

# Spread compassion beyond Christmas: Recognizing America's best charities

By KAREN WOODS

**D**uring the holiday season, usually about this time, the focus for many people turns to charity, and rightly so. Part and parcel of recognizing the gifts we have been given and the blessings we have received is recognition of the responsibility in turn to pass on blessings and do good to others.

What can be frustrating, however, is the sense that the focus on charity and compassion is only necessary during a brief month-long period between Thanksgiving and Dec. 25. The themes that are appropriately highlighted during the holiday season ought not to fade from view during the rest of the year.

In part it's the importance of long-term commitments to the effectiveness of charitable work that has been the impetus behind the formation of the Samaritan Award program. The Samaritan Award is the flagship program of the Acton Institute's Center for Effective Compassion. It is an honor given to America's leading charities and provides valuable information for donors and philanthropists. The evaluation process is new and unique and assesses program, financial, administrative, and stakeholder information.

The 2004 grand prize winner of the Samaritan Award, which carries an award of \$10,000, is the Network Savings and Training Program of Emmanuel Gospel Center (EGC). A national expert on urban ministry, EGC partnered with Enterprise Development International (EDI), a Christian ministry that operates microenterprise initiatives in nations

ranging from Bangladesh to Slovakia. Through its innovative financial literacy program and partnership with other community organizations, the Emmanuel Gospel Center helps set up programs like Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) at local churches in Boston's South End.

IDA programs teach low-income people how to manage their money, read credit reports, and get control of their lives. Participants are required to save \$30 per week, which the program sponsor matches; monies are used for down payment on a house, small business capitalization, or post-secondary education.

## The Samaritan Award is an honor given to America's leading charities.

EGC's program is unique because it emphasizes financial responsibility among the participants. Specially trained mentors complement classroom instruction, and online curriculum counters the digital divide and geographic challenges. Seminars and mentoring foster a closeness not only with the program, but also among the participants; they feel a sense of accountability to themselves and to their peers, which leads to a sense of accountability to their community.

The program is also unique because it is privately sponsored by local banks. According to program director, the Rev. Dr. Brian Gearin, this relationship is critical to the program's credibility and success.

"Churches and financial institutions in the city are almost like islands of integrity," he said. "People feel that the program isn't a scam to get their money. It's something that's really going to benefit them."

The Samaritan Award program also recognizes a group of top 10 honorees, whose programs range from the food distribution and assistance work of the Hunger Strike Force program of Somebody Cares Tampa Bay, to Wholistic Health Clinic Project of Baxter Community Center in Grand Rapids, Mich., which provides traditional health care, dental care, and mental health resources for neighborhood residents who are ineligible for traditional health care benefits.

These programs operate on a 365-day a year basis, and deserve our support and recognition not only during the holiday season but throughout the rest of the year as well. In lifting up the Emmanuel Gospel Center and other effective charities, the Samaritan Award attempts to keep this critically important work in our thoughts and prayers. The ongoing needs of people don't disappear the day after Christmas, and our commitment to helping them meet these needs shouldn't disappear either.

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*Karen Woods is director of the Center for Effective Compassion at the Acton Institute ([www.acton.org](http://www.acton.org)) in Grand Rapids, Mich. A list of the to honorees and more in formation about the grand prize winner can be found at the Samaritan Award Web site: ([www.acton.org/cec/samaritan/](http://www.acton.org/cec/samaritan/)).*