Risky Compassion

By Ash Barker

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

The challenge of responding to mission needs can seem overwhelming in a global sense. But at the grassroots of meeting human need and communicating the gospel, especially in urban mission contexts such as slums and squatter settlements, the complexity and demands of what is needed is still vastly challenging. How does a Christian respondent to human suffering find the confidence and capacity of power?

Twenty years ago Ash and Anj Barker founded Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH), wanting to love God and their actual neighbours in Springvale, Melbourne and see where that led in community transformation. Ten years later they moved to Kiong Toey, the largest slum in Bangkok with 10,000 people jammed in appalling conditions in one square kilometre. They adopted an incarnational mission posture, used community development principles, lived among the poor, and sought to contribute to the local church’s capacity to urban missions work. Other NGOs worked around them with a team that grew to 100 that daily sponsored 20 projects and churches including Kiong Toey Handicrafts, a soccer club, ‘Helping Hands’ micro-enterprise development, and ‘Cooking with춤’ cooking school. But in 2014 they resigned from UNOH and moved on from Kiong Toey, on route to Birmingham to start Urban Life Together and continue to champion initiatives to lift up urban mission needs for small-scale urban mission bodies like the new generation of urban mission works. Risky Compassion is Ash Barker’s immersed reflection on their experience of mission in one of the most needy contexts of the world.

The book is framed around the story of the Compassionate Samaritan. Barker explores how both his experience and this story raised risky questions and introduced him to some shy characters: ‘Life in Kiong Toey confronted me. I couldn’t avoid the big, risky questions that this neighborhood raised for me about life, death and what matters most. As my time in Kiong Toey drew to a close, I began to ask myself deeper answers to make sense of my years here among the poor. The result is the book.’

He gives a chapter to each of the principles he learns from the Compassionate Samaritan which helped keep him going in the face of these doubts and discussions he and his family and team sought to live out in Kiong Toey:

- ‘Travel a dangerous road. Sharing life on risky journeys’
- ‘See suffering. Taking the risks of seeing pain’
- ‘Feel compassion. Lying down in God’s risk’
- ‘Cross over and connect. Solidarity and proximity that makes a difference’
- ‘Do something that helps. Finding strategies that can work’

Thus Risky Compassion is a thoughtful biblical engagement with Jesus from the gospel and the lessons of this biblical story, together with implications from urban mission in contexts of extreme poverty. But it is much more as it becomes a deeply personal memoir of Barker’s leadership, spirituality and neighbourhood relationships. Oscar Romero said, ‘There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have lived. Barker transparently shares events that brought him to tears – the demands of responding to overwhelming and complex needs, the drain of multiple illnesses, the pain of team conflicts, the difficulties of language and culture learning, and the dilemmas of parenting in a slum. He reflects on his call to mission, his formation in a dual context of TCK and educational experiences, his journey towards a new understanding of mission and urban mission realities. He describes the challenges and sacrifices of daily life in the midst of gun and knight fires, tears and food, and heat and overworking. In the midst of life in a slum, Barker explores in the stories of transformed lives andignority against oppressive systems. He shares the satisfaction of growing programs to alleviate poverty, the blessings of community, the strength of teamwork and the fun of football. Alongside stories that bring you tears, there are also humorous episodes that brought both laughs to me as a reader – from the crocodiles that escaped him from flood waters, meeting Datamie Zschich at Hillsong Conference, and (spoiler alert) the ex-convertable camellia tree! One of the most valuable chapters is the final one on strategies of solidarity and proximity. Barker quotes Art Boaz’s Points, boxes, walks away. Compassion comes to help and stay. He discourses and expands on principles of relief capacity building, advancing community building and transforming places to help neighborhoods experience existential aspects of urban mission called for in slums and squatter settlements, but relevant for mission anywhere. Barker explains how he observed practices that are transformative and sustainable ways, empowering people for change and not doing for people what they can do for themselves.

Barker explains that UNOH’s work was often felt like a couple of dozen players a handful on the field and needing a rest, while thousands are in the grandstands cheering them on and teaching them how they ought to be playing by needing practice and exercising themselves. The result, however, depends on more people coming down from the grandstands and getting involved in what is happening at the grassroots level. Risky Compassion is a callout for potential activists to take risky paths, see suffering, feel compassion, get out of the house and do something constructive about overwhelming needs – starting with the needy person in front of us. The next step chapter for the Barker is a mobilising and training ministry under the banner of Urban Life Together, so the book is appropriately titled Life Your Life

With deeply engaging biblical study, emotionally authentic mission biography and tried and proven mission strategy, Risky Compassion is highly recommended reading for students and practitioners of urban mission. Full of tears and laughter, it is a mirror to the life of an urban missionary in Kiong Toey and emerging missionary space on a global scale.