

Charity and the Culture of Begging

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By Glen Evans

My long time Honduran friend and mentor, Elmer, was raised in the city of La Ceiba. A few years ago, he moved to a village near San Pedro Sula, where he began a small business. Because of La Ceiba's more prosperous economy, Elmer recently moved back home. Last week, I went to visit him. Previously, we had shared much time together in his village, but this week we spent some time together back in his hometown. This was my first visit to La Ceiba, so there were many things that caught my attention. One of these was the large number of beggars... everywhere. Wherever we ate, hung out, or walked, there were people asking for money.

It was surprising for me to see so many beggars, given the relatively robust economy of La Ceiba. In nearly every way, the city appeared to be considerably more affluent than the many other towns and cities in Honduras I usually visit. There were more nice cars, houses, and shops. People seemed better dressed. To me, it seemed incongruous to have all the outward signs of prosperity but so many beggars.

So I asked Elmer about this apparent contradiction. He had a one-word answer... "tourists". He said, "tourists come here, and when asked for money, they often give."

At a young age, children learn that asking for money is better than going to school. Many adults realize that asking for money is more profitable than working. Because of the rewards involved, begging can be contagious.

I should not have been surprised by Elmer's response. Twenty years ago, I moved from several small-to-medium-sized towns, where there was little prosperity and no beggars, to Washington DC, where there

was more prosperity and more beggars. In Washington, I was surprised by the demographics of the beggars. I was expecting them to be first-generation immigrants who did not speak English and thus could not find a job. As a result of volunteering in homeless shelters in Washington, I learned that the opposite was true. For the most part, the beggars in Washington are long-term, multi-generation citizens who find it easier and more profitable to beg than to work. Working is not compatible with their emotional and physical addictions.

The sad reality is that many charities and churches -- both in the United States and Honduras -- enable and facilitate the culture of begging, rather than working to help people who beg become productive members of society. Why would churches, charities and well-meaning individuals promote poverty rather than self-sufficiency? One answer is: "Because it is easy." Handing out a few dollars is much easier than getting involved with helping to empower a person or a family. Giving money is not only easy, it feels good. So the cycle repeats itself over and over again.

It would be beneficial if everyone who tries to help someone in need would take a moment to ask themselves, "Are we really helping?" Answering that question, as objectively as possible, might lead to more real solutions. I think the secret to the success of charities is to refrain from being "too helpful". Being too helpful often diminishes the responsibility and dignity of the person being helped, and thus is not very helpful.

Note. The author is the founder of Art For Humanity, a non-profit organization based in Arlington, Virginia. He is helping to form the Leadership University to educate good students from poor families in Honduras so they can lead their families and their nation to a better future. Glen will be a guest speaker at the 11th annual [Conference on Honduras](#) in Copán Ruinas on October 14-16, 2010.