

No Strings Attached
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
August 23, 2026

No Strings Attached: Decolonizing Philanthropy © By Deborah Willoughby

When I was in the first grade, my family moved to a house that came with an old can of Campbell's oyster stew, which I noticed on a pantry shelf every time I pulled out the breakfast cereal. We were not a family that wasted food, so that can worried me. I didn't know what oysters were, but I knew instinctively that I did not like Campbell's oyster stew. I mean no disrespect to people who have tried it and liked it; I wasn't open-minded about new foods. One day, I brought home a note from my teacher, asking that every student bring a can of food for a charity drive. I knew which can I would take. The sketchy looking, probably way out of date soup instantly became someone else's problem. My friends, that was my introduction to the world of charitable giving.

Also, it was my introduction to getting it wrong.

The better way? Give people good food, shelter and health care. Listen to what the recipients say, and treat them with respect and dignity.

The reading quoted Andrew Carnegie's belief that a wealthy man's superior wisdom could decide what was best for the people of a community, "doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves."

That attitude has been around for a while, and it's long past time for a change. Can we let go of the attitude that beggars can't be choosers? Can we recognize that poverty and environmental destruction are part of the same economic structure that created the cadre of billionaires who believe their superior wisdom entitles them to unlimited wealth, power and privilege?

Today I'm going to talk about some best practices for big-time philanthropy around the world, smaller-scale giving and mutual aid. But first I want to mention something very important—not everyone is in a position to make donations. That's OK. There's way too much shame associated with this topic, from the people who are recipients of aid; people who cannot afford to contribute; people who feel like they should be more generous; to those who are shocked to learn that they have been supporting nonprofits that, it turns out, don't share their values. We're all on our own journeys, and I hope we can treat others, and ourselves, with love and understanding.

Reasons for sharing with others are affected by culture, faith, and basic humanity, and also sometimes by status, self interest and solving problems like how to clear the junk out of a garage.

Sometimes we want to be seen doing good things because we want to be perceived as good people—even as we are actively engaged in oppression. That’s the Andrew Carnegie approach.

Maybe we want a tax break, so we can direct our money toward causes that interest us. Or we see an ad for a feel-good organization, maybe with pictures of cute children, or puppies, that gives us a lift, even if it turns out it’s not a great organization.

Sometimes we have a need to control what other people are doing. Like, “I have it all figured out, and they could be perfect like me if they would just do things my way.” We may offer assistance, but there are strings attached. This kind of “charity” is a form of colonialism that doesn’t respect the culture or wishes of the people affected.

There are plenty of historical examples of this. I was in Ireland last year, and the legacy of the Great Famine is deeply rooted in the culture. One thing I learned is how some religious groups came in to set up soup kitchens and offered meals to people who were starving. Many were sincerely trying to help, but there were reports of some who required religious instruction or church attendance for anyone who wanted to eat. That led to the term “souper”—that’s s o u p e r— a derogatory word for anyone who converted in order to eat at a soup kitchen.

I grew up hearing the phrase “beggars can’t be choosers.” That approach shames people by implying that they don’t deserve decent food or housing because they are poor, and that they should be grateful for whatever scraps come their way.

Our church is centered around love, and we believe everyone deserves dignity and respect—no strings attached. It’s time to stop shaming, and demonizing, the poor. That means acting with unconditional love—and giving unconditionally.

Here’s another old saying that maybe doesn’t hold up: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. The comedian Trevor Noah adds, “What they don’t say is, ‘And it would be nice if you gave him a fishing rod.’” Now, there’s nothing wrong with teaching people new skills. But this is condescending when taken literally. My point is, people probably know how to fish, but there are plenty of places in the world where the fish are dying out due to pollution, climate change, and factory fishing fleets from other countries. We need to help the person who is hungry—and we also need to address the systems that create poverty.

In her book *A New Era of Philanthropy*, Dimple Abichandani wrote, “Philanthropy is inextricable from power, and its introduction into any system is never neutral—it either affirms and amplifies the existing power structures or challenges and shifts them.”

There are some best practices for international giving. Groups like CharityWatch do a good job of rating aid organizations for financial practices and governance. But they don’t rate whether they are clinging to a colonial mindset.

Look for non-governmental organizations that have done the work of examining their operations and are making changes. For example, Doctors Without Borders, which was founded in France in 1971, is rated highly by groups like CharityWatch, and they have received a Nobel Peace Prize. But I trust them even more now because of this encouraging statement on their website: “We are making changes to ensure that our leadership and operational structures better reflect the incredible diversity of our organization. ... These efforts include challenging operational structures, creating more opportunities for locally hired staff, and reevaluating compensation and benefits policies.” I read that to mean that staff members in the developing world are now being treated more fairly than they were before and that power is being decentralized. I’ll keep watching for evidence that people in the 70 countries where Doctors Without Borders operates have as much power as the leaders in Europe.

But here’s a mutual aid approach that doesn’t have to unlearn colonial structures, and they are saving lives in the horror that’s occurring in Sudan where **25 million people** are affected by famine due to a civil war with atrocities on both sides. I have donated to the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition, which funds a Sudanese-led network called Emergency Response Rooms.

A description from the Right Livelihood awards organization praises Emergency Response Rooms, which build on local traditions of mutual aid and operate in places international organizations cannot reach. Emergency Response Room volunteers evacuate civilians, run hospitals and support survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. It’s a decentralized model, funded by the Sudanese diaspora and some international donors.

The article adds this: “Beyond saving lives, Emergency Response Rooms nurture a culture of compassion and solidarity that lays the foundation for Sudan’s future civil society and democratic renewal.” May it be so.

On a local level, it’s easier to get a sense of whether a social service provider is ethical and effective. Like with the international organizations, I look for cultural awareness and understanding of the systems that create suffering and injustice. Do they have reputations for treating their employees and volunteers well? If they don’t, they likely don’t treat the people they serve with dignity either.

If you’re thinking about donating or volunteering, pay them a visit, look at their websites, maybe attend a board meeting. Are the people they serve listened to in a real way, or do they just add a token client to the board as a performative action? And do the organizations work collaboratively with other service providers, or do they see them as competitors?

Some years ago, my job sent me to visit a lot of food pantries here in Vancouver. You can learn so much about an organization in just a few minutes. At one of them, I walked past a very long line of dejected-looking people waiting for their bag of canned goods, while the manager talked about the program’s requirements and didn’t even acknowledge the people. It felt dehumanizing. At another faith organization, clients sat on comfortable old couches while waiting their turn to choose from foods that included fresh produce. Then, friendly church

volunteers would carry their boxes out to their cars while chatting with them. It was lovely. And at King Elementary, I know Amalia is devoted to making the food pantry a welcoming and nonjudgmental place, and it shows.

A lot of people also donate locally through foundations that make grants to carefully vetted nonprofits. I spent some time as a grant writer. A major frustration was that, like most nonprofits, we needed operational funds—keeping the lights on and paying staff—but foundations wanted to fund sustainable new initiatives. I appreciated Vu Le's subversive blog, now called Nonprofits AF. He advocates for foundations to make the grant process easier so recipient organizations can focus on their work instead of jumping through hoops to secure funding. He compared the process to the reality TV show "Chopped," where chefs are told to make a meal with random ingredients.

Here's what he wrote: In our sector, it's like "Here's a 12-year-old computer, a printer that only prints when the moon is in Gemini, one halftime underpaid staff member, several people on the Internet who hate you for no reason, and a \$5,000 grant you can only spend on paper clips on Tuesdays. Go end poverty!"

Some foundations are shifting to providing multi year operational grants, simplified applications, and less time on reporting. This gives nonprofits more reliable funding streams. I recommend that structure if you're working with a foundation.

If you have time but not money, you can still support community organizations as a volunteer. Among the best practices for volunteering is that volunteers should be treated with respect. And for the volunteers themselves: "Don't make more work for the organization." Find out what they need, and provide what you can without demands or drama. You're a helper, not a hero riding in to singlehandedly save the day.

Amid all this talk about power dynamics, there's the shining example of grassroots mutual aid. Mutual aid is direct community action with a non hierarchical structure. You may have heard about or contributed to the Free Fridge project here in town. They are community-run fridge and pantry sites providing free food to anyone who needs it, no questions asked. Their slogan is solidarity, not charity. I love that.

I'll never forget my fellow worship associate Kelly Kanyid's reflection on what started her family on this path. During the heat dome in 2021, Kelly and Bradon's daughter Mathilda, who was 5, was worried about people who were outside in the heat, walking up the hill by their house. The family set out a cooler filled with ice and water bottles for anyone who needed water. Neighbors started adding juice and canned goods. One day, a man stopped by the house. He told Bradon that the previous week, he had walked up the hill in the extreme heat, and used the water to cool off while waiting for his wife to take him to the hospital, where he was treated for heat stroke. He told Bradon that the water had saved his life.

These days, the Kanyids have a Free Fridge in their yard, with food available 24/7 for anyone who needs it. It's a radical form of assistance—people don't have to register, show documents, explain why they need the food. They just show up and take what they need and leave what they can.

Especially in this political climate, low barrier food pantries and mutual aid organizations are critically important. Food prices are, as you've noticed, climbing, and the federal government has made cuts in the SNAP program and other anti-poverty initiatives. And people who have fears about being harassed or taken by ICE are avoiding government offices—no matter if they have the right status and documentation, because ICE has been taking people who have legal status. That's one reason I try to support food programs that don't require registration.

We are living in a difficult time. Much of our government is being run by Christian nationalists who say they want this to be a Christian nation but really just seem to be acting with self interest as they reduce aid for the poor. I'll share my favorite quote from Stephen Colbert, a devout Catholic who opposes the administration: "If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it."

I haven't done a conclusive study of world religions, but I've never heard of a faith that doesn't call people to love their neighbors, to welcome the stranger, to share their wealth.

In our lives, as in this church, let's share what we can, no strings attached, and pay attention to the underlying causes of poverty and injustice.