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Review: The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication

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The Facilitator Era: Beyond Pioneer Church Multiplication

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011. Paperback, xvii + 399pp., \$46

Reviewed by Ed Smither

Author

A*The Facilitator Era* is the latest work from well-known missiologist Tom Steffen. Presently, Steffen is professor of intercultural studies at Biola University and directs the Doctor of Missiology program at Biola's Cook School of Intercultural Studies. Prior to assuming his present role, Steffen served with New Tribes Mission as a church planter among the Ifugao people of the Philippines for fifteen years, after which he consulted the mission in church planting for another five years. His previous books include *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers* (1997), *Great Commission Companies: The Emerging Role of Business in Missions* (with Steve Rundle, 2003), *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry: Crosscultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (2005), *Business as Mission* (with Mike Barnett, 2006), and *Encountering Missionary Life and Work* (with Lois McKinney Douglas, 2008). Steffen has also contributed numerous other articles to missiology journals, particularly in the area of church planting and orality.

Overview of the Book

True to his own convictions, Steffen masterfully frames the arguments in this book around an engaging story. In nine weekly encounters, intercultural studies professor Dr. C.P. Nobley meets with his former students, Bill and Bev Beaver, who are on furlough after two years of service in the Philippines. Questioning their role as international transcultural workers, they approach Dr. Nobley who helps them (and the audience) reflect critically on a new paradigm and period of missions—the fa-

Facilitator era. Referring back to Ralph Winter's three eras of mission history—the coastlands (led by William Carey), the inlands (led by Hudson Taylor), and unreached peoples (led by Cameron Townsend and Donald McGavran)—Steffen, via this story, proposes that the most useful role for missionaries today is to help facilitate the pioneer church planting ministries of national believers.

In part 1, the first seven weeks of the encounter, Steffen:

- surveys the church planting literature (pp. 7-23)
- discusses the history of missions, Winters' three eras, and mission models (pp. 24-41)
- works to define key mission terms, including church planting, church growth, healthy churches, and church multiplication (pp. 42-59)
- seeks to define the profile of a facilitator (pp. 60-73)
- discusses the phenomena of the megachurch and short-term missions from North America (pp. 74-99)
- probes into the issues of missions and money, and tentmaking and Business as Mission paradigms (pp. 100-120)
- shows the essential role of storying the Gospel for oral learners (pp. 121-51).

It is not surprising that Steffen would devote such space to church multiplication, Business as Mission, and orality as the author has already shown in other works that these are his passions in missiological study.

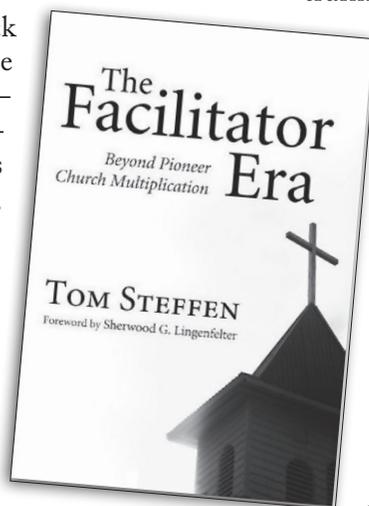
In part 2 (pp. 155-327), Steffen endeavors to support his thesis by examining sixteen case studies that show the facilitator model at work. As the Beavers nicely report to Dr. Nobley in their

eight meeting (pp. 331-39), the case studies dealt with issues such as partnership in the Amazon (case study 1) and in Latin America in general (2); training in Brazil (3) and

China (5); church planting in Japan (4), Southeast Asia (6), Papua New Guinea (9), Poland (10) and Russia (11); and evangelism in Sudan (7). Other case studies addressed community transformation in Uganda (8), developing a Bible and church planting training institute in the Philippines and Russia (12), Busi-

ness as Mission in Russia (13), short-term missions in Peru (14), English youth camps in Ukraine (15), and Bible translation in Southeast Asia (16). While the eighth meeting reflects upon and summarizes what was learned from the case studies (pp. 331-50), in the ninth and final meeting, Steffen has Dr. Nobley make the case for the validity of missionaries continuing to serve as pioneer church planters (pp. 351-72). In week 10, through the Beavers alone, the author offers a final synthesis of the book's arguments.

How does it relate to other works? As Steffen's book covers a number of themes, there are several recent books to which it relates, including Steffen's own *Passing the Baton*, *Great Commission Companies*, *Business as Mission*, and *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry*. In one sense, the overview chapters of part 1 could be considered a "best of Steffen" compilation. In addition, Steffen's chapter on short-term mission certainly relates to Robert Priest's (ed.) *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions* (2008). Finally, as a book on twenty-first century mission trends, Steffen's work also finds affinity with Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross' *Mission in the 21st Century* (2008) and Stan Guthrie's *Missions in the Third Millennium* (2000).



Strengths

Among the book's many strengths, I was first impressed with Steffen's style. Through setting up the non-case study chapters as dialogues between Dr. Nobley and the Beavers, the approach was engaging and invited the reader to keep reading. Personally, I was so into the book that I passed up three movies on a flight from the U.S. to Eastern Europe! I loved the necessary presence of coffee in each encounter and the hospitality displayed through Dr. Nobley's homemade cookies. Bev's continually twisted ponytail was a prop that depicts the curiosity of many students. Dr. Nobley's whiteboard lists not only helped to frame and summarize discussions, they will also serve as useful tools for other mission educators. Through the dialogues, Steffen also managed to embed a significant bibliography and list of content rich and relevant web sites.

Mission professors will connect easily with this narrative because we have all had these discussions to some extent. Through his story, Steffen succeeds in offering a learner-centered model for ongoing missiological education that treats some of the major issues in current missiology while making the case for the facilitator paradigm. Indeed, if Dr. Nobley were having these discussions in the Beaver's field context, we might regard him as a facilitating missions educator.

Second, the facilitator model is certainly a worthy paradigm for global missions today. Steffen helpfully takes into consideration the history of missions and how the paradigms of the first three eras bleed into this fourth period. North Americans and Westerners are invited to learn from our mistakes and take a "back-burner" posture and adopt the role of a ministry coach. In contrast to earlier paradigms in which missionaries spent forty years laboring in another context, this model celebrates short-cycle church planting (and therefore shorter missionary careers) and church multiplication. Indeed, the facilitator model counters dependency and empowers national Christians.

Third, the sixteen case study chapters alone were worth the price of the book. While showing the real difficulties and messiness of global missions, they certainly gave credence to Steffen's thesis and revealed how the facilitator model is wrestled with and worked out on the field in the context of ministries such as evangelism, church planting, training, partnership, BAM, youth ministry, and Bible translation. While the individual case study chapters provided helpful reflection, the concluding debrief chapters with Dr. Nobley and the Beavers firmly supported the maxim that missiology needs mission and mission needs missiology.

Critiques



WHILE THE INDIVIDUAL case study chapters

provided helpful reflection, the concluding debrief chapter with Dr. Nobley and the Beavers firmly supported the maxim that missiology needs mission and mission needs missiology.



As I offer some critiques of Steffen's work, let me begin by quoting Dr. Nobley: "Anything I say that may sound like criticism is not meant to condemn, but rather to challenge, to bring clarity, and to be constructive" (p. 85). In this spirit, let me first remark that it seems like Steffen struggles to define adequately the facilitator paradigm, especially with regard to the facilitator's commitment to learning culture and language. To be sure, in the week 4 dialogue ("what's in a profile"), he asserts that facilitators can be permanent or semi-permanent workers or those that parachute in (p. 63). In distinguishing between pioneer church planters and facilitators, he also suggests that facilitators may not need to acquire linguistic and cultural proficiency in order to minister effectively (pp. 61-66). In case study 5, Monnie Brewer fits this profile as he trains Chinese church planters via translation during a short-term trip (pp. 196-206). On the other hand, Don Finley (case study 3), a long-term

worker in Brazil with fluency in Portuguese, labors to train Brazilians for Muslim ministry (pp. 173-85). In case study 10, the short-cycle church planting team in Poland lamented over not having all of their team engage in rigorous cultural and language learning (p. 248), while case 12 seems to celebrate the importance of being a cultural insider (pp. 282-83). Finally, in case study 13, Dianne Thomas warns, "I would like to sound the warning bell and strongly suggest that missionaries and the agencies they represent do more study and investigation of the host culture in all of our cross-cultural ministry ventures" (p. 295). In the very least, the facilitator profile is quite varied.

While Steffen's goal may not be to definitively nail down a working definition for a facilitator, he has nevertheless presented this as a new paradigm for a new era in missions. After reading Dr. Nobley's descriptions in the week 4 discussions and following the case studies throughout the book, I perceive that the facilitator notion is actually more of a spirit, attitude, or perspective on mission work than a complete paradigm. This posture—that of a coach or consultant—could be held by a short-term mission leader or a pioneer church planter who labors to pass the baton to national leaders.

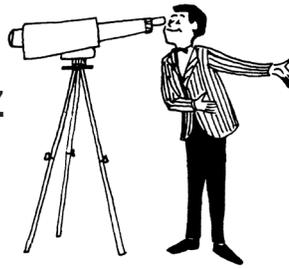
Second, I struggle to follow Steffen's logic that Rick Warren is the best model for the facilitator era (pp. 30-36). Warren's accomplishments as planting pastor of Saddleback Church and initiator of the PEACE plan are carefully noted (and certainly appreciate by) this reader; however, it is not fully clear why this North American megachurch pastor models best this new trend in

global missions. Why not Luis Bush—initiator of COMIBAM, AD 2000, and TransformWorld? Why not John Piper—another megachurch pastor, missionary theologian, sender, and advocate? Why not an unknown leader from the majority world where spontaneous mission movements are developing? Why should there be any face on this era of missions at all? I would concur with one majority world mission leader who, in a recent consultation on diaspora missions, declared that “there is no one leader in this global movement.”

Third, and related, Steffen’s book still appears largely focused on the North American church, which again, is a disappointment in the present era where majority world and diaspora missions movements are developing and even serving as models for the global church. Steffen’s case studies, while very insightful, fail to account for the facilitating activities of non-Western intercultural workers. Perhaps Steffen is suggesting that the facilitator paradigm should be largely pursued by North Americans. However, as I reflect on this, I am immediately reminded of two Latin American workers—one serving as a mobilizer and the other a missionary in the Middle East—who strongly demonstrate facilitator tendencies. It would have been good to hear more of these voices. In light of this third concern, I failed to see the relevance of the week 5 dialogue (pp. 74-99) and the attention given to the megachurch and short-term missions phenomena from North America. Are these foundational for the facilitator era?

In summary, though my appreciation for Professor Steffen and this work are clear, I did not find the work to be as groundbreaking as I had hoped. Indeed, he argues that the facilitator era builds naturally off of the previous eras. However, his discussions on church multiplication, the megachurch, BAM, and orality among others were largely summaries of existing (albeit excellent) work. As noted, while the case studies were helpful, they could have incorporated a broader element of the glob-

As seen through the LENZ



This is the era when Business As Mission (BAM) is playing a major role in getting out the Gospel to restricted areas of the world. But what about a theology of vocation in relation to BAM? What are the motivating factors that should accompany this or any Christian ministry? I have asked Mans Ramstad to write an article that

al church. While one may argue that he has worked within the scope of his expertise, students, and contacts, the author has still made a rather bold claim that the facilitator model is indicative of a new era in missions.

Conclusion

My “constructive, challenging, clarifying” critiques aside, my hope is that this work will be a catalyst for further reflection for the global church, especially as we continue to discuss pioneer church planting movements among the least reached. This book should definitely be read by professors of mission and practitioners from North America who, like the Beavers, are continually re-evaluating the role of the international missionary. Perhaps the book could be assigned in an advanced church planting seminar in a seminary missiology program; however, the book’s cost (\$46) is somewhat prohibitive.

Ed Smither currently serves as Associate Professor of Intercultural Studies and Church History at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and Liberty University. Ed holds doctorates in historical theology (University of Wales) and missiology (University of Pretoria) and his books include Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders and Early Christianity in North Africa (translation of François Decret). Ed spent fourteen years in intercultural ministry, ten of which were in France and North Africa. ■

would give us foundational insights that should preface our calling into the Lord’s work. As you will note from his approach, Mans has had to think seriously about his calling into a non-church planter vocation, and he has done this very effectively to help God’s servants think through their preparation for ministry. These practical principles set forth should be included in every seminary course dealing with God’s calling.

We are also privileged to have Ed Smithers from Liberty University give a good review of Tom Stiffens new book *The Facilitator Era*, dealing with several key issues on the missions scene. Thanks Ed for taking the time to give us an overview of Tom’s work.

Continued from page 5

9. Heslam, P. S. (1998). *Creating A Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism*. Michigan: The Paternoster Press.

10. As Kuyper said, “There is not one square inch of the universe over which Christ does not proclaim, ‘Mine’.”

11. What Niebuhr called “middle level axioms.” See Niebuhr, Reinhold, (1932). *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

12. Augustine, A. (1878). *The City of God*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark.

13. Hockenos, M. D. (2004). *A church divided: German Protestants confront the Nazi past*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.23.

14. Strauss, S. (2005). “Kingdom Living: The Gospel on Our Lips and in Our Lives.” *EMQ*, 41(1):58-63.

15. Young, T. K.-h. (1973). “A conflict of professions: The medical missionary in China, 1835-1890.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 47(3): 272.

16. Tan, J. Y.-K. (2005). “A New Way of Being Church in Asia.” *Missiology*, 33(1):75.

17. *Ibid*, p. 82.

18. Ling, S. (1986). “The Gospel and Chinese society.” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 10(2), 147-152. Ng, K.-w. (1996). From *Christ to Social Practice: Christological Foundations for Social Practice in the Theologies of Albrecht Ritschl, Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann*. Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary.

19. Simons, R. G. (1995). *Competing Gospels: Public Theology and Economic Theory*. Alexandria: E J Dwyer.

Mans Ramstad [pseudonym] has worked as a Christian professional in a creative access country for nearly 20 years. ■