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Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development (Book Review)

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Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development

Roland Hoksbergen. 2012. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. ISBN 978-0-80103984-3. \$21.99.

Reviewed by Nathanael D. Peach, George Fox University

Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development is written for students who have a desire to work in development but are unsure about how to achieve their goal. As I read this book I kept thinking back to my days as an undergraduate student majoring in international business. I was drawn to the idea of “development work” but had little understanding of the realities of a career in this field. This book serves as a map for those with lofty aspirations and lots of questions. Hoksbergen mentors the reader from their initial interest in development work to their college years and beyond. *Serving God Globally* is an honest appraisal of what it takes to work in this important and challenging field.

In writing this book Hoksbergen relies on his own wisdom as a professor of economics and international development, his experiences as a development worker in Guatemala, and excerpts from numerous interviews with practitioners across a host of disciplines and organizations. (A full list of those interviewed is provided on pages xiv—xv.) These excerpts are a wonderful feature of the book. By the end of *Serving God Globally* the reader feels like they “know” many development workers. Because Hoksbergen is able to draw upon such a deep well of experience the reader is shown many paths that will lead them to achieving their goals.

Hoksbergen believes “human development is about agriculture, culture, religion, identity, empowerment, gender, ethnicity, technology, health, business, politics, conflict, peacebuilding, urban planning, human rights, families, community, environmental sustainability, international relations, and much, much, more” (p. 10). Any Christian aspiring to work in one of these fields (or others) will benefit from reading this work. Because Hoksbergen casts such a wide net, his work is explicitly interdisciplinary; he does not focus on a particular discipline for any extended period of time. The aspiring development economist will learn about professional development but not technical economics.

Serving God Globally successfully engages its intended audience. Students are quite busy and lead lives that are pulled in many directions. They often believe they do not have the time to read anything that is not required for a course. The genius of Hoksbergen’s style is that each chapter stands alone; most are readable in a single sitting. While there are themes

that are consistent throughout the book they are not easily forgotten. The reader who puts the book down for an extended period of time will find it easy to pick up where they left off.

Though written for students, *Serving God Globally* is a valuable resource for any Christian professional who mentors individuals wishing to be involved in development. Professors at Christian universities who themselves are not involved in development work would benefit tremendously from this resource. As an assistant professor of economics I meet many students trying to determine if this field is for them. In the two years since I earned my Ph.D. I have realized that graduate school did not prepare me for these conversations. Being familiar with methodologies and relevant literatures is important but not sufficient. This book has helped to address this weakness. Once I began reading it I was able to have deeper, more meaningful interactions with students considering a career in development.

Another strength of the work is that each chapter ends with a short list of reflection questions. These help the reader honestly assess how they engage the chapter's material. Were the book assigned to a mentee, development course, or undergraduate book club they could be used to guide discussions. Through these questions the reader develops a deeper understanding of themselves and what it takes to be successful in this vocation.

Serving God Globally begins by creating a foundation of what development work is and how it intersects our faith. In the introductory chapters Hoksbergen presents four development schools of thought as well as numerous Christian traditions. Both are considered lenses by which individuals interpret the role of the development worker. Hoksbergen is rarely critical of ideologies or traditions; rather he focuses on their strengths. Criticism is not void from the work but it does not take center stage. This complimentary spirit helps Hoksbergen maintain the interdisciplinary focus of the book. It is also effective in highlighting the strengths of the Christian traditions considered.

Once the reader is familiar with these schools of thought and faith traditions Hoksbergen presents ten principles of Christian development. This list should be interpreted as a list of ideals. The list is created in Hoksbergen's respectful manner; strengths from schools of thought and faith traditions can be easily identified. It should be noted that the list is not only focused on the external mechanics of development work. Hoksbergen continually challenges the reader to consider his or her own walk with Christ as an integral part of their professional development. He believes

strongly that if someone is to become a “Christian development worker” they cannot ignore their own spiritual journey.

Hoksbergen ends the introductory chapters with an analogy to help the reader appreciate the interconnected nature of development work. He encourages the reader to think of development as a wheel. At the hub are micro or individual considerations. The tire or outer ring represents macro-level issues. In order for a wheel to function properly, all its parts must do so. Thinking of development in this way drives home Hoksbergen’s repeated mantra that development is holistic and there are no “silver bullet” solutions. One may choose to focus on micro-level issues such as health or microfinance or macro concerns such as governance or trade policies. The benefits from successfully working in these areas do not simply accrue at the level of engagement. For example, healthier children raise public health just as steps to eradicate diseases results in healthier children.

With a foundation of what development work is, how it intersects our faith, and its nuanced nature Hoksbergen moves to the challenge of turning general interest into a career. Hoksbergen does great work in this section by striking a balance between general and practical advice. During the college years students are especially attuned to discerning God’s call for their life. Often these years are riddled with anxiety over choosing the “right” major. Hoksbergen defuses this anxiety by comparing college to the beginning of a game of chess. The college years help you get your “pieces” in position for the road ahead. College should be approached as the beginning of one’s professional development rather than the end. Hoksbergen defines these “pieces” as values, skills, and knowledge (VSK). A wide variety of topics are considered to get the reader thinking about their own VSK. These topics include, but are not limited to choosing a field of study, being involved in a local church body, and volunteering locally. Excerpts from the practitioners interviewed are especially helpful in this chapter. Those quoted hold a wide range of undergraduate degrees and many do not work in these disciplines. Students who are aware that they are not necessarily bound to a career in their bachelor’s degree are likely to be less anxious when choosing a major.

In chapter seven post-college life is addressed. A significant challenge to overcome on the way to a career in development is that entry-level jobs often require experience. Hoksbergen addresses the experience puzzle by offering very practical ways to solve it. Standard solutions such as internships, the Peace Corps, and short-term employment are all considered. Hoksbergen recognizes that these solutions are often as competitive as finding full-time employment. To complement this list

some relatively “easy” ways of gaining experience such as teaching English abroad and volunteering at local organizations are discussed. Each of the easier solutions will provide experience and send a powerful signal to future employers of one’s commitment to a career in development.

The final post-college option considered is graduate school. Because of the rigorous nature of development work it is common for individuals to pursue an advanced degree in order to develop a more robust skill set. The decision to go to graduate school is not an easy one and Hoksbergen gives the reader much to consider. Among the important pieces of the graduate school decision are the challenges of financing more education; acknowledging that graduate education often does not solve the experience puzzle; and how to go about picking a program that fits your career objectives.

Serving God Globally ends on an interesting note. Hoksbergen warns the reader of the propensity to become jaded, burned out, and pessimistic in this line of work. In some ways chapter eight feels a bit out of place; it would be more powerful if the reader were already in the field. That being said, it is effective in leaving the reader with a realistic picture of development work. In this regard it serves as a valuable conclusion to the work.

Chapter nine is an appendix-type list of resources. These range from development NGOs’ websites to tips on fundraising. One limitation of this chapter is that all the academic programs listed are housed at Christian institutions. Hoksbergen himself acknowledges that there is a lot to be gained from an education that combines both faith-based and secular perspectives. Many of the top development programs are at secular institutions and it may not be safe to assume that the reader is aware of this.

For those interested in a career in development work, or for someone that mentors these individuals, I cannot recommend *Serving God Globally* highly enough. The dog-eared, highlighted, worn out copy on my bookshelf is a testament to the wisdom found in its pages. ■