

NEWS & OPINIONS

Beyond “Guesthood”: “Translation,” “Traveling,” and “Neighboring” as Animators of Authentic Christian Development

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Introduction¹

Christian engagement in grassroots, community development has long been marked by a tension between conviction and caution: between the desire to act faithfully out of a thick theological tradition and the fear that doing so will reproduce domination, exclusion, or cultural imposition. In response, many faith-based organizations have gravitated toward intentionally modest, ambiguous, or minimalist theological self-descriptions—postures meant to soften power, protect relationships, and preserve openness across difference. I truly respect such an impulse. Yet this very restraint raises a persistent question: can Christian development practice remain genuinely Christian if its governing theological imagination remains diffuse, tacit, or underarticulated? This essay takes up that question through a close engagement with Philip Fountain’s ethnography of *Mennonite Central Committee’s* work in Indonesia, *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*, arguing that the issue is not whether theology should guide practice, but how it does so. Drawing on the idea of focal images or guiding motifs, I suggest that certain biblically grounded images—particularly those of translation, traveling, and neighboring—offer a more faithful and generative way of inhabiting the ethical ambiguities of development work than the increasingly recommended notion of “guesthood.” Read together, these motifs provide a theological grammar capable of

holding power, vulnerability, movement, and belonging in productive tension, while remaining accountable to the distinctive narrative of the Christian faith

Against this backdrop, it might be helpful to clarify the interpretive posture that informs my own reading and review of, and interaction with, Fountain’s book. What follows, then, is not only an engagement with Fountain’s ethnography itself, but also an account of the lenses—formed through lived experience, disciplinary training, and sustained cross-cultural practice—through which I approach his analysis.

For nearly two decades, I lived in West Java, Indonesia, where I was deeply involved in grassroots community development and missional witness. During that time, I helped found three local, community-based nonprofit organizations and later served as an early responder to the tsunami in Aceh, North Sumatra, remaining engaged in relief and recovery efforts for more than two years. Alongside—and surrounding—this field experience, I pursued graduate study at both the master’s and doctoral levels in theology, missiology, and economic development.

These experiences have shaped the way I approach cultural and theological interpretation. Over the years, they have informed not only how I read sacred texts, but also how I attend to the cultural settings in which faith is embodied and practiced. Two interwoven strands characterize this interpretive approach. Each is

¹ This article is an expanded essay based on a review I did entitled, “Translation, Incarnation, and the Ethics of Faith-Based Development: Review Article on Phillip Fountain’s *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*” (2026).

important in its own right, but taken together they work symbiotically, sharpening and deepening one another.

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 Philip Fountain’s Analysis

First, it must be stated that Dr. Fountain’s fine study provides for us a rich ethnographic account of how the *Mennonite Central Committee* (MCC) in Central Java in the 90s and 2000s wove together 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

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.

frameworks. Although mission shifted from evangelism to neighbor-oriented service, donor pressures, theological assumptions, and organizational culture continued to shape practice. Fountain highlights enduring tensions around partnership, power, and dependency.

He further argues that Menmonite 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: Motifs, Translation, and Traveling

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: they should influence us as to how we see work, humans, land, money, happiness, and the good life.⁴

Philosopher and Christian theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff made a closely related point some time ago. He urged Christian development theorists and practitioners to resist defining themselves primarily as *homo economicus*, or *homo faber*, or even as *homo sapiens*. Instead, drawing on the work of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, Wolterstorff proposed that Christian development workers might best be served by grounding their identity in the notion

of *homo adorans*—humans understood, first and foremost, as those who worship. Wolterstorff is quick to anticipate a key difficulty if we take *homo adorans* as our driving image:

I expect that some of my readers who are Christian will already be feeling acutely disappointed and uneasy. You were hoping that I would mention something important, something significant, something that you could point to without embarrassment when engaged in discussion with, for example, the Marxist, and say: “here, on this important point of practice we differ.” But you would feel embarrassed to mention to the Marxist participation in the liturgy of the church as an important distinctive, because you know that he or she would dismiss it with a wave of the hand as unworthy of consideration by an adult.

One question that ought to be raised here is this: Why should you let the Marxists (or anyone else) determine *your* scale of importance? Why say to them, “You tell me what you think is important, and then I’ll see if I can find a difference between us that fits *your* standard of importance.” Perhaps one significant difference between you and them lies in different standards of importance. (1983, 147)

Wolterstorff’s challenge, then, moves beyond questions of identity language to the more fundamental issue of evaluative authority: who determines what counts as “important” in development practice. When Christian engagement begins by yielding those standards to secular, technocratic, or ideological frameworks, faith is inevitably reduced to an ornamental add-on—tolerated at best and dismissed at worst. But when worship—together with being and identity—is taken seriously as a formative, world-disclosing practice, it cannot remain peripheral to development work; it reshapes our understanding of value, purpose, and success at the most basic level. In this sense, *homo adorans* (or, more broadly, an explicitly Christian theological approach) is not an embarrassment to be managed or defended, but a normative center from which alternative visions of work, justice, and human flourishing may genuinely emerge. The real question, then, is not whether such a

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 EF Schumacher’s famous essay “Buddhist Economics” (Schumacher 1969) in this regard.

posture will appear implausible to others, but whether Christian development is prepared to be governed by its own deepest convictions rather than by borrowed standards of relevance.

To his credit, Fountain makes a point rather like Wolterstorff's in several places in his book. He observes that, although MCC's work often reflected a rich interplay of theology, identity, and practice, it might have been deeper still had those elements been more explicitly and intentionally grounded in clearly articulated faith commitments. By way of illustration, he points to the following exchange:

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 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 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,

Menmonite 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, meaning the more their impact could be dampened, the better. 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 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 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 argued for a carefully oriented interpretive posture—one that resists rigid missional blueprints imposed from outside, while also avoiding the kind of vague, “anything goes” stance that aims at nothing and inevitably hits it.⁷ The reflections that follow are intentionally shaped by this commitment, and they are offered as an attempt to work consistently from within such an approach.

More specifically, as noted at the outset, I am drawn to approaches that are distinctively motif-oriented in character—methods that are imagistic and picture-driven, and that lean deliberately on metaphor, recurring themes, and guiding images. Such images must be sufficiently specific to offer genuine clarity, yet sufficiently narrative to demand ongoing interpretation within particular communal and cultural settings. It should already be apparent how this sensibility aligns closely with—and may even be indistinguishable from—approaches 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 Donald 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 approach offers a promising way through the present impasse. It allows for the retention of prophetic and boundary-drawing commitments—commitments that, in practice, can never be entirely set aside—without collapsing these into rigid, a priori theological prescriptions that predefine missional faithfulness and invite the policing of orthodoxy by gatekeepers.⁹ In this sense, when Philip Fountain foregrounds motifs such as traveling or translation—motifs to which I will return below, since I agree with Fountain that they are especially fruitful—he advances imaginative frameworks that hold genuine promise for helping MCC move beyond the indeterminacy that has resulted from its efforts to avoid all theological specificity.

But it is important to realize that the story of Jesus has long been a given narrative; it is not infinitely malleable. It comes to us as a received tradition with its own internal grammar, narrative arc, and moral claims, rather than as raw material to be endlessly reconfigured in service of contemporary projects. To treat it otherwise is not an act of contextual faithfulness but a form of quiet domestication, in which the story’s capacity to judge, disrupt, and reorient our practices is gradually lost.

At the same time, it is a richly layered story, emerging from a distant historical and cultural context, whose resonance has extended across languages,

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 Backues 2009.

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

societies, and centuries. Precisely because of this depth and durability, the story has proven capable of speaking meaningfully into vastly different settings without losing its recognizable shape. As such, it necessarily admits a degree of interpretive latitude—not the freedom to make it say anything whatsoever, but the responsibility to discern how its enduring themes, images, and claims take form within times and places. Faithful interpretation, then, is less a matter of inventing new meanings than of attending carefully to how this received narrative continues to address ever-changing human circumstances. 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 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.

Focal Images for Faithful Development Practice: Learning to Dwell, Speak, and Journey Well

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

Translation: Faith across Difference

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:

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).

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 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.

Traveling: Faithfulness as a Sojourn

I turn next to an additional image that Fountain highlights—one mentioned briefly above—the depiction of Christian development workers as “travelers” or “sojourners.” Rather than presenting this as an abstract

theoretical construct, Fountain derives the notion from MCC’s own institutional culture and their everyday self-descriptions, as he encountered these in his ethnographic work. MCC workers commonly described themselves as visitors or guests, as people “on the way” rather than settled, and as practitioners whose presence was understood to be temporary and provisional. This language resonates with Anabaptist traditions of pilgrimage, sojourning, and non-belonging, even when those theological roots were not explicitly articulated. Fountain further situates the motif within broader anthropological and ethical discussions of mobility, displacement, and the moral ambiguities of transnational development. In this way, the image of traveling emerges at the intersection of MCC’s lived practice, Anabaptist sensibilities that construe faithfulness as movement rather than mastery, and anthropological concern for the responsibilities entailed in crossing boundaries.

In my own writings and ponderings, I too have previously made significant use of this motif. As I have tried to describe it, “traveling” or “sojourning” for the missionally-oriented development practitioner is best understood as a theologically charged posture—one that holds together movement, participation, and restraint rather than resolving their tensions prematurely. While incarnational engagement rightly emphasizes concrete embodiment, presence, and “being with,” this cannot be reduced to static immersion or the insulation of local communities from all outside influence. Instead, faithfulness requires a form of traveling participation that remains mobile, provisional, and responsive to context.

I previously have differentiated between two different kinds of traveling:

First there is the inevitable travelling [sic] through time as a people, something which is fated by mere existence and biology, though it is not necessarily willingly embraced by all involved. The picture of the children of Israel in the Pentateuch is a good example of this sort of travelling. In metaphoric terms, this can be seen as a moving from idolatry to the truth, from one approximation to a closer one—though it can just as easily involve movements in the opposite direction. Thus, while it surely includes the normal pilgrimage of life, it is also at times taken up heroically by those who would live life intentionally in service to others. Such travelling is unavoidable, but it can be done with varying degrees of quality. As we live our lives next to others—irrespective of place

or time—we must choose to travel toward them and with them in a manner which takes upon us a fidelity of relationship and a fealty of kinship. (2003, 124-125)

But there is a second type of traveling, a variety perhaps less common, one that can be avoided altogether (in contrast to the first type), a form that aligns quite well with the picture we have of Jesus as the kenotic savior,

A sojourn taken up as an act of free choice, from one domain to another, easily rejected and thus costly in its selection. . . . This sort of choosing embraces certain afflictions in order to open up additional possibilities for the future. This is travelling which requires endurance, which summons strength and vision and a recognition of the worth of self-denial for the sake of a hopeful future—both for self and for others. This was the variety that Jesus referred to when he challenged his followers to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24 NRSV; cf. Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27). (2003, 125)

While both forms of traveling entail sacrifice and difficulty, it is this second that gives decisive weight to a costly, chosen mode of itineration that is modeled on the picture of the “emptying” picture of Jesus himself—one that willingly embraces vulnerability, endurance, and surrender to open new possibilities for life together. In development practice, such a posture enables outsiders to contribute precisely as outsiders who nonetheless seek belonging: offering perspective without domination, counsel without coercion, and accompaniment without control. When practiced well, traveling becomes a disciplined way of inhabiting the tensions between insider and outsider, concreteness and movement, humility and responsibility—making genuine participation possible while resisting mastery, permanence, and the false promise of final arrival.

Taken together, the traveling motif names a distinctively Christian way of inhabiting the ambiguities of missional development work. The traveler or sojourner is pictured, not as a figure of indecision or theological evasion, but as one whose faithfulness is expressed precisely through willingness to remain “on the way,” accountable to others and open to transformation. Read in this light, Fountain’s emphasis on traveling proves especially fruitful: it takes this motif from MCC themselves and asserts it as an image

capable of holding together theological conviction and contextual humility, presence and movement, identity and openness—without collapsing into either rigid prescription or indeterminate vagueness. Traveling, then, functions not as an escape from theological seriousness, but as a demanding form of it, one that locates Christian development practice firmly within the costly, unfinished journey of faith itself. In its distinctively Christian form, this sort of traveling draws its coherence and its authority from the narrative image of Jesus, which alone supplies conceptual grounding and enacted force. Echoing Wolterstorff words above, this demanding image of traveling offers to Christian development practitioners a distinct standard of importance by which we might discern what Christian missional faithfulness entails. I am glad that Fountain underscored its importance in his analysis.

Neighboring: Incarnation as Shared Life

Finally, in Chapter 6 of his book, Fountain introduces one more intriguing image—a notion that, upon closer examination, also raises important questions and invites us toward careful scrutiny. The motif in question here is “*guesthood*,” an image whose theological and practical implications end up being 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 attends with particular care 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 cultivate—Fountain's work presses toward a deeper question still: the articulation of guiding theological motifs capable of grounding Mennonite development practice in a distinctly Christian way of being in the world. Such motifs must do more than manage difference or soften power; they must reorder presence, accountability, and belonging in light of the narrative of a God who moved toward humanity, dwelt among neighbors, and journeyed vulnerably through the world. For my part, the Incarnation—read through the interrelated images of traveling, translation, and neighboring—offers a more compelling theological center than the motif of guesthood alone. Traveling names the provisional, costly movement of faith that resists both mastery and stasis; translation names the patient, dialogical labor of learning languages, meanings, and moral worlds; and neighboring names

the commitment to shared life, accountability, and local belonging. Held together as focal images, these motifs resonate deeply with the theological grammar of Scripture and with historic Mennonite commitments to simplicity, communal engagement, and incarnational presence. Joined in this way, they offer a narrative, ethical, and practical anchor capable of sustaining a genuinely Christian service of faith—one faithful both to the story Christians inhabit and to the neighbors among whom they live and journey.

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