The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor - Scott A Bessenecker

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

In 1999-2000 I met some of the hundreds-of-thousands of people who were homeless and displaced because of religious/ethnic violence in the Makutu Islands of Indonesia. A friend and I were visiting an island off South-East Sulawesi that many of them had fled to. They came to the island because they or their ancestors had migrated from there, but they had little in the way of assets and resources, local infrastructure was stretched beyond capacity and many came with the grief and recent memories of friends and close family members being killed. Hearing their stories and seeing their displacement left me with more questions than I had answers to. They asked us to send help, but I knew that sending dollars and recruiting visiting experts in an effort to lift them up would not be as effective as placing ourselves among them to help them rise up from their poverty. Reading The New Friars reinforced this lesson for me and reminded me of the needs in that part of the world which are repeated in too many places around the globe.

Back in Australia, the example of workers with Urban Neighbours of Hope (UNOH) in Melbourne and Bangkok has prompted me over the last year to open my eyes to those who are challenged with poverty and marginalization in my own suburb. Early in 2006 when the Australian government was defending British censorship guidelines with the ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ tourism commercials, UNOH and their asylum seeker friends reminded me that a warm welcome is not offered to everyone who wants to come to Australia! Many missionary organizations are grappling to connect Generation-X and Generation-Y with a vision for global mission; UNOH are speaking to thousands in churches and conferences and successfully recruiting a new generation of urban missionaries eager to serve at or below the poverty line. They are also empowering a larger team of volunteers and associates whose imagination has been captured by UNOH’s work.

Scott Bessenecker delves into the small but potent and growing movement of which UNOH is a part. InterCherCH. Servant Partners, Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor and Word Made Flesh (WMF) are some of the other incarnational mission groups that represent what he calls ‘the new friars’. Like the Franciscan ideal, they take seriously the call to downward mobility, turn their backs on conspicuous consumption and pursue lives of simplicity and compassion to society’s rejects. As director of Global Projects with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Bessenecker takes groups of students to work in slums around the world and has seen them up close. As he describes in different chapters, they are incarnational in living the gospel among people, devotional in pursuing intimacy with Jesus through spiritual disciplines; communal in depending on one another and sharing wealth; missional in pursuing the Kingdom and ministering to the poor, and content to be marginal in churches and society in order to connect with people on the edges.

The New Friars paints an evocative picture of Jesus’ incarnation that sent him into the stench of human poverty and the mission he sent his disciples on without the insulating power of money, food and extra clothes. I found particular inspiration from its stories of other movements through history – Francis and Clare of Assisi, St Patrick and the Celts, the Jesuits, Nestorians and Moravians, and the new monasticism and the 24-7 prayer movement. New missional orders today hold in common with those movements a willingness to embrace the condition of the least and the lost.

Bessenecker helps us imagine what it is to live like one of the billion slum dwellers in the world. His exploration of the causes of poverty, the effects of sin, and the corporate and political injustice and crumbling infrastructure slum dwellers face is insightful. The figures of child slavery, genocide and ever-widening global inequality is almost unbelievable from the comfort of my suburb. But I appreciated his practical suggestions for simple living from where I am. And for potential incarnational mission workers, he wrestles with issues of lifestyle, family opposition, sharing resources and inevitable grief, and pathways to short-term and long-term service among the world’s poor.

To really dig deeply into the wound of poverty will require thousands of healthy “blood cells” who will take on the entrenched values of culture, personal sin and spiritual forces: devoted, focused and radical men and women who are not afraid to link their destinies with the destinies of these poor communities, people who are willing to live with Jesus among the “least of these.” And the “least of these” have never needed advocates more than they do now (p. 57).

The New Friars offers an informed overview of a passionate movement that is committed to one of the biggest and most overlooked challenges of global mission today.

This review was previously published in Church Missionary Society book reviews, accessible at http://www.cms.org.au/_resources/Mission-Book-Reviews/cbd1d5b9e-8fe-e-e1a-286-0007245dfaf773add4b78bad6da2d8ad7d4f5a9c1bdc7c4c5a. As a UNOH writer himself (Credible Witness, 2006), Darren encourages readers when they are finished with The New Friars to check out related books by Melbourne writers at www.unoh.org especially Ashley Barker’s biblical and autobiographical challenges in Make Poverty Personal, Finding Life and Surrendering All.