

**Ash Barker, *Slum Life Rising: How to Enflesh Hope within a New Urban World.***

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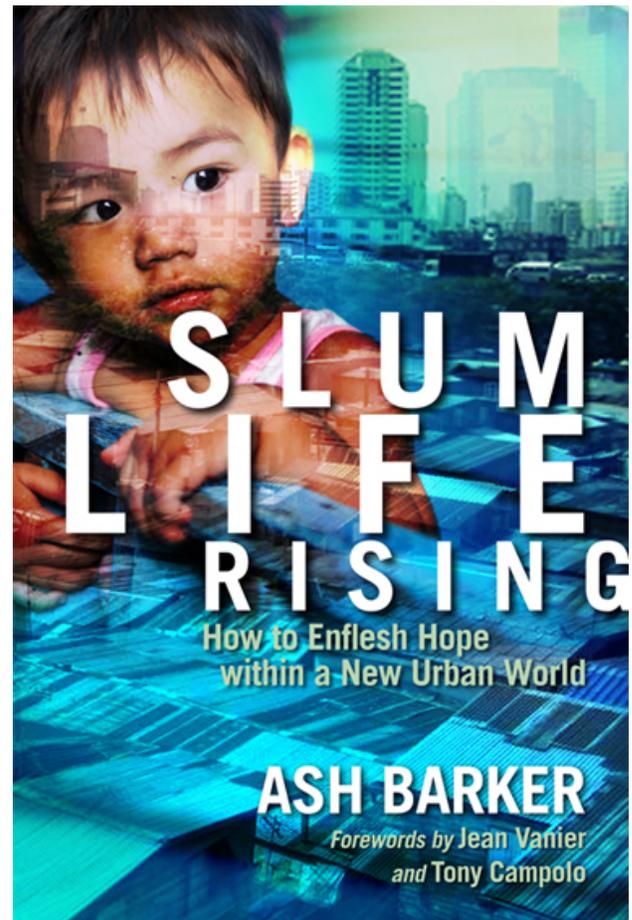
354 pages. P/B. ISBN: 9780987099433. AUD\$20 book; \$9 Kindle

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

One of the most respected locally grown missions in my home city, Melbourne, Australia, is the Churches of Christ missional order 'Urban Neighbours of Hope'. There are a few reasons for the esteem people feel. UNOH cultivate strong teams through shared spiritual practices. Their members sacrificially live on the poverty line. They advocate for and work among and with the poor and marginalised in Melbourne and beyond. Their strategy is one of community development, but holistically embracing compassionate service, advocacy for justice, church planting and authentic evangelism. And the Director, Ash Barker, leads the mission from a grassroots position of serving himself working in Klong Toey slum in Bangkok, and is reflecting thoughtfully, from his perspective as a practitioner, on issues of poverty and how Christians can meaningfully respond.

Barker's most recent contribution, *Slum Life Rising*, is the most challenging book I have read for a long time. Barker explores the demographic, development, theological, personal and teamwork challenges of responding to the appalling 'perfect storm' of poverty found in urban slum and squatter settlements. Combing global perspectives on the crisis with case studies from Klong Toey where his family and UNOH team live and work, and not avoiding the complexities of power, financial and health dilemmas of ministry in this context, he presents an imagination-grabbing approach to incarnational mission of 'enfleshing hope' in situations of despair that I find it hard to comprehend. With more than 1 billion people 'living in shit' (to borrow from Mike Davis' description), and likely 2 billion by 2030 and 3 billion by 2050, this will be one of the most missiologically significant issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Barker explored a Christian response as a PhD thesis with MCD University of Divinity, supervised by Ross Langmead, Whitley College's Professor of Mission Studies. This book is a result of that research and Barker's twenty years of urban mission in Melbourne and Bangkok. It follows Richard Osmer's practical theology framework of asking what is going on? (the descriptive task), why is this going on? (the interpretive



task), what ought to be going on? (the normative task), and how might we respond? (the pragmatic task).

It is a complex task, firstly, to *describe* the nature of slums and explore how Christians are responding to this huge and expanding humanitarian crisis (or not). Barker offers an insightful snapshot of slums and squatter neighbourhoods ('slums' to refer to living conditions, 'squatter' to refer to legal concerns, and 'neighbourhoods' to refer to their shared space and connections). He describes them as a 'perfect storm' of poverty because of their seemingly overwhelming complex and enmeshed poverty: 'The various 'fronts' of poverty kept thundering together, causing misery to multitudes: evictions, fires, floods, urbanisation, vulnerable employment conditions, dangerous housing conditions, sewerage inadequacies, superstitions I didn't understand, corrupt officials, language barriers, sanitation problems, AIDS and other preventable infectious diseases, premature deaths of children, the disabled and the elderly, and often no meaningful connection with Christians' (p.15).

It is fascinating, furthermore, to read not just Barker's analysis of the causes of slums but how he *interprets* why ministry in that context is so challenging and why there are so few Christians and Christian workers. There is certainly a disparity of allocated resources, especially considering the huge needs. Conditions are a health hazard and impede ministries aiming for transformation, church growth and poverty alleviation. Even where scant resources are allocated to help, best-practice long-term participatory development practices are not always followed. Aid and development in slums is not as easy to manage or promote as in more stable rural areas. Moreover, there is a range of championing of incarnational approaches to mission, but many of them have serious limitations in slums, for example how to live simply, look after missionary children, and decide who to help (and thus often to let live). Barker also grapples with the theological rejection of incarnational methodology by some scholars, and discusses what incarnation can mean including relocation, crossing cultures and simple lifestyle.

A valuable theological contribution of the book is the writer's proposal for a distinctively Trinitarian motif of 'enfleshing hope', building on incarnational mission definitions proposed by Langmead. This is part of the *normative* task in Osmer's schema of practical theology. Barker suggests Christians responding theologically to slums need an awareness of joining the Creator in enfleshing hope; following Jesus the redeemer in engaging suffering and fostering transformation; and participating with the Spirit's transformative influence. It is the Spirit that helps us to continue the ministry of Jesus, cross cultural barriers, innovate new approaches to ministry and engage in power encounters with forces of evil. It is a helpful reminder that God in God's fullness is not absent even in slums and wants to incarnate hope there.

At a *pragmatic* team level, Barker unpacks how Christians can be used by God to foster the Kingdom of God in slum and squatter neighbourhoods with practical suggestions for pioneering team building and strategy, local place-sharing and strategies for poverty

alleviation. He deals with orienting new workers, clarifying expectations, financial support, when to relocate, and practising humility in contextualisation, joining existing community groups and local leadership development. The book shows the experience of sensitive and discerning leadership: 'Slums can be tightly networked, delicately balanced ecosystems. Those Christian workers who can help sustain the living tissue while nudging it toward Kingdom transformation can be an invaluable resource to its very fabric' (p.242). Barker discusses cautions and celebrates good new stories in a range of ministries: relief, capacity building, evangelism, teaching, social capital development and advocacy.

*Slum Life Rising* will be essential reading for missionaries and mission leaders. There are no easy answers here to complex dilemmas. But Barker offers a clear treatment of the state of slums, and points to some original theological and practical resources for responding with authentic goods news. Apart from its strategic relevance, it is also a helpful model of practical theological reflection for teachers and students of mission studies and practical theology. I will be steering my church leaders and mission students to read and digest it, and ask of one another, 'what are we going to do about it?' The book consists of thorough academic research, but also offers study questions, pictures and stories that enhance suitability for personal and group reflection. Jesus stood in the gap for those on the margins who needed healing and respect, and I love that about Jesus. Ash Barker is standing in the gap to advocate for and humanise a largely ignored group of people and neighbourhoods, and I love that about him and his recent and most significant book.

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