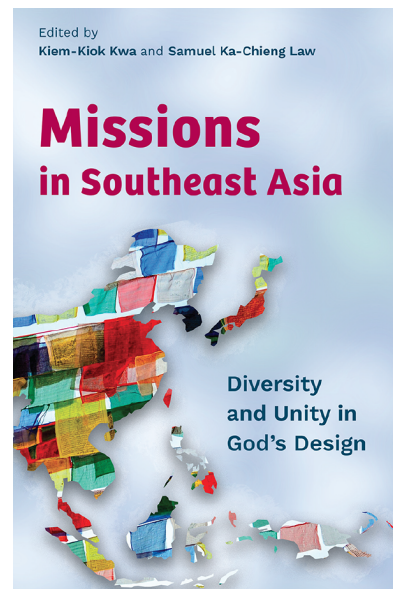


Kwa, Kiem-Kiok, and Samuel Ka-Chieng Law, eds. *Missions in Southeast Asia: Diversity and Unity in God's Design*. Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2022.

Reviewed by Paul Salem, IMB Field Personnel, Asia Pacific Rim

For more than twenty years missiologists have been saying that the church is now a global church and the demographic center of the global church is no longer in the West. However, this statement has barely moved from being a novelty statement of a self-congratulatory nature. The time to hear from different parts of the world on church matters is long past due. When Asian theology is considered, the focus is often on the larger nations of India and China. Therefore, an academically rigorous volume of Southeast Asian missiology is both welcomed and needed to give depth to understanding Christianity in its global contexts. *Missions in Southeast Asia: Diversity and Unity in God's Design* edited by Kiem-Kiok Kwa and Samuel Ka-Chieng Law is a worthy contribution to global missiology.



The book is organized into two parts. The first part walks through “A Diversity of Local Church Histories”. Each chapter covers a brief history of Christianity and the state of the church in most of the Southeast Asian nations (with exceptions of Laos, Brunei, and Timor Leste). Each author offers an overview of the arrival and growth of Christianity in a particular Southeast Asian nation. These chapters offer analysis from a presumably local perspective (although author backgrounds are not given anywhere in the book).

Another beneficial contribution of these chapters is the analysis following the turbulent decades after World War II through the 1980s. Each of the authors moves beyond the telling of history, to offer missiological commentary on the state of the church in each of the nations featured, even venturing to suggest what must happen next. Various authors note that Southeast Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world, and it shows in these chapters.

The second half of the book covers “A Unity of Interweaving Themes”. These are topical treatments of missiological themes that have global importance and particular relevance in Southeast Asia. Due to the diversity of cultures, faiths, languages, and political systems in the region, the authors challenge readers to move from an overly simplistic view of cultures and missions to one that engages a globally interactive and locally engaged region. The chapters cover missiological research, globalization, regional engagement with the global church, holistic mission, and contextualization. Each of the chapters includes short case studies with questions that encourage readers to bring various chapters together for integrated learning. The questions are designed to help the reader assimilate the ideas introduced in the different chapters into their own missiological framework.

Strengths and Weaknesses

This volume offers needed perspective from a region of the world that is often not represented in missions literature. Sometimes volumes of this nature can be heavy with a particular agenda or even portray Western missionary contribution in a negative light. While this volume in no way sidesteps the unhealthy or even damaging impact of Western influence, there is also an acknowledgment of many different influences on each nation. Some of these nations have complicated histories with each other as well as with other non-Western nations that shaped the region. Several of the authors acknowledge that this complex history makes the cultural tapestry more layered, thus calling for more careful and nuanced contextualization.

An indirect contribution of the book is the acknowledgment that, in all but one of the countries featured, Christianity remains a minority religion. As the church enters a time where it will be a minority in most nations of the world, this volume offers an important guide to thriving as a minority community and addressing issues that the church must face when it does not have political leverage.

One chapter by Samuel K. Law calls for a complex-systems approach to missiological research and education. Much of missiology has been developed in the context of cultural homogeneity. Southeast Asia, particularly in the cities, is an amazing mix of cultures, languages, and influences, making simplistic homogenized people group missiology obsolete.

There are a few ways in which this volume could be stronger. The chapters in the first half of the book did well to cover complex histories in a short space, but then sometimes reduced the analysis to the author's pet topics. For example, the chapter on Indonesia by Benyamin Intan was overly focused on political engagement, which moves the emphasis away from a missiological treatment to one of political theology.

Additionally, the book was lacking in some critical areas for a book on missions. For example, the book could have benefited from clarity on what is and what is not mission. Furthermore, academic missiologists offered little in the way of demographic or ethnographic research data. Relatively little space was given to evangelism, discipleship, and church planting, which have been the classic core of evangelical missions. Although readers get an idea of how the church was initially established, it was interesting that there was very little about the continuing of gospel advancement in Southeast Asia. This group of learned missiologists could have offered a more complete picture of missions in the region and where it is going.

The church of Southeast Asia, like that of the rest of the world, also faces the challenge of new, ever-changing urban dynamics. Although some individual contributors commented on urban contexts, others omitted this important reality. There were points in which it was suggested by authors

that the church needs to be more indigenous and more deeply rooted in a particular culture. This volume could be greatly improved by addressing new global-urban realities and how they impact mission in Southeast Asia. The urban contexts of Southeast Asia are exceedingly diverse and are inundated with myriad global influences. Global corporate culture or youth culture might be more influential than the old village culture of a particular ethnic group. A quick survey of what is played on the radio throughout Southeast Asia might indicate that urban Christians may be more comfortable worshipping with a contemporary musical style than with the old instruments grandma grew up with. In the largest metropolitan region of Southeast Asia, Jakarta, it is estimated that about one third of marriages are inter-ethnic. This is where Samuel Law's urging for more complex research tools is vital for the church going forward. Contextualization in the midst of diversity requires new thinking and a little less focus on traditional cultural expressions.

Missions in Southeast Asia: Diversity and Unity in God's Design is a valuable contribution to the global church and certainly a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in missions in Southeast Asia.