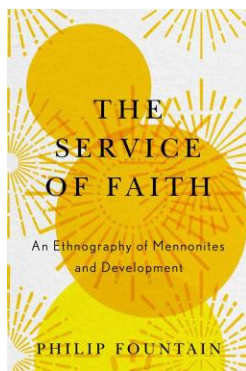


REVIEW ARTICLE

Translation, Incarnation, and the Ethics of Faith-Based Development: A Review of Philip Fountain's *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*

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This review¹ engages Philip Fountain's *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development* as a significant contribution to contemporary conversations on Christian relief and development practice. Drawing on nearly two decades of experience in grassroots development and humanitarian response in Indonesia, the reviewer approaches Fountain's ethnography through a theological hermeneutic attentive to recurring motifs that shape moral imagination and institutional practice. The review affirms Fountain's analysis of how the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) negotiated faith, identity, and development amid interfaith, postcolonial, and donor-driven pressures, with particular attention to *translation* as a guiding metaphor. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the ethical sufficiency of *guesthood* as a dominant image for Christian presence. In dialogue with biblical theology and missiological scholarship, the review proposes *neighboring*—understood through an incarnational account of translation—as a more theologically grounded and ethically demanding framework for Christian development work that sustains accountability, vulnerability, and long-term commitment.



2024. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
\$37.95

Incarnation as Hermeneutical Orientation: “Translation” and “Neighboring”

As a preamble to my engagement with Philip Fountain's *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*, it may be helpful to situate the interpretive posture that I personally bring to this work.

First, I lived for nearly two decades in West Java, Indonesia, where I was deeply engaged in grassroots community development and missional witness. During this time, I founded three local community-based non-profit organizations and later served as an early responder to the tsunami in Aceh, North Sumatra, remaining involved in programmatic relief and recovery efforts for more than two years. Before, during, and after this experience I studied for both Master and

¹ This review article, written by Lindy Backues, is almost identical to the one published in the *On Knowing Humanity Journal* under the title “Beyond ‘Guesthood’: ‘Translation,’ ‘Traveling,’ and ‘Neighboring’ as Animators of Authentic Christian Development” (Volume 10, Issue 1, January 2026). See Philip Fountain's response in this issue.

doctorate degrees in theology, missiology, and economic development.

Informed by this background, for many years I have approached cultural and theological hermeneutics in a way that has helped fashion my theological understanding—not only of sacred texts, but also of the cultural contexts where faith is lived and practiced. Two interwoven strands characterize this approach. While each is significant, together these two streams operate symbiotically, each deepening and sharpening the other.

The first strand is shaped by my attention to deliberately recurring elements within texts and contexts—elements that function as interpretive anchors, binding purposeful action to covenantal identity and substantive theological claims.² What I have increasingly sought are bounded and relatively stable themes within cultural and theological discourses, interpretive features akin to what New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays describes as “focal images” (Hays 1996). For Hays, focal images are concrete, imagistic patterns that accumulate moral and interpretive force through their recurrence across diverse texts and contexts. They function as interpretive portals, offering the “meaning translator” (note: more on that just below) glimpses into what is most significant in each situation. Rather than functioning as narrowly referential rules or principles, focal images shape the ethical imagination of those seeking self-understanding, operating as hermeneutically generative archetypes—thick, evocative representations that acquire normative force through their repeated and resonant reappearance. Accordingly, in the analysis that follows, I draw on this notion of thematic emphasis as I evaluate and appraise Fountain’s book. My analysis focuses on identifying themes that emerge at the intersection of the Indonesian context that Fountain describes and the biblical scriptures that inform Mennonite theological interpretation.

The second strand of my approach grows directly out of this way of reading and understanding—one that attempts to remain attentive to motifs and focal images that shape moral imagination, rather than merely prescribe behavior. Many of the New Testament’s most formative images place power and vulnerability at the center of faithful discipleship: the crucified Messiah, the self-emptying Christ, the body composed of weaker members, and the neighbor encountered on the roadside. Read in this light, it becomes clear that theologically important focal images do not hover abstractly above social life; they are learned from and inhabited within particular locations. This strand therefore foregrounds questions of power and

vulnerability, privileging the perspectives of those who live at the margins in a manner consonant with the Roman Catholic tradition’s articulation of a “preferential option for the poor.”

As one moves into the neighborhood and learns to live locally, another New Testament motif begins to surface, one that Fountain himself highlights and to which I return below—the motif of *translation*. I believe the incarnation itself may be read as an act of divine translation (see Backues 2003 and 2017b), as the Word is rendered into flesh, place, and practice. In this sense, translation—understood both literally and figuratively—becomes a critical skill of faithful neighboring, shaping how difference should be negotiated and meaning discerned. This notion of *neighborly translation* functions, in my reading, as a focal image of particular importance for development practice, and features prominently in my appraisal of what Fountain uncovers and advances in his work.

A Summary of Fountain’s Analysis

First, I contend that Fountain’s *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development* offers a rich ethnographic account of how the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) embodied a distinctive synthesis of faith, peoplehood, and development practice in Indonesia in the early twenty-first century. As someone who lived and worked in Indonesia during that same period, I find his analysis resonant and insightful. He first situates MCC historically, showing that since its founding in 1920 amid the Russian Mennonite crisis, the organization has functioned not merely as a relief agency but as an expression of Mennonite peoplehood—shaped by persecution, migration, mutual aid, and an ongoing moral “pilgrimage.” Yet this identity has long been marked by internal tensions and evolving definitions of what it means to be Mennonite.

Fountain then examines how MCC’s service ethos was “translated” in Indonesia (he helpfully highlights in this chapter the idea of “translation” as a notion ripe with potential for understanding this process). Rather than importing a North American model intact, MCC personnel renegotiated service within Indonesia’s religious, cultural, and bureaucratic landscape, generating hybrid practices that transformed both Mennonite and Indonesian expectations.

Subsequent chapters trace how MCC’s work became embedded in development and peacebuilding frameworks. Although mission shifted from evangelism to neighbor-oriented service, donor pressures, theological assumptions, and organizational culture continued to shape practice. Fountain highlights

² For a detailed methodological exposition of the approach I have developed—one that integrates these strands through motifs, themes, and guiding images—see Backues 2019.

enduring tensions around partnership, power, and dependency.

He further argues that Mennonite theology and development practice mutually shaped one another, producing a lived “theology of development.” Ideals of peace also met the frictions of post-conflict realities and interfaith engagement, tensions that could nonetheless be generative. Later chapters explore MCC workers’ complex posture of “guesthood” and the everyday practices—meals, greetings, office rhythms—through which service was quietly enacted. In these ordinary interactions, Fountain locates the fragile yet formative heart of MCC’s work in Indonesia at the time.

Engaging Fountain’s Analysis: Translation, Motif, and Practice

In much of my own writing and research (2003; 2009a; 2009b; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2019; 2020), I have tried to point out that theologically integrated development work should take on something far richer than an “Oxfam with Hymns”³ posture, one that amounts to little more than LEGO-snapping faith remnants onto acts of service virtually uninformed by what it is we say we believe. Rather, development, Christianly-undertaken in a deep grammar manner—one that takes seriously the thematic approach I highlighted earlier—will surely produce an entirely different way of looking at the fundamental factors we discover in our life-world: it should influence us as to how we see work, humans, land, money, happiness, and the good life.⁴ In several places, and to his credit, Fountain makes a similar point.

Fountain also found that, even though at many points MCC’s work represented a rich interplay between theology, identity, and practice, it would have been much richer had it been more squarely nested in faith components overtly and identifiably articulated. For instance, he highlights the following interchange:

...When I posed the question: “What is MCC’s theology of service?” to MCCers in Indonesia, I anticipated a straightforward answer. My expectation was entirely misplaced. In their responses to my question various MCCers confessed to not knowing what “the answer” was or should be. Others divulged that, although they once thought they knew what MCC’s theology of service was, now that they were actually on assignment they were much less sure. Still others informed me that MCC

had never actually articulated a theology of service (135).

Fountain observes that MCC’s main office seemed very reticent to contrast theological remnants from their past with present-day, amorphously defined practices that had little in common with those notions MCC had embraced in the past. This left both MCCers and Fountain himself confused in respect to how MCC saw its own missional focus.

Moreover, Fountain was struck by the possibility that this confusion—this very blurriness—was intentionally cultivated. He observes that when Nancy Heisey, a scholar with deep Anabaptist roots and extensive experience within MCC, attempted in the 1990s to draft a theological and missiological statement for the organization, her work ultimately “was never published” and failed to “...garner wide readership” (139). This was so even though she submitted four separate draft manuscripts, each accompanied by careful and sophisticated theological critique! As a result,

...the project of constructing a missiological statement was abandoned amid fading enthusiasm among all involved. Rather than articulating a theological identity, this is an instance of disarticulation of a theology of service. It was a proactive avoidance of the production of a clear public statement about MCC’s theological identity (139).

Even so, Fountain felt it would be a mistake to conclude that MCC was shaking off all theology or “theological imaginations” (153). Instead, he implies the way they framed things caused missional focus to be *intentionally* blurry, sometimes confusing, and *deliberately* debatable, to the point it prompted some Anabaptist leaders to urge MCC to fashion a “...clear theology that guides why and how they do development so that both word and deed promote a consistent witness” (154).

Fountain sees this acceptance of missional ambiguity to be the result of MCC’s “push and pull” nature, with their missional core transformed and molded by local encounters and by tangible service—a dynamic he characterizes as a type of “translation” process, in opposition to a fixed program implemented and guided by an outside, imported missional core. And Fountain also found that MCC continued to exhibit missionary shadows left over from its long history, whether ones couched in donor-agency

³ This helpful phrase comes from the former director of *Christian Aid* in the UK, Michael Taylor (Taylor 1995).

⁴ I have long found inspiration from economist E. F. Schumacher’s famous essay “Buddhist Economics” (Schumacher 1969) in this regard.

imprints, faith-based language of transformation, or assumptions about what “help” must look like, all these rooted implicitly in the sending community’s deeply Anabaptist identity in flavor. As Fountain says,

...Memmonite Christian theology, spirituality, and ethics permeate the organization. They constitute a crucial dimension of the habitus within which MCCers carry out their work (153).

Still, there existed strong impulses either to deny these shadows were there, or, once discovered, to claim that, by definition, they must be oppressive. Such a quandary prompts one to ask what type of missional focus a Christian development agency should have at its center, a question that deserves more attention than it normally receives. Fountain’s book helps resolve the quandary, while still leaving some dilemmas for us to ponder as we close our analysis.

I definitely understand what Fountain’s concern highlights, and to a degree I agree with his analysis. Dogmatically detailing missional focus or a strict alignment with outside prescriptions is a sure recipe for erecting oppressive edifices that do anything but liberate. The impulse toward recommending “translation” as a motif designed to counter this tendency is also an excellent move, one I myself utilized repeatedly in my work in West Java, in Bali, and in Aceh between 1989 and 2007.⁵

But what should this translation look like? Are we free to have it say whatever we wish? Can it turn into anything a local person wants it to become?⁶ If so, which local person(s) are permitted this liberty (for local communities on the margins are themselves not monoliths in terms of voices heard or power wielded)?

In several of my own writings I have suggested a middle ground approach, a posture that avoids strict missional blueprints imported from outside, but that also helps us avoid blurry, “anything goes” stances

aimed at nothing and then proceeding to hit it.⁷ In short, as I stated at the outset, I favor approaches more *motif-oriented* in character—more imagistic and picture-driven—methods that lean intentionally on metaphor, on recurring motifs, and on guiding images. These images must be sufficiently specific to provide clarity, yet sufficiently narrative to require ongoing interpretation within local and communal contexts. It should not be difficult to see how such an approach aligns closely with—and may even be indistinguishable from—frameworks that place “translation” at their center.⁸ I return to this point below.

In advocating for image-based missional emphases, I am not alone. I have already noted above that New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays (1996) has argued strongly for such an approach; Christian ethicists David Gushee and Glen Stassen (2016) have done likewise. Once again, what these scholars commend are interpretive styles that emphasize the identification of *master narrative images*. As I have noted, Hays calls these “focal images” that disclose what faithful discipleship looks like in practice. These motif-rich emphases are drawn from close engagement with the New Testament taken as a whole and are then taken up communally, often in new contexts or sites of action (such as Central Java in Indonesia).

This seems to be a promising path out of our present conundrum. Such an approach allows us to retain prophetic and delineating commitments—something impossible to entirely abandon in any case—without resorting to rigid, a priori theological prescriptions that define missional fidelity in advance and thereby empower gatekeepers to police orthodoxy.⁹ In this regard, when Philip Fountain foregrounds motifs such as *traveling* or *translation*, he endorses mental pictures that hold genuine promise for helping MCC move beyond the indeterminacy into which it has drifted by attempting to avoid all specificity.

⁵ This *translation motif* is not a new one; missiologist Charles Kraft of Fuller Seminary recommended a “dynamic equivalence” model for missiological engagement (contra a “formal correspondence” model), borrowing from translation and linguistic theory for his inspiration (see Kraft 1980). Kraft borrowed from pioneering missionary linguists like William Smalley and Eugene Nida for his conceptual funding; see Smalley 1991 and Nida 1961 and 1964.

⁶ As a development theorist, I am reminded of the caution against “romanticizing the local,” a move that can be almost as patronizing and belittling as it is to demonize the local.

⁷ As I have outlined elsewhere (Backues 2009, 68–69), since there is no “value-free” place for anyone to stand, when we advocate for missional blurriness and “ethical neutrality,” such a position always results in culturally and politically dominant “value-free” liberal values to tacitly sneak in, Trojan horse-like. This helps explain why we hear Fountain highlight long-standing MCC imported values—often theologically-inspired—still holding sway in MCC; these persisted, but in a form less colored by theological justification, and still outside in nature. Nature simply abhors a vacuum.

⁸ See Backues 2003 and 2009.

⁹ The process I endorse has much in common with what is described in Bevans 2002.

But it is important to realize that the story of Jesus has long been a given narrative; and it is not infinitely malleable. At the same time, it is a richly layered story from a distant historical context that has reverberated across cultures for millennia. As such, it necessarily admits a degree of interpretive latitude. By learning to interpret the image of Jesus found in the New Testament in a more collective and genuinely intercultural manner, we can loosen our grip on prescriptive impulses while also avoiding the cul-de-sacs of vagueness that offer no real guidance—and that risk allowing unnamed and even anti-Christian themes to slip in unexamined.

It is interesting to note that MCC seems to have caught a glimpse of the metaphor or image focus themselves, as hinted at by their own words, cited by Fountain:

...vagueness is not...an unfortunate outcome of development vocabulary that can be countered through ever more precise and refined definitions. It is, rather, a requisite and inherent feature of development discourse. Successful policy “generates mobilising metaphors... [sic] whose vagueness, ambiguity, and lack of conceptual precision required to conceal ideological differences so as to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests.” Development policy fails if it is too specific and prescriptive to the point at which it excludes key constituents (140–141).

This raises a deeper question: Are mobilizing metaphors merely rhetorical instruments used to soften ideological differences or avoid excluding key constituencies? Or might such master metaphors also function prescriptively—metaphorically, prophetically, and narratively—chosen to shape practice in ways that keep us from defaulting to unexamined assumptions and inherited master narratives, often rooted in secularized, Enlightenment frameworks?¹⁰ In MCC’s case, the danger of such drift appears to have materialized, as program evaluation increasingly came to be filtered through ostensibly “universal” and “generic” categories like *witness*, *peace*, *community*, or donor-driven metrics. The meanings carried by these terms depend on the narratives that underwrite them—and those narratives that may not easily align with carefully articulated theological commitments. To neglect the identification of missional themes, then, is to risk aiming at what is convenient or familiar rather

than at what is central to the theological narrative one claims to inhabit.

It is against this backdrop that two further observations come into sharper focus. Both follow directly from the emphasis on master metaphors and guiding motifs I have been advancing and both help clarify what is at stake in Fountain’s analysis.

As noted earlier, Fountain underscores—rightly and with evident appreciation—the motif of *translation* that MCC–Indonesia adopted as a guiding impulse. As mentioned above, this theme has long informed my own thinking and practice, and I regard Fountain’s sustained attention to it as one of the book’s most constructive contributions.

Yet Fountain might have pressed this theme further, particularly by engaging more fully the work of a thinker who long ago commended *translation* as a central motif for understanding the Christian faith and what it means to participate in its lived expression. Somewhat surprisingly, early on Fountain references Lamin Sanneh, but only once, and only in passing.

Sanneh (2009) warrants far more sustained engagement, particularly given the Indonesian (predominantly Muslim) context in which Fountain is working and the missional processes he seeks to evaluate. Greater attention to the implications of Sanneh’s thought would, in my view, have strengthened Fountain’s treatment of *translation* and reinforced the claims he advances around it. By way of illustration, I offer here a brief passage from my own earlier reflections on this theme:

As we [have] heard Sanneh emphasize..., deep within the Christian motif is the linguistic notion of *translation* (as opposed to *dissemination*.) This feature is well illustrated by the biblical image of the Tower of Babel as dramatic plot challenge (see Genesis 11) that finds its New Testament resolution in the polyglot scene of Pentecost (see Acts 2). As the story goes, long, long ago at Babel, by way of judgment and censure, one language became many. It seems only natural to think that to reverse this “curse,” these many languages (this hermeneutical cacophony) would need to be blended into one again, an image that would make sense in terms of the deep structure of scriptural Islam.... In Islam, God’s language (Arabic) is put forward as the linguistic fulcrum and the Prophet’s city (Mecca) is (re-)positioned as the world’s global, topographical epicenter...—recreating unity at the expense of diversity. In contrast, ...the

¹⁰ This focus on the theologically problematic nature of Western secular culture reminds me of the insightful (yet now largely forgotten) essay penned by futurist and Christian theorist Tom Sine, entitled “Development: Its Secular Past and Its Uncertain Future” (1980).

biblical narrative depicts communication and interrelationship as incarnationally translated forward (in contrast to being textually disseminated outward yet anchored to a fixed hub), contextualizing from one culture to the next in a manner necessitating humble, interpersonal communication and encounter—a process evincing significant consistency with the deep grammar of the incarnational motif (2017b, 116).

If Sanneh is right—and I am persuaded he is—then *translation* is not merely a helpful interpretive motif for navigating new development contexts; it lies at the very heart of the deep grammar of the biblical narrative itself. At its core, translation names the way readers participate in the discernment of theological meaning. Indeed, the essence of what is at stake—not only in development practice, but also in grasping the biblical witness and the portrait of Jesus it presents—is bound up with this logic of translation. Fountain leaves significant interpretive potential unexplored by engaging Sanneh’s thought only briefly. There is considerably more that could have been brought to bear in strengthening his analysis.

Finally, in Chapter 6 of his book, Fountain introduces an intriguing image—one that, upon closer examination, also raises important questions and invites careful scrutiny. The motif in question is that of *guesthood*, an image whose theological and practical implications are less straightforward than they might initially appear.

As Fountain explains, MCC personnel in Indonesia gradually came to understand themselves not as experts, but as “guests”—a self-conception that draws heavily on Mennonite traditions of hospitality and pilgrimage. This motif of *guesthood* called for humility and attentiveness, yet it was also complicated by interactions with local customs, by engagement in Muslim-majority settings, and by the dynamics of donor expectations. The ethnographic vignettes Fountain presents reveal persistent tensions: between welcome and intrusion, support and patronage, and identity and adaptation. In this way, *guesthood* emerged as a space in which MCC personnel could negotiate new meanings, embrace personal vulnerability, and engage local communities through sustained relational presence.

At first glance, the motif of *guesthood* appears deeply appealing. It seems to offer a gentle and ethically attractive alternative to historically dominant images that have often accompanied harm on the global stage—figures such as *implementers*, *planners*, *developers*, or even *missionaries*. In contrast to these more technocratic or domineering roles, *guesthood* promises humility, restraint, and relational attentiveness. Yet

upon closer examination, it becomes less clear that this image can bear the ethical weight it initially appears to carry.

To begin with, the host–guest relationship is far less symmetrical—and far less disempowering for the guest—than the metaphor suggests. Guests are the ones who arrive, they decide how long to stay, and they determine when to leave; in this sense, *they* retain a decisive measure of control. In many cultural settings, the moral burden falls on the host to accommodate, serve, and entertain, while social convention makes it difficult to ask a guest to depart. Even when guests are deferential or self-effacing, they remain the recipients of hospitality rather than those bound by its terms. The result is that guesthood often leaves underlying power dynamics intact: humility may be performed, yet authority and mobility can remain firmly with the visitor—something I witnessed repeatedly over nearly twenty years in Indonesia. The imbalance is sharpened by the fact guests are present by choice rather than necessity—they may leave at will, yet they may also choose not to, a fact that obligates hosts to sustain hospitality, even when doing that becomes burdensome or unwanted.

Moreover, by definition, guests remain outsiders, occupying a position not unlike that of a tourist. For readers familiar with classic literature on grassroots development, this might immediately call to mind the work of participatory theorist Robert Chambers, particularly his critique of development practitioners as “tourists.” Chambers offers a searing analysis of the “rural development tourist,” identifying a set of deeply entrenched biases that accompany this posture—biases he carefully unpacks and critiques (1983, 13–23; cf. also Backues 2003, 141–142.)

Finally—and in direct contrast to the image of the rural development tourist—there is already a focal image at hand, one often overlooked yet deeply rooted in the biblical narrative, and one I noted right at the outset of this piece: the image of the *neighbor*. This image, I suggest, flows directly from the theological center of the Christian story, which is decisively shaped by the Incarnation—the claim that God comes to dwell among us. Seen in this light, the contrast with *guesthood* becomes clear. A neighbor belongs to the community and shares in its risks and vulnerabilities; a guest does not. Guests are, by definition, temporary. They retain the option of departure and thus have limited investment in the long-term consequences of communal life, whereas neighbors remain, commit themselves, and are bound to what unfolds.

For these reasons, I suggest that had Fountain centered his analysis more explicitly on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—and on its portrayal of God as *neighbor*, as attested in the gospel itself—he would have been better positioned to offer a deeper and more theologically grounded evaluation of MCC–Indonesia’s

work. Such a focus would have allowed for greater clarity in assessing both forms of missional *blurriness*: the kind that is necessary and faithful in complex contexts, and the kind that becomes problematic by obscuring purpose and direction. It also would have illuminated the weight of institutional baggage, since neighbors, unlike guests, learn to live locally—with bags unpacked, commitments deepened, and vulnerability exposed to real, local consequences. By contrast, the motif of *guesthood* lacks sufficient theological robustness, especially when the paradigmatic image of neighborliness is already embedded in the figure of Jesus himself.

It is noteworthy that Fountain recognizes tensions within the motif of *guesthood*. He observes that MCC, even while embracing this self-understanding, enters its fields of service equipped with financial resources, professional staff, and organized projects—so that, paradoxically, it often finds itself *hosting* while claiming to be a guest. On closer reflection, however, this paradox should not be a surprise. As noted above, guests—especially wealthy and powerful ones—frequently wield considerable influence, even when they adopt a posture of humility. Fountain carefully traces this oscillation between power and vulnerability, showing how *guesthood* requires constant recalibration of authority. Yet I would suggest that had he counterposed this motif more explicitly with the image of *neighborliness*, readers would have been better served. The image of the neighbor is more fitting to the ethical vision his book ultimately advances, offering a clearer and more theologically coherent framework for understanding responsibility, power, and presence in development practice.

Put simply, guests remain outsiders and, as such, typically enjoy significant privilege; they are not required to belong. They are present only temporarily and expect to be hosted. Neighbors, by contrast, must settle in as neighbors: they learn the local vernacular, adopt the forms of interaction preferred by the community, share in vulnerability, and become proximally accountable for their daily lives. Read through this lens, it is telling that MCC-Indonesia meetings were conducted almost exclusively in English, and that a key qualification for local staff working alongside foreign personnel was their ability to communicate fluently in that language. It is likewise significant that MCC's offices were located in Salatiga—a cool mountain city long associated with Dutch colonial administration—chosen in large part so that the children of foreign staff could attend the Christian international school based there. These arrangements underscore how *guesthood* quietly preserves distance and privilege, even when accompanied by humility of intent. By contrast, the image of *neighboring* resonates more fully with the focal images of the biblical text itself

and aligns more closely with historic Mennonite commitments to simplicity, communal engagement, and incarnational presence.

For these reasons, I favor *neighboring*—understood through the lens of *translation*—as a better guiding metaphor for theologically-informed development work than *guesthood*, because it provides ethical and theological depth that *guesthood* cannot adequately offer.

Conclusion

Fountain's ethnography stands as a valuable and illuminating contribution to the study of faith-infused development practice. He offers a careful and textured account of how MCC's work in Indonesia generated theological, institutional, and interpersonal tensions that shaped both practice and identity, and he is especially attentive to the fragility and complexity of missional self-understanding. Read alongside the interpretive posture outlined at the outset of this essay—one attentive to focal images, power asymmetries, and the moral imagination they form—Fountain's work invites a deeper question still: the articulation of a guiding theological motif capable of grounding Mennonite development practice in a distinctly Christian way of being in the world. Such a motif must do more than manage difference or soften power; it must reorder presence, accountability, and belonging in light of the image of a God who moved into the neighborhood and lived among us. For my part, the Incarnation—and its accompanying focal image of *neighboring*—provides a more compelling center for this task than the motif of *guesthood*. When *neighboring* is held together with a thick understanding of *translation*—understood both literally and figuratively as the patient work of learning local languages, meanings, and moral worlds—it offers a way of inhabiting development practice that privileges commitment over mobility, vulnerability over privilege, and interpretation over distance. In this way, *neighboring* and *translation* together resonate deeply with the theological grammar of Scripture and with historic Mennonite commitments to simplicity, communal engagement, and incarnational presence. Joined as focal images, they offer a narrative, ethical, and practical anchor capable of sustaining a genuinely Christian *service of faith*—one faithful both to the story we inhabit and to the neighbors among whom we live.

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