Our family do not live on the streets of Springvale or the slums of Thailand. I do not work with Urban Neighbours of Hope. But I am challenged by UNOH’s church planting and community development among some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Australia and Asia. They have helped open my eyes to the urban poor where UNOH works but also in my own neighbourhood. UNOH friends have modelled opening their lives to neighbours and have inspired me to see myself as a missionary and community development worker and pastor to my neighbourhood.

Jon Owen is an activist and practitioner in urban mission. With his wife Lisa he has worked with UNOH since 1997, for a decade in Springvale in Melbourne and now in Western Sydney. He does not just write theory or ideas of what should be done, but reflects on his own grassroots stories of overcoming prejudice, advocating for East Timorese refugees, mediating violence, praying for the oppressed and being open to God’s surprises.

The book’s eight chapters intersperse Owen’s stories with fresh readings of gospel accounts of what Jesus did in ministering to people on the margins. It connects the gospel with issues of Australian culture, transcending gender expectations, overcoming consumerism and violence, and welcoming asylum seekers. How does the gospel address our society and its power and affluence, apathy and marginalisation? What spirituality helps sustain urban missionaries working in neighbourhoods notorious for their poverty, drug use and violence? These are critical questions for mission in contemporary Australia, and Muddy Spirituality grapples with them honestly, biblically and with a dose of humour.

The writer warmly introduces his readers to the compassion of “A God who has a dream for this world, a dream that is not based on domination, but one that requires, desires and yearns for our participation” (p19). I especially appreciate his warning not to mistake information for transformation, or radical discipleship action for conferences and books. Spirituality is not down to earth if it does not model and emphasise the social aspects of faith and help the church minister in places “where the world hurts the most” (p.164).

Muddy Spirituality is an inspiring grassroots book ideal for anyone wanting to explore radical discipleship, missional spirituality and urban mission from a grassroots perspective.

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