



The *Missio Dei* Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Glissmann, Volker, ed. *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*. Mzuzu, Malawi: Luviri Press, 2020. Pp. 284. US \$46.20 (Paperback), US \$40.00 (Kindle)

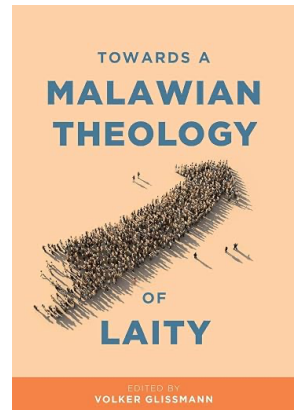
Donald Stanley MEADOR

ORCID: 0009-0009-0464-3066

Little Flock Baptist Church, Shepherdsville, Kentucky, USA
swmeador2000@gmail.com

The fourteen chapters comprising this book examine the scriptural and historical basis for an equipped and empowered laity actively engaging in the *missio Dei* alongside the clergy, as well as practical ways to accomplish that New Testament objective. Most of the contributors are Malawian. Those who are not Malawian have a significant connection with Malawi and a strong commitment to the health and growth of the Malawian Church. All are accomplished theologians. **Hany Longwe** writes in the **Introduction**, “The aim of this book is to bring together different contributors to address biblically and theologically the role of the laity within the context of the Malawian church” (13). The tome brings numerous Malawian voices to the global discussion of the clergy-laity divide, providing context-informed insights for the consideration of African and World Christians. Given the breadth of the contributions and the benefit of aiding each voice to reach a wider audience, a review essay is in order.

Hany Longwe, a Baptist theologian and educator, lays the groundwork in “**The Church, the Laity, and the Priesthood**.” He lays out the New Testament vision of equality across sex, age, race, and class, arguing that the New Testament Church did not distinguish sharply between clergy and laity. During the Protestant Reformation, the Church recovered the doctrine of the Priesthood of



Donald Stanley Meador
The *Missio Dei* Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

All Believers. He posits that “Although some churches have embarked on a lifelong relationship with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, they have had a difficult time agreeing on the precise language for describing this most important belief to which they hold fast” (17). He recognizes that the clergy-laity divide is widening once again, in both the Malawian and global Church. In a statement that could represent the overall message of the book, he wrote, “The priesthood of the ordained ministry is to enable and not remove the priesthood of all believers. The clergy are not prior to or independent of or against the church; rather, with the rest of the laity, they are the church sent into the world” (29). He concludes the chapter with a call for theological training institutes to develop programs for training the laity.

The second chapter, “**The Place of the Laity in the Church under the Priesthood of All Believers,**” was written by author and lecturer **Joseph Andrew Thipa**, who posits that too many church leaders in Malawi seek elevated status and honor from their congregations. This tendency is not limited to Malawi; it is a global reality in the Church. He examines the history of the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers, from Martin Luther to the present. The Life and Work programme of the 1910 World Missionary Movement, according to **Thipa**, sought the renewal of temporal orders by learning “how Christians could assist one another in bringing their faith to bear on the general life of society — in politics, industry, education, international relations, et cetera” (39). He observed that the laity is already present in society and engaged in societal issues at a level not available to most clergy. He concluded the chapter with a call for the clergy to aid the laity in functioning holistically as the people of God in society.

The Right Reverend **James Tengatenga**, professor and Anglican bishop, wrestles with what it means to be a minister in the third chapter, “**Not Just Loyal Sheep: Informed Ministry of the Laity.**” He warns that referring to clergy as *ministers* can foster the errant idea that the laity are not ministers. While Malawian churches have done a thorough job of convincing Christians otherwise, “being a Christian is being a minister” (43). The growth of the Anglican Church in Malawi has outpaced the formation of clergy, resulting in many lay leaders with little to no formation being appointed to positions of leadership, which is less than ideal. “The laity,” writes **Tengatenga**, “are not considered ministers in the way that clergy are. In fact, their work is not considered ministry. After all the laity are but sheep” (46). The prevailing attitude he describes runs counter to the priorities of the Protestant Reformation and conflicts with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. He declares that both clergy and laity are ministers and need theological formation. He calls for the reinvigoration of Theological Education by Extension for educating and forming lay ministers.

Chapter 4, “**The Laity as Church in the World: The Need to Equip Them in Their Apostolate**,” was written by the Right Reverend Dr **Fanuel Magangani**. The nature of the Church universal and the *missio Dei* are examined in this chapter. **Magangani** explains,

The main point to be made in this presentation is that Christ did not intend merely to save individuals but to save the world, and for this He founded the Church to continue His mission in the world. As members of the Church, the laity have a specific mission to the world and in the world to be fully Christians just like the clergy. (54)

He observed that the ongoing expansion of the church in Malawi occurs through the movement of the laity into new areas, and the formal presence of the church follows them. He concludes the chapter with a call for every parish to serve as a lay training center to further equip them to carry out the *missio Dei*.

Manuel Kamukhwanji, a theologian and professor, wrote “**Servants or Masters? 21st Century Pontification of the Church in Africa**.” He decries the state of the church in Africa, diminished by scandals, materialism, spiritual abuse, and weaponized church discipline, and thus fallen into disrepute, which he attributes in large part to pastors who lead their churches as a CEO leads a company. He likens the current situation to the rise of the pontiff in the eleventh century. He urges churches to engage in a theological reflection on the difference between “biblical leadership models and those promoted by society” (61). He calls on seminaries to rethink their mission since numerous graduates have compromised biblical standards and values of leadership. His call includes the necessity of theological formation for lay leaders with a strong connection to the local church.

The sixth chapter, “**The Place of the Laity in Doing Theology at Grassroots**” by **Chatha Msangaambe**, challenges the Malawian church to learn from the history of the church in the West, to glean its value, adapt it locally, and avoid its mistakes. Drawing on decades of experience as a pastor and lecturer, and on his current service as the National Chairperson of the Evangelical Association of Malawi, he aims to rediscover “the place of the laity in the church’s on-going efforts to remain missional and relevant in the contemporary world” (73). He follows the characteristics of a missional church delineated in Dan Kimball’s book *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Zondervan, 2007), which he encapsulates as “a church that is having an energizing faith; outward-looking focus; and frequently participating lay people” (74). The undergirding premise is that the majority of the church comprises lay people who interact directly with the world outside the church. Their experiences provide valuable insights for contextualizing theology and engaging missionally, which is the

The Missio Dei Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

crux of doing theology at the grassroots level. He admonishes church leaders and theological educators: "For any training curriculum to be relevant, it has to formulate its objectives with the goal of offering the most important skills that the students need for the work in which they are being trained" (88). In my own work in discipleship and theological education in North and South America, I have focused on skill development as the crucial difference between teaching (imparting knowledge) and training (making disciples). **Msangaambe** observes that Western approaches that focus on theory rather than practice in the local context are doing a disservice to Africans, whether clergy or laity. His observation is accurate and highlights the necessity of contextualized theological formation. He concludes with words of wisdom for the Malawian church, "the success of any clergy begins in the appropriate engagement of the laity in the life of any church" (89). This is a leadership lesson of global import.

The Reverend Dr **Blair Bertrand** contributed chapter 7, "**Changing Expectations: A Sociology of Ordination in Malawi.**" He posits that Malawi has millions of Christians but few ordained ministers. While the number of Christians has increased, the number of trained ministers has remained static. In many Malawian pulpits, sermons are preached by lay preachers with no formal Bible study or theological education. He does not call Malawian churches to live up to the expectations of Western Europe or North America regarding ordination; he calls Malawian churches to establish their own expectations, which, as of yet, they have not. He writes, "Malawi has not shaped its own norms for Christian ministry nor does it meet the ones adopted from the West" (93). He then adroitly traces the concept of ordination through history as a form of contextual theology. He applies the "Two Publics" framework from sociologist Peter P. Ekeh's landmark study, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa,"¹ to the dynamics of power and authority structures related to ordination in post-colonial Africa. He observes that "even the best-intentioned missionaries played out the logic of power and authority inherent in their [contextually formulated] understanding of ordination" (95). In post-colonial Malawi, foreign church leaders were replaced by local leaders but the imported power structures remained in place. This reality brought the "two publics" into the life of the church. The first public, Ekeh's primordial public, is that ruled by primordial commitments in which public and private morality are

¹ Peter P. Ekeh, "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500007659> (also available at JSTOR and on ResearchGate.net); see also Ekeh's later "Afterword: Note on 'Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,'" in *Reclaiming the Human Sciences and Humanities through African Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Helen Lauer and Kofi Anyidoho, 219–232 (Legon-Accra, Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2012).

Donald Stanley Meador
The *Missio Dei* Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

the same. The second public, Ekeh's civic public, is that ruled by the imported concepts of morality and justice, in which there is little to no moral connection between public and private commitments; morality exists in private while public interactions are amoral. The split between public and private morality posed numerous challenges for the church regarding corruption. Bertrand writes, "because of the two publics there is no moral imperative to change because both ordained and lay avail themselves of the spiritual benefits of the primordial public and the material benefits of the civic public" (102). He concludes the chapter with a call for a contextualized theology that reimagines "how the Malawian church determines who has the authority to lead Christ's church" (109). In the end, he argues for an Africanized qualification for ordination of clergy rather than a diminished clergy-laity divide. His contribution is observant and fascinating, especially to an outsider. Despite addressing the Malawian church reality in greater depth than many of the other contributors, he did not clearly connect his study of ordination to a Malawian theology of laity. Undoubtedly, some readers would have hoped for a more explicit connection.

Volker Glissman, editor of the volume under review, contributed chapter 8, "**Voices from the Grassroots: Meaningful Partnership.**" He argues that a meaningful partnership between the clergy and laity can only develop if the voices of the grassroots (aka the laity) are included in the conversation. Through qualitative research via interviews, he endeavored to give voice to the laity. In English, he interviewed 7 females and 8 males from urban and semi-urban contexts. Four participants had experience with non-Malawian churches. Two participants were not Malawians (to include global concerns). Eight of the participants were married couples. The researcher acknowledged the limitations of the small sample size and considered his findings as a first step toward amplifying the voices of the Malawian laity. Readers should be aware that the limited sample size and its demographics may not be a representative sample of the Malawian laity. The findings, while interesting, may not produce sound conclusions needed to amplify the voice of the laity in the conversation at hand. Nonetheless, the author found that "a significant obstacle for the empowerment of the laity in the Malawian church comes from the very clergy-centered view of ministry and the mediative role between the divine and human world role ascribed to the ordained ministry" (141). The author concludes that the church has failed "to properly and theologically teach the full participation of all God's people in [the] ministry of the kingdom. This is missing in the lived theology of the people here in Malawi but actually worldwide too" (145). In short, this research suggests that the concept of the priesthood of all believers has yet to become a part of the living theology of Protestant churches in Malawi.

Donald Stanley Meador
The Missio Dei Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

The Reverend Dr **Gertrude Aopesyaga Sulumbu-Kapuma**, argues for the importance of the laity in congregational care in chapter 9, “**Lay People and Caring for the Widows.**” She posits that the laity both serve the congregation and inform the clergy of needs. The laity need additional training in some aspects of congregation care; the care of widows is one such aspect. The chapter examines some of the challenges widows face in Malawi. Globally, widows need someone to journey with them through the grief cycle. She observes that “widows are not supported in their time of need and the church which is supposed to accompany them, plays no role in helping them heal” (148). Beyond this universal responsibility of the church, she focuses on harmful cultural practices that the Malawian church should help widows avoid. One such practice is widowhood cleansing, in which the family of the departed husband requires the widow to have sex with a “cleanser” to achieve ritual purity. Until she is “cleansed,” she cannot make important decisions and is often left with nothing as her late husband’s estate is settled by his family. Such cultural practices are incompatible with Christianity, go against the principle of ubuntu, ignore basic human rights, and are against the laws of Malawi. However, “the cultural practices have made [widows] believe that they have no rights to fight against the injustice done to them” (156). Condemning all forms of abuse, she challenges the church to find “ways that can help restore the dignity of women so that they live a life that has meaning” (158). She concludes the chapter with a call for the church to train lay leaders to aid widows and address harmful cultural practices in their theological training.

Volker Glissmann also wrote on “**The Fragmentation of Theological Education and Its Effect on the Church, Grassroots Theological Education in Malawi and TEE.**” He observes “that something is not aligned between the pastoral and spiritual needs of the community of God’s people, and the kind of theological education that theological institutions offer” (172). Fragmentation refers to the misalignment of theological education and ministry needs or the breaking into fragments a once unified content (e.g., academic, ministerial, or grassroots theological education), resulting in “an essential loss of usefulness of theological education” (173). The fragmentation created three interrelated issues for the church and grassroots: the meaning and unifying principle of theology have been distorted, the ill-defined nature and purpose of theology contributed to the fragmentation of theological education, and the fragmentation separated theory from practice. The author calls for the reintegration of theological education with the following considerations: clearly defined theological and pedagogical outcomes, identification of the end recipients, and inclusion of the grassroots in theological education. He proposed Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as the best model of reintegration of theology and grassroots formation.

The Missio Dei Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

Watson Rajaratnam, a lecturer and missions mobilizer, wrote “**Lay Empowerment and Mission for the Malawian Church.**” His impassioned contribution asserts that Malawi has great potential to contribute to the world’s mission force by sending, funding, and praying. He laments that few pastors have a vision to equip and send their laity. He writes, “the problem lies not with God or His ability to empower the Malawian church to fulfill His Great Commission, but with the Malawian clergy who have been failing in their entrusted responsibility of discipling and mobilizing their congregation to fulfill the [missionary] task” (209). He posits five focal points for a course correction: 1) transforming lay members into disciples, 2) training laity to become disciple makers, 3) turning lay disciples into lay leaders, 4) using lay disciples’ resources (gifting and finances) for ministry and mission, and 5) empowering the laity following Jesus’ example. He challenges the Malawian church with these words, “The time has come for the Malawian clergy to awaken the Malawian laity and reinstate them to their rightful position in the churches” (216). He concluded the chapter with a call to biblical disciple-making that equips and empowers a missional laity.

Paul Matthews Louis Mawaya wrote on “**Theological Training in Malawi: The Case of CCAP Blantyre Synod.**” He presents feedback from participants and practitioners of theological training within the Blantyre Synod of the CCAP (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian) from 2014 to 2018, with a particular focus on sustaining theological training for the grassroots. His research comprised seven personal interviews with key respondents who completed theological training and then successfully graduated a cohort using the same training. His research revealed that low literacy levels, limited financial resources, a low view of the value of training, and the general difficulties and busyness of life worked against successful theological training. Those who completed the training reported qualitative improvements in their personal life and family relationships, as well as congregational growth. He concludes that “only a theologically trained community can experience transformation that remains Bible centered and Christ centered” (239). He calls church leaders to promote, facilitate, and participate in theological education in their churches.

Isabel Apawo Phiri calls for an end to gender discrimination in “**Ministry for All God’s People: Laity, Gender and Theological Education in a Rapidly Changing Malawi.**” Intersectionality is her analytical tool of choice as it “encourages examination of how different systems of oppression intersect and affect groups of women in different ways” (240–241). She attributes the oppression of and discrimination against African women in the church to clericalism and patriarchy. She traces the clergy-laity divide through Church history, including a discussion of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which is widely accepted by Protestants in theory, albeit unevenly applied across

Donald Stanley Meador
The *Missio Dei* Calls for an Equipped and Empowered Laity
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *Towards a Malawian Theology of Laity*,
edited by Volker Glissmann

gender lines. She included biographical information about her own journey through several Presbyterian churches as the ordination of women became acceptable over time. She also advocated for the World Council of Churches and lauded its Programme to Combat Racism that promotes peace and justice. She concludes, "In Malawi, we need to prepare the people of God for ministry where every Christian will develop the consciousness that they have to contribute to peace and justice in response to God's mission" (254).

Finally, **Volker Glissmann** contributes a discussion of the "**(Financial) Viability of Grassroots Theological Education.**" He defines *viability* as the question of "whether something can achieve its intended purpose" (260). He argues that theological education is a matter of covenant faithfulness, thereby asserting that viability is covenant faithfulness, that covenant faithfulness requires comprehensive theological education, and that comprehensive theological education requires church-based funding. He writes,

Viable theological education allows the church, in all its many manifestations, to work successfully and fully participate in the mission of God in the world. A key question here is, is it actually viable for the church *not* to comprehensively train the grassroots and instead focus predominantly on ministerial theological education? (261)

Clearly, the church in Malawi, as well as the global Church, must acknowledge that equipping and empowering the laity through theological education is a biblical imperative.

I sincerely recommend this book to theologians and lay leaders seeking to better understand the biblical and historical development of the theology of the laity. The authors present a well-reasoned, unified argument for the priesthood of all believers as orthodoxy. Readers will also note that orthodoxy in this matter divorced from orthopraxy will never result in a robust pursuit of the *missio Dei* in Malawi, nor anywhere. All the contributors to this work are to be lauded for boldly taking a seat at the theological table of the global church. My highest praise is reserved for chapter 9, "Lay People and Caring for the Widows," by **Sulumbu-Kapuma**. Her chapter should be required reading in seminaries around the world to illustrate the necessity of contextually developed practical theology. May theologians around the world welcome these authors with open arms for their effort to establish a sound doctrine of laity in Malawi's churches.