Slum Life Rising - How to Enflesh Hope within a New Urban World

by Ash Barker

In Slum Life Rising, Ash Barker explores the demographic, developmental, theological, personal and teamwork challenges of responding to the plight of the poor in slums and shanty settlements. Combining global statistics with case studies from Klong Toey in Bangkok, and not avoiding the complexities of power, financial and health dilemmas, he presents an imagination-grabbing approach to incarnational mission of "enfleshing hope" in situations of despair that fail to redound to comfort. With more than 1 billion people living in slums (to borrow from Mike Davis's description), and likely 2 billion by 2030 and 3 billion by 2050, the writer has convincingly reviewed that this will be one of the most mission-critical significant issues in the 21st century.

Barker explored a Christian response to slums as a PhD thesis with Whitney College, MCD University of Divinity. This book is a result of that research and Barker's twenty years of urban mission in Bangkok and Malaysia. It follows Richard Comer's practical theology framework of asking "what is going on?" (the descriptive task), "why is this going on?" (the interpretive task), "what ought to be going on?" (the normative task), and "how might we respond?" (the practional task).

It is a complex task, firstly, to describe the nature of slums and explore how Christians are responding to it and expanding humanizing crises (e.g., not only in three chapters of Part A, Barker offers an insightful snapshot of slums and shanty neighborhoods: chapter 1 introduces them with a Klong Toey case study, chapter 2 offers a global perspective and chapter 3 investigates Christian responses. Barker uses the term "slums" to refer to living conditions, "squatter" to refer to legal concerns, and "neighbors" to refer to their shared space and connections. He describes them as "a perfect storm of poverty because of their seemingly overwhelming complexity and intertwined poverty. The various 'fruits' of poverty thrive thing together, causing misery to multitudes: evictions, fires, floods, urbanization, vulnerable employment conditions, dangerous housing conditions, leverage inadequacies, superstitions, corrupt officials, language barriers, sanitation problems, AIDS and other communicable diseases, premature deaths of children, the disabled and the elderly, and often no meaningful connection with Christians" (p.15).

Part B offers how Barker interprets why ministry in that context is so challenging and why there are so few Christians and Christian workers. Chapter 4 takes the reader back to Klong Toey and explores the hazards conditions that impede health, transformation, church growth and poverty alleviation. Even where scarce resources are indeed allocated, long-term participatory development projects are not always followed. Aid and development in slums is not easy to manage or promote as in more stable rural areas. Moreover, there is a range of incalculable approaches to mission, but many of them have serious limitations in slums, for example, how to live simply, look after missionary children, and decide who to help and thus raise the question of theological reflection on missional methodologies by some scholars. Chapter 6 discusses what incarnation can mean including relocation, crossing cultures and simple lifestyle. Chapter 7 evaluates whether incarnation mission can be just one core value (among many) in urban mission.

The valuable theological contribution of the book is Part C's proposal for a distinctive "Trinitarian metaphor of 'enfleshing hope'." This is part of the normative task in Comer's scheme of practical theology. Barker suggests Christians responding theologically to slums need an awareness of joining the Creator in enfleshing hope (chapter 8), following the redeemer in engaging suffering and fostering transformation (chapter 9), and participating with the Spirit's transformative influence (chapter 10). It's a helpful reminder that God in its fullness is not absent even in slums and wants to incarnate hope there.

At a pragmatic level team in Part C, Barker unpacks how Christians can be used by God to foster the Kingdom of God in slum and shanty neighborhoods with dozens of practical suggestions. Chapter 11 explores pioneering team building and strategy including training new workers, clarifying expectations, raising support and deciding when to relocate. Chapter 12 stresses the importance of local place-sharing - promoting humility in contextualization, joining existing community groups and local leadership development. Chapter 13 explores sustainable strategies for poverty alleviation in a range of ministries - relief, capacity building, evangelism, teaching, transformation, rapid development and advocacy. The book shows the importance of sensitive and discerning leadership: "Slums can be tightly networked, deliberately blanketed ecosystems. Those Christian workers who can help sustain the living tissue while nudging it toward Kingdom transformation can be invaluable resources to its very fabric" (p.246).

Slum Life Rising will be essential reading for missionaries and ministry leaders. There are no easy answers here to complex dilemmas, I would have liked to have read more primary data, from qualitative research or otherwise, of what is actually happening and evaluation of what Barker is proposing, and more about "enfleshing hope" good news in slums. It's an important area and more thorough research is critical. But Barker offers a clear treatment of the state of slums, and points to original theological and practical resources for responding with authentic good news. Apart from its strategic relevance, it's also a helpful model of practical theology reflecting the teachers and students, and I believe Church leaders and mission students to read and digest it, and ask of one another, "what are we going to do about it?" The book consists of academic research, but also offers study questions, pictures and stories that enhance suitability for personal and group reflection. Jesus stood in the gap for those on the margins needed hearing and respect, and I love that about Jesus. Ash Barker is standing in the gap to advocate for and humanize a largely ignored group of people and neighborhoods, and I love that about him and his recent and most significant book.