Faith Seeking Action: Mission, Social Movements and the Church in Motion

By Gregory P. Leffel

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

It is not just Christians who bear the image of God and a passion for making the world more just and equitable. The passion and energy in some social movements for mercy and justice is admirable. As Christians seek to discern where God is moving in the world and how to join God’s mission and focus the church on mission. It is appropriate to learn from contemporary social movements and how they are forming and flourishing, or not. This book is essential for Gregory Leffel sets himself Leffel as co-founder of Community, a missional community in Lexington, Kentucky, and president of One Horizon Foundation. This book is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in understanding the nature of the church’s engagement with society, as a movement embodying the good news of God’s work in the world. Social movement theory explains how movements unite people to create or resist change. New social movements have been emerging since the 1960s, convinced that people can transform social life for the common good. This is a valuable resource for communities of Christians and social activists share in common, and so it is appropriate to learn from one another and collaborate.

Leffel’s contribution to mission and to movement theory is to link the two fields in this unique work. Leffel explores the mission of the church drawing on recent work on missio Dei, contextualization and mission to the Western world. Leffel brings this into dialogue with analysis of social movements and revitalization theory. The result is a conceptual framework that integrates faith and action. He introduces missio-ecclesiology as a new way of addressing the church’s engagement with society, as a movement embodying the good news of God’s work in the world. Social movement theory explains how movements unite people to create or resist change. New social movements have been emerging since the 1960s, convinced that people can transform social life for the common good. This is a valuable resource for communities of Christians and social activists share in common, and so it is appropriate to learn from one another and collaborate.

Leffel offers three case studies of movements to exemplify and develop his theory. The first movement is the international anti-globalization movement that has been mobilizing since the mid-1990s against the globalization of corporate power and resulting widening poverty and decline in labor standards, marked especially by its activism against the World Trade Organization. The second movement is the American Sanctuary movement of churches creatively providing refuge for Central American refugees in the 1980s. The third movement is the more local and grassroots, Xenos Christian Fellowship house church movement. It is characterized by its counter-cultural rejection of conservative institutional Christianity and particular approaches to collective living and leadership development.

The experience of these movements is fascinating in themselves, but Leffel uses them to go beyond theoretical understandings of movements and develop an action framework to guide social activists in what to do to form a movement — in rhetoric and calling people to action, in strategy and organizing action, and in culture and developing community and solidarity for action. Social movements pressure those holding power to change how they exercise it and provoke a crisis of decision among elites and the public. They do this through mass insurrections, resistance, or grassroots organizing. Leffel describes these different approaches for what is involved in understanding, forming and deflecting movements.

Faith Seeking Action is a book which leaves me wanting two further things. Firstly, I am curious to read more on how social movements sometimes fail and disintegrate. Leffel is not starry-eyed about the movements he studies, but I would be interested if he could also describe movements in decline and how that can be avoided wherever appropriate. Secondly, I am curious about how Leffel’s frameworks could be applied to social movements in Australia. His stories are American through relevant in their application to Australia. What I would like to see, furthermore, is someone to apply Leffel’s frameworks to the analysis of historical and contemporary social movements in Australia. This is not a weakness in Leffel’s work, set as it is in North America, but a point of departure for further research. Further research in Australia would be a further test of his frameworks and a useful application to ‘missio-ecclesiology’ in this land.

Leffel boldly suggests that churches can learn from social movements such as environmental, anti-globalization and identity movements, and that churches can even collaborate and contribute to the quest for justice in many of these movements. The research and practical frameworks of Faith Seeking Action are a valuable contribution and a gift to mission studies.


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