

# Advice for parents wanting to give the evangelical Operation Christmas Child shoebox scheme a wide berth

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*Alastair Lichten looks at the ethical, educational and efficiency case against the Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child shoebox scheme.*

It gets earlier every year. Despite the unseasonable sunshine this September we've already started to receive the usual messages from exasperated parents about their school or community group supporting the Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child shoebox scheme.

While every year we could add new examples of this charity's unsuitability ([last year](#) it was their President's latest homophobic tirade praise for Russia's anti-gay laws) the fact is that the concerns over their [inappropriate proselytization](#) and [anti-Muslim bigotry](#) have been around for years.

I've no desire to rehash all of these here, but I do want to provide a little help and support to those wanting to challenge a decision to use this scheme in their schools or anywhere else. There are ethical, educational and effective alternatives, a selection of links below provide more background on these.

The scheme started in the nineties, perhaps Samaritan's Purse was too busy in the eighties supporting the murderous Nicaragua Contra. We began to draw attention to the scheme a number of years ago and as result the scheme has been dropped by many schools and companies. As a result of the criticism of proselytization materials being placed inside the shoeboxes after donation, Samaritan's Purse stopped this practice and started delivering their evangelical booklets alongside the boxes.

During the traditional festive many people will be looking to engage in charitable activity supporting a range of religious and secular charities. If your school or community group wants to get involved and is considering supporting the scheme you should challenge them to do some due diligence and ask themselves three questions: Is it ethical? Is it educational? Is it effective?

While Operation Christmas Child may fail all three tests, there are a number of good alternatives out there.

## Is it ethical?

While the vast majority of those involved in Operation Christmas Child are likely acting with good intentions, the scheme is highly problematic - not only on account of the organisations aforementioned bigotry - but because of the way it seeks to use poverty and humanitarian tragedies to evangelise to children.

The biggest concern that parents raise with us is the scheme's underhanded nature. When working with schools Samaritan's Purse often downplay or don't mention the scheme's evangelical mission or the materials included in the packs or that children receiving the 'no strings attached gifts' are

encouraged to attend Bible courses.

In 2001 Samaritan's Purse was under contract to deliver US aid to the victims of the El Salvador earthquake. Residents of several villages reported that they needed to sit through a half hour prayer meeting before receiving assistance.

Following such criticisms Samaritan's Purse claim that such practices no longer happen, but even when explicit links aren't made between the aid and conversion / religious participation, the link is strongly implied and a social pressure is created.

Almost all schools and community groups will have a statement of values. Ask them if Operation Christmas Child is consistent with these.

Last year Girlguiding UK confirmed to the NSS that it didn't support the Samaritan's Purse Operation Christmas Child initiative, and that it would be encouraging Girlguiding groups to only support fundraising initiatives that are in accordance with their values of "inclusive, fun, caring, empowering, challenging and inspiring".

### **Is it educational?**

Many schools naïvely get involved in the scheme because they want their pupils to learn about charitable giving and the wider world. Most reputable aid agencies and development charities are able to provide schools with educational materials about their work.

By comparison, Samaritan's Purse often deliver collective worship, assemblies or even RE classes on the 'true meaning of Christmas' and their view of the Christian nature of charity.

### **Is it effective?**

While it may make you feel good, filling shoeboxes with plastic trinkets to send overseas is an horrendously inefficient way to give to charity. Reputable charities usually seek to convert physical donations into money, because money can be used far more efficiently. Shoebox schemes are a bad idea and no major aid agency supports them. They are the charitable equivalent of untrained volunteers turning up in disaster areas, even if well intentioned they mostly just get in the way of professionals who would have far rather have the price of a plane ticket to spend on supplies.

Personally on all these tests I would support [Oxfam Unwrapped](#) or [Good Gifts](#) who provide practical help directly to those in need. Both websites and Oxfam's materials for schools are a good way of learning how different donations can make a direct difference in the UK and developing countries. Other members have suggested [Plan UK](#), who work with the world's poorest children and [Save the Children](#), who carry out vital work saving children's lives across the world.

### **See also:**

*Our campaigns director Stephen Evans on challenging the scheme and finding more effective ways to give [Operation Christmas Child: Christian fundamentalism, gift-wrapped](#)*

*An overview of many of the scheme's problems, 'no strings attached' proselytizing and neo-colonialism [Operation Christmas Child](#)*

*A parent's perspective on learning of the scheme's underhanded nature and successfully challenging it in their school [Enticing children to evangelism with toys: Samaritan's Purse shoebox scheme.](#)*

[7 reasons not to participate in Operation Christmas Child](#)

[Is Operation Christmas Child's shoebox campaign just a propaganda tool for Christianity?](#)

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## Alastair Lichten

Alastair ([@AlastairLichten](#)) is a former head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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