

***Eight Million Exiles: Missional Action Research and the Crisis of Forced Migration.*** By Christopher M. Hays. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024. 254 pp. Softcover \$18.23; Kindle \$24.99.

As a pastor in the Bronx, New York City, an area that is deeply affected by the migrant crisis of the 2020s, and as someone who has lived in the mountains of South America among the *campesinos*, it was with great interest that I read Christopher M. Hays' timely book. It was therefore that much more disappointing that I found it to be of so little value to my ministry, even after a second time reading it through.

Hays (D. Phil in New Testament from Oxford) is the president of Scholar Leaders International, and is a member of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs in Washington, D.C. He served in the nation of Columbia as a missionary and seminary professor, and this book is the outworking of his years spent laboring there.

The reader should note at the outset that "Missional Action Research" (from the subtitle of the book) is a technical term that refers to "an innovative method of applied theological investigation" and which "uniquely fuses the theological framework of integral missiology with insights from the social sciences and Participatory Action Research" (ix). This MAR method was developed by a small number of seminary professors who lived and ministered in Columbia and their methodology is the focus of the work at hand. The seminarians were from the Biblical Seminary of Columbia and Fuller Theological Seminary, and they were firsthand, frontline ministerial responders to a crisis that resulted in 8.1 million internally displaced persons (IDP) in Columbia, "the largest population of IDPs in the world" (2).

The opening pages are filled with heartbreaking rapid pace stories telling the brutality of the guerrilla forces and conflicts with armed forces, motivated by economic goals, with the innocent Colombian people often caught in the middle. Reading like it could be made into a breathtaking documentary film, the heinous atrocities are told in unsparingly graphic detail, and unfortunately a discretionary trigger warning does not appear until 8 pages in. Of course, there is no way to do justice to the stories of these IDP, with over 12,140,000 catalogued victimizing events, and 91 massacres in 2020 alone. As Hays notes, "forced displacement results from the use or credible threat of violence...(and) the explicitly stated threat of future violence" (7).

Each of the first seven chapters is punctuated by a vignette that gives glimpses into the plights of Colombian migrants. These are typically heartbreaking, like Maria Fernanda ("No less than a block away from where we were heading, [the driver] turned around and knocked me out" (29) but are also at times inspiring, such as Deiner Espita's recovery from a pancreatic cyst and ultimate abandonment of atheism to embrace faith (140-43).

The three themes that Hays lists as having shaped MAR are (in order), the social sciences, Scripture, and experience (14-21). He states, "the attempt to combine three streams of revelation - social sciences, Christian scripture, and experience - makes this project idiosyncratic. That blend of epistemic commitments also makes this book atypical, oscillating between

narrative, Scriptural reflection, personal testimony from victims of displacement, and a wide range of empirical and theological social-scientific research” (20).

This is as good a place as any to state frankly that these sections of the book are tedious reading, that terms are not readily defined for the reader (a glossary in a second edition would be helpful), and that the goals of the author seem unclear. The book is inconsistent. Certain sections are clear and easily readable. Other sections are a labor to work through. Hays sounds like a seminary professor trying to sound like a seminary professor. For instance:

“One could hypothetically imagine a missiological biblicism short-circuiting collaboration with the social sciences, if the Scriptures were viewed as the exclusive source of knowledge about the concrete realities to which the church responds. But such epistemological reductionism has been soundly rejected by integral missiologists” (67). And:

“Being convinced of both the benefits that action research could bring to our work and of the essential compatibility of action research with integral missiology, we decided to synthesize the two into what we called “A Participatory Action Approach to Integral Missiology” (68).

The author makes special appeal to the Lukan corpus to draw insights in developing MAR (cf. p. 16ff.). “The works of Luke are congenial for this purpose given their deep attention to matters of both migration and missions” (17). Regarding the streams of insight that shaped the project - social science, scripture (particularly Luke’s books), and experience - the works of Claire Watkins are cited in relation to the nature of the desired experience: “an attentiveness in humility before multiple voices in conversation; an eschatologically formed expectation regarding outcome; and, above all, a pneumatological understanding of the reading of incarnational realities of faith” (pp.18-19).

“Theology of the Balcony” versus “Theology of the Road” is a major concept that Hays takes time to explain as referring to the moving from spectator to getting one’s feet dirty through participation in a “theology that is going somewhere; indeed, a theologian who is going somewhere” (23). This discussion is of value and translates to other cultural missionary fields.

The author holds to several popular text critical assumptions, such as source criticism: “A couple hundred years of Synoptic scholarship has made it clear that Luke consulted Mark and probably either Matthew or Q” (112), and he espouses a form of social justice gospel emphasis, calling liberation theology “a key interlocutor for integral mission” (37), and seeing North Atlantic missions as “heavily colonial” (40). But fortunately, Hays pushes back on the supposed value of the universal church, stating, “Without denying the value of seminaries and parachurch organizations within the body of Christ, the primary agent of the kingdom is the church, which, notwithstanding its universal nature, exists and operates especially as local communities of faith” (70).

Despite the timeliness of the topic and the sincerity of the author, the book fails because the author does not clearly give compelling reasons why the reader should care about MAR much less adopt it in his ministry. If a missionary church planter is following the NT pattern, he will be doing the will of God and endeavoring to accomplish everything that Hays’ book purports to set out, without having to slog through its more tedious sections.