chapter four also discusses paternalism, including the notion of knowledge paternalism, where outsiders and the rich assume they know how to do things and they have the answers, when in fact, their knowledge may not generalize to the social situation they find themselves facing.

This is followed by a discussion of asset-based community development (ABCD) in chapter five. ABCD focuses on the positive dimensions of the community and the strengths the community has to bring to the community development process. Chapter five also introduces asset mapping, participatory learning and action, and appreciative inquiry. Chapter six then goes into the detail of how to facilitate the participation of the poor in the community development process.

Chapter seven is titled “Doing Short-Term Missions Without Doing Long-Term Harm;” it addresses the issues of short-term missions in light of the understanding of responding to poverty as presented in the earlier chapters. Focusing on one to two week long missions trips, which are the norm for North American churches, Corbett and Fikkert highlight the cultural differences between Americans and people from the Majority World, especially in the areas of concept of time and of concept of self (noting group versus individualistic differences).

Chapter eight addresses the challenge of doing effective poverty alleviation in our own communities, and the book closes with a ninth chapter on how to extend this approach around the world. Alternative approaches such as microfinance and microenterprise, as well as business as mission, are introduced. The role of North American churches is discussed in overseas asset-based community development, and roles of supporter, joint trainer, and mobilizer of workers are discussed.

Throughout the book the authors emphasize two key themes. First, they write that for fullness of life to be experienced, four key relationships must function properly: relationship with God; relationship with one’s self; relationship with other humans; and relationship with the rest of creation. Corbett and Fikkert teach that the Fall broke each of these relationships and thus Christian community development ministry is about reconciling these relationships. To alleviate poverty, their emphasis is upon reconciliation with the objective of helping people respond to their call of glorifying

God through work and through the proper support of their families with the returns to their labor. A second key theme that appears throughout is the necessity to properly understand a community and its situation along the continuum of relief, rehabilitation, and development. They point out instances when churches utilize an approach that might be appropriate in a disaster relief situation, when in fact the situation called for a development approach. These examples illustrate how the misapplication of relief in a development context can needlessly complicate relationships and actually hinder the reconciliation that is central to material poverty alleviation. In discussing community development, they reinforce the concept of asset-based community development as opposed to needs-based development throughout the book.

This book contributes directly to the ongoing discussions within U.S. churches, especially evangelical churches, concerning the nature of missions and development efforts. In recent conversations with church members and mission leaders, I have learned of leaders within missions and development agencies, such as World Vision staff and U.S.-based leaders of an evangelical medical missions organization, reading this book. The missions committee at my own church is reading this book. A cursory search of online reviews on blogs and on Amazon.com shows the extent to which this book is having an impact. Also, the book is currently in its fifth printing, which is excellent for such a book. Moreover, many people are being introduced to the book by their partners in other countries. From what I have seen and heard, this book is meeting an important need in the discussion of church strategy in the area of short-term missions and in holistic ministry.

Already making a significant impact, this book has a role not only for the dialogue within the church on missions and development but also for Christian economists. For the latter this book provides a first rate example of a scholarly contribution aimed squarely at the ministry of the church. Working out of their training and practice of Christian community development and micro-enterprise promotion, Corbett and Fikkert translate community development approaches in an approachable and readable manner. This style will help draw people into the book who otherwise would not read a community development journal or a volume aimed solely at NGO staff or a scholarly audience. While many or perhaps most Christian economists will not take on such a public role aimed at non-economist or non-scholarly audiences, for those of us who do take on these roles, this book provides a fine model.

Moreover, for those Christian economists involved in their church or local communities in discussions of economic development and community development, this book may serve as a resource for study and teaching. The authors designed the book for group study, including

discussion questions. Some adult Sunday school classes may find the book to be suitable for a short course or class.

Additionally, while the book is not a research monograph and it does not emphasize research, the academic reader cannot help but see a number of themes where further economic research could assist the church. Some possible research topics suggested by the book in my analysis include describing and explaining in economic terms the different forms of economic relationship between North American churches and their partner churches and organizations in the Global South. Alternatively, the book mentions business as mission. How effective are various business as mission approaches in terms of both evangelistic and church growth impacts and also in terms of community development and economic impacts? What factors might influence the effectiveness of business as mission efforts?

I recommend this book as a resource for Christian economists as a possible text in a class on community development, as a resource for ministry in addressing poverty here in the U.S. and abroad, and as a helpful example of a book written by Christian economists for a popular audience.

