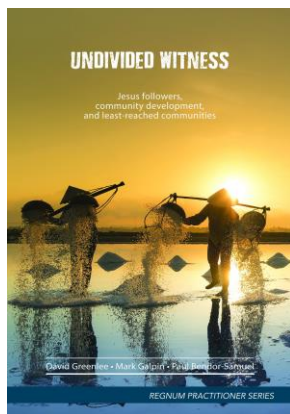


BOOK REVIEW

Undivided Witness: Jesus Followers, Community Development, and Least Reached Communities

By Greenlee, David, Mark Galpin, and Paul Bendor-Samuel, Eds.

Reviewed by T.S. John



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In *Undivided Witness*, editors David Greenlee, Mark Galpin, and Paul Bendor-Samuel, along with a seasoned group of nine contributors, grapple with the challenge of combining church planting with development among “least reached peoples.” Their purpose is to assess the potential synergy between Christian development and a growing indigenous church planting phenomenon labeled by the editors as “Vibrant Communities of Jesus Followers” (VCFJ). The structure of the book is the presentation and evaluation of ten principles drawn from the rich experience of the contributors. The editors hope the book will “help dissolve the perceived tension between [church planting and community development] (12)”. Because few if any published scholarly works have examined the intersection of Christian community development, least reached peoples, and VCFJs, *Undivided Witness* is a pioneering work in this space.

Indeed, the ten principles are helpful in guiding the application of the synergies discovered in least-reached contexts. It is also true that some of the contributors’ conclusions about handling the perceived tensions between the two approaches are understandably

debatable and, in my view, show a bias towards achieving community development outcomes at the expense of spiritual/VCFJ outcomes, without fully exploring the costs entailed in doing so. Given the controversies surrounding such topics, the book’s value should not be judged by its ability to reach uncontested conclusions. Rather, its importance is derived from the helpful conversation it initiates within an unexplored space. In the spirit of this stated outcome, I take the liberty to add the voices of Laura Dudley Jenkins and Dena Freeman for consideration.

The book proceeds by providing a robust exploration of its ten guiding principles. The principles were created by Operation Mobilization (OM) to ensure that their own development practices aligned well with their other goal of achieving VCFJ outcomes among least reached peoples. It is important to note these principles are not the brainchild of an individual, but emerged instead from extensive discussions with OM development practitioners and partners, missiologists (including Bryant Myers), and development-savvy faculty from both Oxford Centre for Missions Studies and All Nations Christian College. The principles were then published as a scholarly article in the journal *Transformation* (Greenlee, et al. 2020), and are presented in this book in a more robust form. While the editors have confidence in the universality of the ten principles, they also see them as “under development” and hope they will stimulate further discussion and insights from Christian community development practitioners and missiologists.

The first four principles, “Understanding the Kingdom of God is Fundamental,” “Understanding How People Enter the Kingdom of God Shapes How We Do Ministry,” “The Gospel Impacts Whole Peoples and People’s Whole Contexts,” and “A Broad Vision of Glorifying Christ” are an important reminder of current thinking on the theology of development from an evangelical perspective. The contributors argue that helping the poor experience the socio-economic

implications of God's Kingdom is a biblical form of witness that points to the King and can lead to the emergence of VCFJs. The contributors also surface challenges that can impede the emergence of VCFJs. They encourage practitioners to believe God is working through their development initiatives despite the lack of spiritual fruit. In my view the contributors in this section should have been a bit more circumspect about the absence of spiritual fruit and VCFJ outcomes in light of their strong views on the importance of VCFJs in development. If one accepts Bryant Myers' claim that "it is impossible to imagine a transforming community without a transforming church in its midst" (2011, 177), which is echoed by Mark Galpin in Principle 7, then the lack of spiritual/VCFJ fruit should be deeply disturbing to Christian development practitioners. It would certainly disturb church planting movement proponents, and their voices on these issues would provide some helpful balance.

It is for this reason Holly Steward's chapter on "Principle 5: Prayer, Spiritual Warfare, and Change" is so important. Steward's engagement of spiritual warfare is often ignored by Christian development practitioners from the West, but lies at the roots of spiritual/VCFJ growth. Not only do her stories and lessons reflect the perspective of grassroots Christian development and church planting practitioners I have encountered in South Asia, they also reflect the growing movement of Pentecostals transforming traditional societies in ways that, according to Dena Freeman (2012), rival if not exceed the work of development organizations, Christian and secular alike. Bryant Myers is right that Western-influenced Christian development theorists must take the transformative impact of Pentecostal efforts much more seriously (Myers 2015). Consequently, the chapter is a welcome and relevant addition to the literature.

Robert's Sluka's chapter on "Principle 6: Caring for Creation as Worship, Witness and Obedience" is another important contribution, partly because he brings much needed attention to the issue of creation care, but also because he helps readers understand how it can be applied at the intersection of community development, least reached peoples, and VCFJs.

Editor Mark Galpin takes on "Principle 7: A Vision for Renewal and Vibrant Communities of Jesus Followers." Like Myers, Galpin argues that community transformation can only happen if the strategy incorporates "a vision for vibrant communities of Jesus followers (VCFJ) and the renewal of the whole person and community" (97). Ultimately, the book's thesis rests entirely on Galpin's argument and he does a commendable job defending his position. Still, his analysis of the practical outworking of this vision and his concerns about proselytism (discussed in greater detail in the epilogue of section one), would benefit greatly

from analyses like those of Laura Dudley Jenkins' study of Dalit mass conversions in India (2019). Her analysis encourages those working in the international Christian development sector to reconsider their Enlightenment-influenced conceptions of conversion among marginalized people groups, to question their relationship with State and international actors who use these conceptions to reinforce marginalizing systems, and to stimulate fresh, maybe even prophetic perspective on how Christian development initiatives can support VCFJs to become a grass-roots force for systemic change.

In "Principle 8: Community Development Workers are Committed to Professional Excellence," Scott Breslin unpacks this important principle through an analysis of seven stakeholders: the affected people, host governments, donors, the international development sector, the development organization, the development worker him/herself, and God. While the analysis is helpful in addressing and resolving faith-based challenges (and opportunities) faced by the practitioner in the development "workplace," Breslin leaves out the church as a stakeholder (local, regional, or otherwise) and does not integrate VCFJ as a defining outcome that influences his measure of professional excellence.

In "Principle 9: Shared Principles of Excellence," Andrea Waldorf provides an insightful comparison between the defining principles of community development and principles outlined by David Garrison in his seminal analysis of VCFJ movements among least reached people, "Church Planting Movements" (CPMs). While there are significant overlaps between CPMs and Christian community development principles, there are also some key differences that Waldorf does not address. The chapter nevertheless offers a helpful bridge between CPM proponents and proponents of Christian community development that will prove valuable for ongoing discussion between the two.

In the final chapter, "Principle 10: The Least Reached Are So for a Reason," Rosemary Hack draws from her own experience to help readers understand why the "least reached" are such. Geographic, linguistic, political, and climate (I would add cultural and infrastructural) barriers have made access to least reached peoples anything but easy both for the Church and even, in some instance, the rest of the international community. Hack's overview reminds readers that cross-cultural missions remain relevant and vital to the spread of Christ-centered human flourishing. Her challenge to the Church to go where few have ventured to tread shows that the world still needs risk-taking "sodalities" of the Church (to use Ralph Winter's terms) to bring Christ's transforming power to the least reached.

Finally, Paul Bendor-Samuel wraps up the book with a call to “listen closely” to the communities served and to what God is doing among them, to “see clearly” to find and respond to the least reached, and “ask humbly” how God might have readers respond to their needs.

Throughout the book, *Undivided Witness* provides important recommendations and food for thought within a space that is largely unexplored. Though there are times the conflict between community development and church planting leans in favor of development, *Undivided Witness* makes an important contribution to this important debate. In addition to providing helpful principles and addressing important issues, the book may kick-start further discussion on the most biblically sound strategies for integrating Christian community development with church planting efforts among least reached peoples. Practitioners in both camps have much to learn from each other.

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