Book Reviews


*Encountering missionary life and work* blends the rich experiences of two missionary authors—a man and a woman, both scholars (missiologists)—from different Christian traditions and backgrounds. Although both are Americans, Tom Steffen is of German descent; Lois McKinney Douglas comes from Irish ancestors. Tom’s field experiences have been mostly in tribal areas in the Philippines while Lois worked largely in urban contexts in Portugal and Brazil. Tom’s thinking style is more linear, analytical, low context, and time-oriented. Lois is more global, intuitive, high context, and event-oriented. Tom has made academic and field-based contributions to the development of mission strategies, while Lois has been engaged in active ministry for more than fifty years in the areas of theological and mission education (xi). Both have shared their insights and wisdom gained through many years of field missionary experience in this book. Moreover, their differences in style, background, perspectives, and personalities, as well as genres have greatly enhanced the quality of the material presented throughout the chapters of this excellent missions textbook.

The book is based on the assumption that “the Bible serves as the cross-cultural Christian worker’s source of comfort, character, guidance, and sometimes strategies. . . . It is far more than a theological textbook, designed to impress the mind and categorize doctrines. Rather, it is God’s sacred storybook designed to integrate the mind, the imagination, and feeling” (31). This assumption gives the textbook a higher level of validity and reliability.

The book is divided into four parts with 17 chapters, each chapter containing about 20 pages. In the preface and introduction, a rational about missions is presented that explains why this textbook fits and engages with the changes taking place in the world, in missions, and in missionaries. It sets the tone for the reader to understand missions in the constant changing scenario of this world. The content of the book is then presented in four main parts, each focusing on elements that all missionaries can expect to face as they seek to follow God’s initiative and prompting to bring Christ to
those who do not know him.

The first part “Changing Scene” gives a brief overview of mission history through the lives of missionaries, from the past as well as present. Through lives totally committed to Christ, both in word and deed, thoughts and practice, the readers gain perspective on Missio Dei in this world. Key mission and missiological concepts and ideas are also introduced and defined in this part, thus from the onset the reader can start interacting with the material presented in the various parts that follow.

“Home-Front Preparation” is the second part and also the largest section of the book, covering what is necessary for the preparation of healthy cross-cultural missionaries engaged in world missions. The third part called “On-Field Preparation” explores the realities of learning how to live well in a totally different and new culture. The last part focuses on the “Missionaries and Their Lives.” Not only are missionary families dealt with in this section, but also single female missionaries, who today comprise at least two-thirds of the local missionary force. This part also deals with crises on the mission field and how to be prepared to handle hardships and the unexpected.

Encountering missionary life and work is an excellent textbook with depth of content and balance between theory (concepts) and mission application and strategies. Many illustrations and personal missionary experiences make the material of the book relevant and interesting. Of special interest for me was the way the authors shared their personal lives as part of the book narrative. An example is Tom’s story as a way to describe and illustrate his own culture in chapter 10 (pp. 181-186). This is done so as to demonstrate that one can only really understand somebody else’s culture when one is aware of one’s own culture. In this section of the book, culture is integrated in stories in ways that contrast and parallel concepts and ideas with application (pp. 187-195).

An outstanding feature of the book is the many “sidebars” which provide examples, illustrations, and personal experiences and stories that make the book complete and balanced. I wish the font size of the letters chosen for these sidebars (and tables, case studies, or inserted boxes) would be bigger.

The wealth of knowledge expressed in this mission textbook is overwhelming, not only for students of mission and church mission administrators, but also for those who teach courses in mission and train mission personnel. One of the strengths of the book is that it engages and challenges the North American church to think about its missionary responsibilities and how cross-cultural missions need to be carried forward. The book could be much more international in its dealing with sending organizations.

One of the good features of the text is that it provides many study questions throughout the book (mostly in the sidebars). This
helps the reader to situate his/her particular context with that of the book. Moreover, the many case studies given also help the reader to reflect on what was just presented and make personal applications to life, again helping the reader connect with the text and understand it, as the book is quite voluminous (416 pages) and takes time to be read and assimilated.

Overall, *Encountering missionary life and work* is a unique and timely book in its category. It brings together the best missional thinking and fresh practical mission field applications for the life and work of the cross-cultural missionary. Tom Steffen and Lois McKinney Douglas provide what I think can be considered one of the best textbooks for contemporary missionary practice.

In my view, *Encountering missionary life and work* is for all mission students, professors of missions, and cross-cultural missionaries, but it can also be used by lay leaders and church administrators as it will help to orient them in the current cross-cultural ministry of the world Christian church. If people would come to understand the content of this textbook they would have a bridge between past and present, between their culture and foreign cultures that would facilitate the knowledge and application of the Scripture’s *Missio Dei* into the life and work of God’s church in mission to the unreached.

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Okoye writes from the Catholic tradition. In *Israel and the nations* he proposes a hermeneutic for studying mission in the Old Testament. In the foreword of the book, Carolyn Osiek very concisely summarizes the problem: “What is the role of the Old Testament in Christianity? Is it only to prove the superiority of the Christian revelation, or to justify political claims without regard to contemporary suffering?” (xi).

The author assumes that the readers come either with a mission background or a biblical background, but not both (xiv). He also claims that the integrity of the Old Testament as the Word of God is guaranteed in his book, preserving the organic links between the Testaments without reducing one or the other, although recognizing as authoritative bodies of texts not included in the Jewish canon. In addition, Okoye employs the Documentary Hypothesis and the sources that wrote the biblical text, as espoused by the historical-critical methodology.

The author believes that Israel was not missionary at the beginning but became so later on. For him the covenant between God