Hi friends – For who haven’t met me yet, my name is Tanya Cothran and I joined the Toronto First congregation in 2013. For the past 14 and a half years I have been Executive Director of Spirit in Action International, a California-based not-for-profit organization. We’re a granting organization, which means that take donations from people and then give grants to groups who are working directly with the community. In the case of Spirit in Action, we move donations from North America and we give grants to grassroots organizations in Eastern Africa, including Kenya, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda.

We fund a large range of programs, depending on the priorities and strategies of the local organizations to bring more economic development and justice into their communities. One of the programs I’ve worked with the longest is the Manyamula Cooperative in northern Malawi. A Spirit in Action grant back in 2010 helped them start a poultry farm. The profit from the chickens then formed a loan fund for members to be able to take low-interest loans. The changes in the community have been amazing to witness. Many more people now have tin roof on their homes instead of thatching, and so many more have electricity connected to their homes. Since beginning, they have added a sunflower oil press, a corn grinder, and several farming initiatives and still get together monthly to share and encourage each other and plan for the future of their community and cooperative. Over the last five years, Spirit in Action has been funding the salaries for five employees and this year I’m helping them find other grants to be able to expand their sunflower oil production.

It was with the WE charity scandal news coverage in the last two years that I came to realize that not everyone thinks about donations and charities and international development as much or as often as I do. The categorization of “not-for-profit” might give the impression that my work is somehow separate from money and the capitalist tendencies that come with it. But every day I am interacting with some aspect of money – asking for and receiving donations, receiving requests for money and sending it out – and all of those interactions are laced with power dynamics. So I’m here to share some of what I have seen and learned from 14.5 years in this sector, and to offer some advice about how – if we’re wanting to do justice work with our dollars – we can make our donations more justice-oriented.

I am not just a fundraiser, I also am a donor to many different causes. The reasons I give are probably similar to you. In part, it just feels good to give. I have a set amount each month that I know I can afford to give away, and over the course of the month I have the pleasure of getting to respond to calls for support. Giving money to groups like Sistering, Migrant Rights Network, and Flaming Chalice (which I spoke about in January), and of course giving to this congregation, helps me connect with causes and communities beyond just myself. When I identify with the vision of these organizations and give money to that vision, I feel I am contributing to a world that I want to live in. Sometimes I give because that feels like the only thing I can do in the moment. When my colleague died in Malawi last year, I couldn’t be there or attend the funeral, but I could send money to contribute to funeral costs. Also, housing a stranger is more than I’m
willing to do on my own, but I can donate to groups who are providing those services. Money can be a way for us to actively promote and protect our values.

So giving each month gives me that warm feeling of “being the change I wish to see in the world.” And through Spirit in Action, I also get to help people channel donations, and receive those warm feelings. But digging deeper, there are some interesting power dynamics going on – between donor, the organization, and the person seeking help. Organizations asking for funding sometimes write their proposals based on what they think funders want to hear, or what they know will be palatable to those with money. Most of Canadian charitable giving goes toward religious institutions, political campaigns, and the health sector, not to programs for needle exchanges for addicts or groups that want to upend the current social order. Another power dynamic is a result of organizations knowing that people donate when they feel moved, so they frame their fundraising pitches to perfectly tug on our emotions. Maybe you’ve seen the fundraising messages telling donors that by giving $5 a month they are helping to save a life – that people of color are waiting and desperate for our help. These messages are often accompanied by photos of young, gaunt faces which in my industry we call “poverty porn.” It sets up a dynamic of victim-hero and powerless-powerful. With a donation of money being the means of power. Not only are these messages dehumanizing and degrading, they also present a fantasy where the donor is the clear savior.

Marya Mannes, a 20th century, American writer and social critic, who was known for not mincing words, said, “Generosity with strings is not generosity; it is a deal.” When we make conditions about how and when our financial donations are spent, or where a group buys it’s supplies, we are stepping into the realm of deals. These deals can undercut the justice work we are aiming to do with our dollars. So the spiritual work of giving is giving with true generosity and not deal-making, and it comes from giving from our own abundance and with a healthy detachment from outcome.

At a Spirit in Action gathering in Kenya a few years ago, James from the Democratic Republic of Congo, shared about generosity that came in the form of a deal. A donor working with James wanted to buy the community a hydraform brick machine. The bricks are designed to be interlocking and not require mortar, therefore making them easier to use than traditional clay bricks. So the donor send the money for the fancy, new machine, which was bought and installed. But pretty soon the machine was just sitting there, unused. It was hard to operate and it was actually not filling a real need. Bricks are inexpensive in the rural parts of eastern Africa where clay is abundant. And the hydraform machine would’ve taken away the livelihood of many local brickmakers. In fact, when Spirit in Action does fund building projects, providing bricks is often the contribution that the community is proud to make on their own. As James was telling us about this, Samuel, from Kenya, interjected that he also had a hydraform brick machine that wasn’t in use! We all laughed and James summed up the situation by lamenting that, “you can only do so much to convince a westerner to not do a project they think will work.” Think of all the money wasted on an expensive machine that wasn’t really wanted or needed! What could the impact have been if instead of giving with strings attached, conditional on the donor’s best intentions, the donors asked James and Samuel what their communities most wanted as a path to their economic security and development.
As I learn more about justice and equity work and unlearning the default of white supremacy culture, I have worked to make my giving match this new mindset. I love the quote, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” The quote is attributed to Lilla Watson but it is a statement that was co-created by her and a other members of an Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, Australia. This mindset shift – from helping to mutual liberation – is a vulnerability practice, as is any experience of giving up control. In terms of practicalities, this might be giving to an organization’s general fund rather than specific earmarked campaigns. (It could mean giving grants and not loans. Kiva – that site where you choose the entrepreneur from a developing country that you want to support – can feel like charity because it is framed as a way to help others, but it does not ask for generosity on the part of the lender.) It could also be giving money to food banks, rather than buying canned food and donating the cans – this lets the food bank buy the food that is most needed.

I see pledging to First, and giving monthly to the general fund, as an expression of this “let us work together.” This is our congregation and many of us volunteer and donate financially to keep it working, trusting that the Board and the ministers will keep us grounded in our values and our vision for a better world.

Further along on this journey of helping to mutual liberation, it might be giving to mutual aid funds or other unofficial or un-registered charities. The Groundswell Community Justice Trust Fund in Toronto collects many small donations and grants them to grassroots organizations working against systemic injustice in Canada, mostly giving to Indigenous and Black-led groups. They are funding radical work, and so-called political activity, so do not want to be constrained by charitable registration. Also, giving to the Groundswell Fund and letting their team of activists decide where to give the grants, means that it’s no longer just the people with money who get to decide what gets funded and what doesn’t. Giving up your charitable receipt is part of embracing the vulnerability and true generosity without strings attached. A few weeks ago, Donovan Hayden, in speaking to our congregation about the 8th principle, named donating to local grassroots organizations as an anti-racist practice. He mentioned groups like Rebuild Eg West (with their Eg West Tenant Relief Fund), Black Urbanism TO, and Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction. Once you give to the GoFundMe campaigns of these groups, they gets to decide how to redistribute the money. That lack of donor control is exactly why those donations are part of the work of anti-racism.

For international crises, like the war in Ukraine, or the lower-profile crises of Tropical Storm Ana in Southern Africa, and the on-going violence and starvation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, my suggestion is to get the money to those groups who are equip to organize the emergency response. GlobalGiving is an excellent resource for finding grassroots organizations around the world. GlobalGiving’s Ukraine Crisis Relief Fund will channel donations to local partner organizations that have been vetted by GlobalGiving. You won’t get a tax receipt for that donation, but ¿is the point to help people, or to get money back on your taxes? Options like using Airbnb as a way to help Ukrainians, is channeling money through corporations, and may not provide the real emergency assistance that so many need right now.

At Spirit in Action, we are actively shifting our methods from a more traditional colonialist international development angle to what is called trust-based philanthropy. It used to be that
our grants were approved by a group of white Americans without specific expertise in community development. Now, in addition to our eight North American Board Members, our team also includes five African Advisory Board members, who are non-profit professionals from Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi. This is part of bringing the decision-making closer to the communities being served. Since making the shift in the last three years, there is a new level of excitement and energy among Spirit in Action’s 25 grant partner organizations. The move away from a top-down structure and towards one that is more horizontal has increased collaboration and generated new ideas. Perhaps paradoxically, in giving up this control, the North American board now feels closer to the work from the time that they’ve spent listening to the perspective of the African Advisory Board and watching what happens when we let go of micro-managing the budgets of groups halfway across the globe.

I can hear people protesting, well it’s my money, I earned it and so I want to make sure it’s used well! In thinking about this, the poem “On Children” by Kahlil Gibran, which is often used in child dedications, came to mind. I’ve adapted it to be “on money” and it provides a radical proposal for how we might think about owning money. The new version goes:

- Your money is not your money
  It is the money of Life’s longing for itself
  It comes through you (as a donation) but not from you
  And though it is was with you yet it belongs not to you

You can hear that this messages is quite far from the message that the donor is saving a life. If we’re giving money because we want more justice in the world, then let’s free up our money to do the real work of justice.

Thank you and amen.

Groundswell Fund: https://groundswellfund.ca/
GlobalGiving: https://www.globalgiving.org/
Pledge to First: https://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/pledge/
Black Urbanism TO: http://www.blackurbanismto.com/
Toronto Indigenous Harm Reduction: https://www.torontoindigenoushr.com/
Spirit in Action International: https://www.spiritinaction.org/
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