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## Err on the Side of Action

Aaron Baart

Dordt College, [aaron.baart@dordt.edu](mailto:aaron.baart@dordt.edu)

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## Err on the Side of Action

### **Abstract**

"When we become so afraid of doing the *wrong* thing that we fail to even try to do the *right* thing, something is askew."

Posting about actively helping those in need from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/err-on-the-side-of-action/>

### **Keywords**

In All Things, missions, Liberia, generosity, love

### **Disciplines**

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### **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# Err on the Side of Action

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 [inallthings.org/err-on-the-side-of-action/](http://inallthings.org/err-on-the-side-of-action/)

May 25, 2017

Aaron Baart

In 2007, my wife, Nicole and I invited our family and some other local friends to help raise a bit of money for a new friend that we had just met from Liberia. He and his church had fallen on hard times. It was only two years after the brutal and long drawn-out Liberian civil war had ended, a war that ravaged the country, leaving it one of the poorest nations in the world with astronomically high unemployment rates. People in my friend's church were literally starving. It was the first time in my life that I had actually gotten to know someone in such a horrific situation. It wasn't a news story on TV anymore. It was real life. They were real people. And now I knew at least one of them. He had a wife and kids. A church and dreams. The more I listened to his story, the more I began to realize how similar we really were. But the longer we talked, the more his story started to do something to me. I couldn't leave it alone. It wouldn't leave *me* alone.

Oddly enough, we had met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia while Nicole and I were there completing the adoption of our middle son, Judah. After receiving some training from an international NGO in Ethiopia, he returned to Liberia and I returned home to the U.S. We stayed in pretty close contact, and when I shared his story with our family and friends from the church I was pastoring at the time, we quickly banded together and raised some money to help out his struggling Liberian church.

Well, one little fund raising effort led to another and soon our new international friendship had turned into an energetic and naïve, yet young and blossoming non-profit ministry organization. [One Body One Hope](#) was born. On top of praying and dreaming, we filed all the necessary paperwork, wrote our bylaws, articulated our mission, and constituted a board. We gathered regularly and deepened our relationships. We read books and planned our first trips to Liberia. The next ten years sped by as schools got started, churches planted, farm land developed, orphan ministries launched, and most importantly, relationships developed. Somehow 5,684 miles just didn't seem so far apart anymore.

In the earliest days of our ministry, what we lacked in experience we made up for in sheer energy. But we also knew we were green. We bumped our noses and skinned our knees. We attempted some things that didn't always work, but we kept plodding along. International development was a new game for all of us and there was so much to learn. At the time, *When Helping Hurts*, *Toxic Charity*, and other books and articles in a similar vein were being published and popularized. We devoured as many of them as we could. The missional and international development worlds were waking up to the realities that all the aid that was being sent overseas (and to Africa in particular) wasn't translating into long-term development, and we didn't want to end up becoming one more cautionary tale.

The emerging statistics and stories were waking the wider development world up to important realities. However, I also started to notice an opposite and disturbing trend beginning to emerge. The corrective warning about handouts not always equating to hand-ups was countered with a pendulum swing in the other direction, causing some to grow fearful of helping at all. Many people started to ask me questions like, "Aren't you afraid of developing a culture of dependence?" Or simply put, "How do you know if you're even helping at all?"

While I can appreciate the increased awareness of and sensitivity to doing more harm than good, I also know that sometimes the pendulum gets pulled too far in attempt to bring it back to center. This is a classic case in point. When we become so afraid of doing the *wrong* thing that we fail to even try to do the *right* thing, something is askew. After thinking about this topic for ten years now, I've developed a clear and guiding personal mantra: *I'm always going to err on the side of action*. Here's why . . .

- **Real relationships are always messy** – I didn't get involved in ministry and international development because I love projects; I got involved because I love people. And people the world over are messy. Sure, we'll squabble. We'll cry. We'll try. We'll fail. But I'll always get back up and I'll always keep trying because failing is fine if you're learning to fail forward.
- **My neighbor as myself** – If I would take a chance and risk in order to create an opportunity in life for my own family, then I can't ever confess with conviction that I've even attempted to love my neighbor as myself unless I'm willing to risk the same way for my neighbor, even one 5,684 miles away.
- **A "paralysis of analysis" is real** – It is possible to be so afraid of making mistakes that we never actually try. Think about it. I (and I would argue, my friends on the other side of the world too) would rather that I tried and failed to help than that I never tried at all.
- **Hierarchies of needs matter** – Jesus describes what righteousness looks like by laying out that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). When there are people in the world who are truly disadvantaged, displaced, homeless, helpless, and hungry, let's be as wise as we can in helping our fellow image-bearers; but let's first and foremost help.

May we all be willing to risk, quick to help, and even faster to love, our neighbors as ourselves.