

BOOK REVIEW

**Farrell, B. Hunter, and S. Balajiedlang
Khyllep. 2022. *Freeing Congregational Mission:
A Practical Vision for Companionship, Cultural
Humility, and Co-Development***

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
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Reviewed by Say Young Lee

Freeing Congregational Mission serves as a comprehensive guidebook for the church's mission, anchored in the theology of *missio Dei*. It particularly delves into the vision and practice of short-term mission (STM) within the context of mainline churches in the United States. From a historical standpoint, STM have emerged as a potent missionary strategy, characterized by explosive growth and expansion, fueled by a sense of urgent eschatology. This growth is intertwined with church growth theology and missions for unreached people groups.

The emergence of *missio Dei* paradigm in the twentieth century broadened the scope of missions to encompass various social justice activities, extending beyond mere evangelism and church planting. Nevertheless, the locus of control and agency for missions often resided with the church and mission organizations, rather than attributing the primary agency to God. This inclination also led to a colonial perspective, aiming to transform mission fields from the vantage point of the sending church. Consequently, the practice of STM still continues to retain a colonial undertone, seeking to extend the church's influence and assert cultural and spiritual superiority over the host communities. This enduring dynamic illustrates that while missiological theology has evolved, missions have remained largely within the domain of the church's mission in the modern era.

In this book, leveraging their rich experience in the mission field, denominational leadership, and theological education, Hunter and Bala adeptly reveal the realities of the church's mission practice as described above. They introduce a vision and theological foundation for renewing the church's mission in the first section of the book.

In the second section, they provide church mission leaders with a practical methodology for practising companionship-based missions and enacting tangible transformations that align with God's mission. This book offers a roadmap for nurturing a missional spirituality, addressing challenges such as colonialism, cultural superiority, and consumerism in mission work. It accentuates the significance of companionship-based missions grounded in Jesus' life and a community centred on the gospel, and offers concrete examples for transforming readers' behaviours and habits.

What sets this book apart is its recognition of issues not only within the context of church-centred missions and colonialism but also within the self-centric and self-satisfying mission practices rooted in consumerism prevalent in the US (7). The authors critique self-satisfying missions for diminishing God's role in the mission and reducing it to a mere "to-do list" for human accomplishment (9). They highlight how consumerist missions within American churches, especially mainstream ones, prioritize the individual over God. The authors particularly critique STM participants from American churches for pursuing self-satisfaction by indulging their personal goodwill. In essence, they acknowledge the potential of STM as a form of spiritual training, contributing to the expansion of God's kingdom through human effort. However, they also acknowledge the irony that such endeavours can inadvertently strengthen a human-centred approach to missions, ultimately replacing God's sovereignty with human agency in missionary endeavours. Consequently, they advocate for a renewal in the church's mission practices, emphasizing the need for a shift towards missions driven by God and motivated by a quest for his kingdom, rather than centred around human objectives.

Building upon this awareness of STM challenges, the authors seek solutions rooted in Jesus' life and the Gospel-centred community, providing alternatives to the issues of colonialism, cultural superiority and consumeristic missions. They introduce three elements for fostering a community's spiritual reclamation. First, they present a theology rooted in Jesus' companionship, contrasting with self-centric missions. Secondly, they propose a cultural humility grounded in the Incarnation, as an alternative to colonial attitudes. Thirdly, they advocate for a methodology centred around mutual cooperation rather than a unilateral approach where the giver transforms the receiver. According to the authors, the keyword for gospel-based missions is "companionship", a concept rooted in shared experiences such as meals and journeys (47). Unlike a partnership focused on projects, companionship is a relationship that stems from vulnerability, where weaknesses are shared rather than power dynamics (50). As such, companionship is not about the achievement (52). The authors argue that for readers to engage in companionship-based missions, they need to shift their

focus from self-centred endeavours to God-centred missions, emphasizing the need to display a shared direction centred on Jesus (60).

Consequently, the authors posit that the companionship-based missions they advocate aren't about individually-driven or church-centred missions, aimed at conversions and discipleship. Instead, they promote a journey of humble companionship rooted in Jesus' life and demonstrated through a community united by the gospel (62). Such missions aren't about powerful individuals transforming the weak, but about emulating Jesus' mission, a collaborative effort that transcends distinctions (67). This approach prioritizes a gradual, shared missionary journey (229) rather than swift transformations. In this context, the authors call upon church mission leaders to alter their attitudes and methodologies in order to align their mission practice with the concept of companionship-based missions, providing practical strategies for implementing these changes.

The book also stands out for its role as a guide in cultivating missional spirituality. The authors' focus lies in altering misguided behaviors and habits deeply ingrained in the readers' lives. Their language is pragmatic and grounded in everyday life, avoiding doctrinal or metaphysical complexities. Through practical, real-life examples, they offer a roadmap for adopting more desirable patterns of thinking and behaviour, particularly in the context of mission mobilization. A notable example includes the three stones the authors present as alternatives for revitalizing missions, symbolizing a "home" represented by the cooking fire in Congo, where Hunter served (14). Through this metaphor, they underscore the centrality of companionship-based missions (15). Moreover, the authors share a specific case involving differing opinions between missionary and local inhabitants, regarding the installation of wells or sports fields in Congo (21). This case makes the concept relatable and practical, illustrating the mistakes and challenges that churches in the US might have experienced. Furthermore, at the conclusion of each narrative about the theoretical foundation of the three stones, the authors offer practical methodologies for implementation. In Section 2, they provide detailed practical manuals for short-term missions, children and family ministry, and training mission leaders. These manuals guide the application of *missio Dei* theology beyond theoretical discourse and into the realm of practical church mission, emphasizing both spiritual development and practical action.

However, while the authors emphasize that cross-cultural training isn't a manual approach, system, method or technique, but rather a spirituality emerging from deep meditation on the gospel and obedience to Jesus (100), it's somewhat disappointing that the book doesn't offer more guidance on cultivating an everyday missional spirituality, something that should be an ongoing and regular practice. Moreover,

while the authors' provision of comprehensive manuals for renewing church mission practice can be viewed as a contribution toward God's mission, from the perspective of understanding a community as an organic entity, the practical methodology in the book seems to lean toward modern, Western approaches that aim to change individuals and organizations through planned manuals and deliberate education (234).

Nonetheless, the authors' responses to pertinent and well-articulated questions regarding the mission practice that aligns with the *missio Dei* paradigm and the relevance of short-term missions are astute and aptly presented throughout the book. The authors' emphasis on theology of companionship, cultural humility, and the practical aspects of co-development as the foundation of short-term missions, alongside their presentation of specific ministry models, resonates well with the contemporary role and responsibilities of the church. I firmly agree that these topics are essential and timely discussions and responses. Furthermore, by highlighting that STM have served as opportunities for participants' spiritual training and growth, the book addresses the question of opportunity cost for STM, that is, whether the resources invested in STM are merely consumed for self-satisfaction. The book firmly answers this question with a "no", stating that STM of the church can be valuable and meaningful dedications for the sake of missional spiritual training rooted in God's mission.

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