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Selling Charity: Making Giving a Common Activity
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London is an international shopping destination, with travelers flocking to well-known areas such as Piccadilly Circus, Oxford Street, and Harrod's department store like pilgrims to sacred shrines. These areas stand forth as consecrated precincts of consumption, full of glamour, bright lights, crowds and, of course, expensive things to buy. Few Londoners shop there regularly.

Londoners shop locally. Each borough -- whether Hammersmith, Bayswater, Chelsea, or Wimbledon -- contains a shopping area or two where stores are concentrated in just a few streets. In these areas, goods are more affordable and one can buy just about anything. Hardware stores and cobbler shops stand next to stores selling the latest in clothing fashions, mobile phones and computer technology. It is here where one finds that typical British institution, the charity shop. In these shoppers not only consume for themselves, but give to others.

Charity shops seem to be everywhere. There are two around the corner from the apartment we are renting during our stay here. The closest shopping area in Putney contains four or five, while the one a bit further away in Fulham has six.

Although charities usually address problems of poverty or health, charity shops are not designed for the poor. Although most of the goods they sell are donated, and thus second-hand and lower-priced, their main clientele are the middle class looking for bargains. From the outside, they look like any local shop, although the store's name may be the charity's name, such as "British Heart Association." Inside, most shops sell four main classes of used items: clothing, kitchen ware, books and music. Perhaps they should be considered "recycling" shops, where items in fairly good condition find new owners.

Most shops acquire funds for their charities by applying three principles. First, sell donated items. Second, use volunteer staff, so little money is paid in wages. Third, this enables most sale income to go to the charity.

A few charity shops work with new products. One such charity is Oxfam, which focuses on world-wide

famine and anti-poverty projects. Many items in its shops originate with craftsmen overseas, usually impoverished. Oxfam attempts to return a reasonable amount of the profits from these items to the artist and not a middle-man.

The ubiquitous nature of charity shops makes the practice of charity an everyday occurrence rather than an occasional donation. "Going shopping" now includes the idea of benefitting others as well as oneself.

Going in and out of charity shops on a regular basis makes them familiar; the staff gives the charity a human face, unlike solicitation letters or Internet Web sites. This makes it easier for people to interact and get involved with helping the charities, on an occasional if not a long-term basis. Oxfam, for instance, has a party kit that can be picked up at the shop that helps people host a fund-raising event.

I recently attended a joint 50th-birthday party thrown by three friends. They invited all their friends and relatives. Instead of presents, they used the kit to direct donations to Oxfam, raising more than \$1,500. Instead of acquiring lots of (unwanted) "stuff," they and their guests had the satisfaction of helping people who needed it more.

Few of these charities have religious connections. Given the low interest in religious matters in Britain, fewer than 25 percent of Brits attend church regularly, which is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is how much charity shops and their emphasis on helping others have affected the churches.

The large, old church of St. Martins-in-the-Fields, prestigiously located on Trafalgar Square, needs many millions of dollars in repair work to keep it safe for use. But the brightly-colored banners on the church's front soliciting donations for this work equally solicit funds for the church's poverty work. The shop in its crypt, London's most popular site for making brass-rubbings, is a charity shop whose profits go not only to the repairs, but also to combat poverty. Charity, once the hallmark of religion, has developed an independent existence in Britain, one that has come back to change the shape of church fund-raising as well.