



# In His Image: Understanding and embracing the Poor

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by **Andy Matheson**

■ reviewed by **Martin Clark**

**A**ndy Matheson’s book is one that deserves close attention because of the reality of the experience behind it.

This is no dry theological treatise – although it contains much profound theology. Based on his role as International Director of Oasis and extended periods in India and other developing countries, the result is a conversation between theology and practice around the issues of poverty in which both his commitment and his honesty in wrestling with difficult issues shine through.

His central insight is that the only valid starting-point for engagement with the poor is to acknowledge their creation in the image of God, and to move beyond the concept alone to ‘imaging’ God as an active verb. When summarised so briefly this sounds like no great shakes. Yet when applied as a philosophical underpinning of the work of a committed group of international mission workers, its effect is transformational. It is a refreshing and productive starting-point in engaged mission and a necessary counterpoint to theological perspectives which tend to emphasise human sinfulness.

The book begins perhaps predictably with some necessary theological and statistical groundwork on poverty. It is worth persisting here because even if these sections are not deep enough to satisfy the intellectual reader, – inevitably in a book of this compact size – we are quickly launched into vivid illustrations which hammer home the thrust of his argument. The lives of street children and the lessons of working with them explode into life in the chapter on Wholeness. One of his questions is how to make sense of the scale of the need compared with the ability of Christians to respond. His answer is twofold: to give one’s whole attention to the person in

front of you, and whatever their needs are; and to seek wherever possible to work in partnership with other churches and agencies so that the impact is coordinated and multiplied. ‘A holistic organisation is not one which combines evangelism with social action but one in which staff all treat people as integrated beings’ (p.59) he writes, leading into a particularly useful discussion on the detail of job descriptions – whether they empower staff to be flexible in responding to real situations or become so narrowly drawn that they stifle compassion and innovation.

Each chapter explores a different concept or facet in the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and its consequences, and all offer valuable insights. ‘Prevention’ is notable for addressing systemic responses to poverty, for example in the key area of combating human trafficking –on which Oasis has such an important global leadership role. Those who believe in the transformational power and potential of enterprise, and especially social enterprise, will find Matheson’s chapter on Empowerment particularly encouraging. It is an unexpected pleasure to find him citing Ernesto Sirolli, the pioneer of community-based enterprise facilitation. By contrast, the case study of how the flaws in a food distribution programme in a megacity could have been improved through a social enterprise approach – but weren’t because of entrenched views among the organisers – is a depressing but insightful instance of his questioning perspective.

I came away with a greater understanding of the philosophy which underpins Oasis, a huge admiration for their work, and a determination to behave differently at work and elsewhere when faced by challenging people who are nevertheless very definitely made in the image of God. ■

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