



## ***Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations can make a difference* by Bob Mitchell, Foreword by Bryant L Myers, Orbis Books, 2017**

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We live in uncertain times with global, political and economic alliances under strain and nationalistic ‘me-first’ politics gaining significant support in a number of countries. This is not the time for Christian organizations to retreat from the world nor is this the time to merely ape secular actors. This book is a timely, readable, and practical promotion of faith-based development that answers a critically important question: How can Christian organizations make a difference?

The author, Bob Mitchell, brings to this task an impressive and diverse background – legal qualifications, a partner at an international accountancy firm, an executive with World Vision Australia, an Anglican clergyman, and a PhD in Applied Theology. He marshals his wide experience to help readers understand the complex issues swirling around “faith” and “development” without using complex academic language. This results in a practically rich and theoretically well-informed book.

“Development” is a word with many meanings. Secular development specialists, one of the audiences Mitchell seeks to engage, consider the objective of development “‘to advance human dignity, freedom, social equity and self-determination’ and that a lack of development involves ‘social exclusion, poverty, ill-health, powerlessness and a shortened life expectancy’” (p. xxi). Mitchell critiques secular development as often being too western, arrogant, and having too narrow an economic focus. In contrast, Mitchell

promotes a wide appreciation of human flourishing from a Christian perspective.

Mitchell recognizes that the resources of faith are too often suppressed in development practice, even in Christian-based organizations, due to the “cult of modernity” (p. 166). International development as “an academic discipline has tended to marginalize religious viewpoints” (p. 119). The tools of rationality are prioritized over the resources of faith. International development is still impacted by the “secularization thesis” promoted by significant 20th century thinkers—Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim—that faith and religion will diminish as people “develop” into rational beings. This has proven to be a false presumption and yet many development agencies continue to work with this paradigm resulting in the sidelining of faith and religious dimensions of life. “Faith-skeptical” attitudes have even impacted Christian organizations, Mitchell argues: “Many European FBOs have engaged in this kind of dichotomous thinking, allowing faith to dissipate so they can become more ‘professional’.”

While some FBOs are distancing themselves from the resources of faith, there is an increasing awareness by politicians and secular development professionals that faith and religion have something to contribute in the fight to end extreme poverty and promote sustainable development. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) plus religious congregations and their institutions have an extensive reach into many of the most vulnerable communities. More



than 80 per cent of people in the world have “a religious affiliation and worldview” (p8) and as former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, argues, “There has been a very belated recognition that the majority of the world’s population does have religious convictions and to ignore these is to push against the grain.” (p8) This new interest in faith and religion has risks. Mitchell notes that organizations formed by people of faith can be coopted as an instrument to be used rather than as a partner to be valued and appreciated.

The majority of the book is dedicated to building up the capacity of Christians and their organizations as faithful partners. Mitchell describes the richness of a Christian theology of development, and shows how it connects and contrasts with the secular development theory and practice. He theologically reflects on prevalent theories of change, the importance of narrative and ‘kingdom now’ theologies. Mitchell references some of the giants of contemporary theology—NT Wright, Jurgen Moltmann, and Miroslav Volf—but he does not give an in-depth analysis of their theologies. It is sufficient for his argument to acknowledge the reliable foundations upon which he builds and move on to discuss practical applications.

Mitchell addresses issues that prevent FBOs from being faithful in a clear, readable, and coherent argument. His proposal develops resources for FBOs. He does not reject the academic discipline of development studies but presents an insightful and balanced critique of science, human rights, and secularism arguing that they can enrich Christian practice without compromising faith. He warns that FBOs can engage with any relevant academic discipline but should assess the worldview upon which it is based and compare it with their Christian worldview.

Mitchell calls for a renewed level of intentionality by FBOs to use the resources of their faith tradition. Mitchell explains the importance of ‘inner transformation’ in the process of development, the contribution of prayer and spiritual disciplines, and the special relationship that needs to

be strengthened between FBOs and the local church. There are also sections discussing how to engage people of other faiths such as Muslims and followers of African Traditional Religion.

The weakness of the book is a lack of detailed research methodology. In the foreword, Professor Bryant Myers, hails Mitchell’s work as “the first systematic, field-based academic research on the theory and practice of faith-based development done by a Christian organization” (px). Mitchell uses eight World Vision Evaluation Reports on work in Georgia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Senegal, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, Armenia, and Albania. Too little information is provided on the quality of the evaluations, the research methods used in the evaluation process or the reliability of the conclusions. For example, one evaluator, Ashley Goode, authors or co-authors six of the reports. Did this fact affect the quality of the data set? The quality and credibility is apparently taken at face value. Given Mitchell’s recognition of the importance of credible, robust evidence of the contribution of FBOs, it is essential for him to provide more information and critique of the data upon which he builds a substantial amount of his argument.

The advantage of Mitchell’s accessible writing is that non-academic professionals will read it. The downside is that critical academic readers may not appreciate the firm academic foundations from which his arguments emerge. Mitchell describes a number of habits and practices that result in a more faithfully-based organization but he does not explicitly link them to any processes or models which embed the practices into the life of an organization. In the past 20 years, the academic discipline of practical theology has developed a number of rich and robust processes for theological reflection (See *Theological Reflection Methods*, Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, Francis Ward, SCM Press, 2005).

Other writers who would have strengthened Mitchell’s arguments include Professor Linda Hogan from Trinity College, Dublin (*Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, 2015) and Professor Luke Bretherton

from Duke University (*Resurrecting Democracy*, 2015). This is a fast moving area of research and practice. Interested readers can learn more about how secular and faith practitioners engaged in development work are learning together by visiting the Partnership for Religion and Development (<http://www.partner-religion-development.org>) and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities ([jiflc.com](http://jiflc.com)).

Mitchell concludes with a discussion on the increasing demand for accountability in all areas of public life – including FBOs and religious bodies. He argues that FBOs should not resist these pressures but embrace accountability as an opportunity to increase faithfulness and transparency. A number of cross cutting themes are considered (disability, gender, environment, child protection). The book

concludes with a call to all the actors (governors of FBOs, churches interested in development, the development sector, governments, NGOs, Christian development practitioners) to think again about the contribution faith can make to solving the world's greatest challenge – ensuring sustainable development for this and future generations.

This book is primarily a pastoral, practical resource and should be essential reading material for all Christians studying or working in the field of development. As Bryant Myers states in the foreword, “This is an important call for the leadership of faith-based agencies to recover their confidence in their own traditions in the aftermath of the corrosive effects of two hundred years or so of modernity and its secular faith commitments.” (pxii)

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**Competing Interests:** None declared.

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