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# Editors' Introduction

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For many years now, the Accord Network and key players in the world of Christian development theory and practice have championed words like “(w)holistic,” “integral,” and “transformational.” The main idea behind this is that God is interested not only in our spiritual connectedness to God and the content of our verbally expressed faith, but also in what we do and how we live our faith in every one of life’s arenas. This idea of a holistic gospel directly challenges a long and storied era of a dualistic gospel, in which the only really important part of faith is to love God and love our neighbors by bringing them to a saving knowledge of Jesus. The purpose of Christian mission is then to preach the Word in order to gain converts for Christ. In the midst of this confusing era, it was hard for anyone engaged in mission work to comprehend what other purposes there might be, even though it surely did seem that other arenas of human well-being were important too. And it was clear that the Bible talked about a lot more than the salvific side of life. No surprise then that Christian organizations sprang up like mushrooms to address hunger, poverty, health, race relations, gender, armed conflict, family relationships, farming, children’s well-being, and creation care, among many others, all of which gained biblical attention. And yet, for many the true test of success in development work still seemed to come down to whether people were being converted, “born again” or finding a “saving faith in Jesus.”

But over the last seventy and more years, as our global exposure and experience have grown, the character of mission has undergone a major renewal as mission leaders from numerous traditions rethought how Christ speaks to us about our engagement with people, cultures, and nations around of the world. One result has been a good many Christ-centered, biblically rich books that reframe Christian mission to incorporate a full gospel approach to all of human life.<sup>1</sup> In all this work “mission” continued to be about spiritual life, but a spiritual life seamlessly integrated

into a full package of who we are, how God loves us, and how God calls us to live, and paying special attention to what can be learned, spiritually and otherwise, from those we are called to serve. At any given time, discernment is needed. Christian calling in any particular moment might be to build peace, overcome famine, improve gender relations, or heal the environment.

Such broad thinking represents a major revision, but it is finally catching on and becoming increasingly normal. At the same time, in some ways and in some arenas, the pendulum has swung the other way, with the importance of the salvific side being downplayed or vanishing altogether. This is not a surprise, because the struggle to maintain a holistic approach in the face of myriad complex contexts, cultures and subcultures, and theological and denominational differences is always that, a struggle. As a part of that effort, the current issue of Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy (CRDA) testifies that we have come a long way, because this issue, and indeed the very existence of the entire journal, is geared toward wrestling with aspects of life that realize the good news of Christ in all its dimensions.

The issue begins with an article by four practitioners from World Vision who see the importance of including children in the planning and shaping of their programs. Children are not just mouths to feed, bodies to house, or brains to educate, but children of God whose voices need to be heard and respected as they also join the work of discerning pathways of understanding in nurturing and living out human values, like “compassion, purpose, resilience, joy, wisdom, and personal faith” (Kraft et al. 2026, 1). This article is followed by another that intentionally addresses holistic aspects of an economic empowerment program for orphaned and vulnerable youth in Kenya. Asking primarily if return on investment (ROI) is an appropriate measure of progress or success, the authors point out that “the ultimate goal

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<sup>1</sup> We started to identify these influential luminaries but quickly realized how long the list was. With so many people to name, we worried about leaving key people off the list. As a result, here in the footnote, we mention only a sampling of some thinkers and guides who have been especially influential at different junctures of our own lives. We encourage you to develop your own list. Here are some of ours: John Stott, René Padilla, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and papal encyclicals like Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), and Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* (2015).

is not merely economic advancement, but the holistic transformation of individuals and communities in alignment with God’s vision for human flourishing” (Williams et al. 2026, 22). Employing the Harvard Human Flourishing Index (HHFI), itself a measure of a broad, interconnected range of human goals, the authors conclude that “ROI can move beyond narrow economic returns to capture broader dimensions of transformation, such as improved health, strengthened relationships, greater life purpose, and enhanced well-being” (24).

This issue proceeds to three book reviews: The first is a review article by Lindy Backues on Philip Fountain’s thoughtful ethnography of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and their development work in Indonesia, together with a response by Fountain to Backues’ review. Fountain’s book is *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonite Development* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2024). One issue of interest to anyone working across cultures to promote development is whether outsiders should consider themselves, and behave, as “guests” or “neighbors.” The conversation between Backues and Fountain is deep, meaningful, and helpful.

The second is a review of *The Justice of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2025) written by Joash Thomas, who was born and raised in India. Thomas immigrated to North America as a young adult and now lives in Canada. He brings his experience as both a political operative and pastor in North America to this discussion of justice. As reviewer Clark Buys of Tearfund says, “a central contribution of this book is the vantage point Thomas brings as someone shaped by both the Global South and the North American church” (2026, 38). Arguing that the message of the gospels champions both spiritual and physical liberation, Joash suggests that Western churches that feel called to make a contribution in another country move beyond mission trips to “vision trips,” which require listening, humility, and seeing with fresh eyes.

The final review assesses a book about whether RCTs (randomized control trials) are really the “gold standard” for program evaluation. The book is *Mismeasuring Impact: How Randomized Controlled Trials Threaten the Nonprofit Sector*, by Nicole Marwell and Jennifer Mosley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025). Reviewing the book are development economists Jeffrey R. Bloem and Bruce Wydick. They concur with Marwell and Mosley that while RCTs have their place, quasi-experimental approaches are even better for NGOs, including Christian relief, development, and advocacy NGOs, because they resolve significant ethical problems while also supporting those NGOs that wish to emphasize such values as dignity, relationships, justice, and

spiritual growth, all of which are difficult to measure quantitatively.

We hope you find this *CRDA* issue instructive and helpful. We do not think it easy to discern what service to God means in this complex world, but we are unified in our thinking that there is no greater task. Feel free to let us know if you would like to share with our journal’s audience about your own journey integrating faith with global engagement: we are always looking for those kinds of testimonies that help us all learn from each other!

## References

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