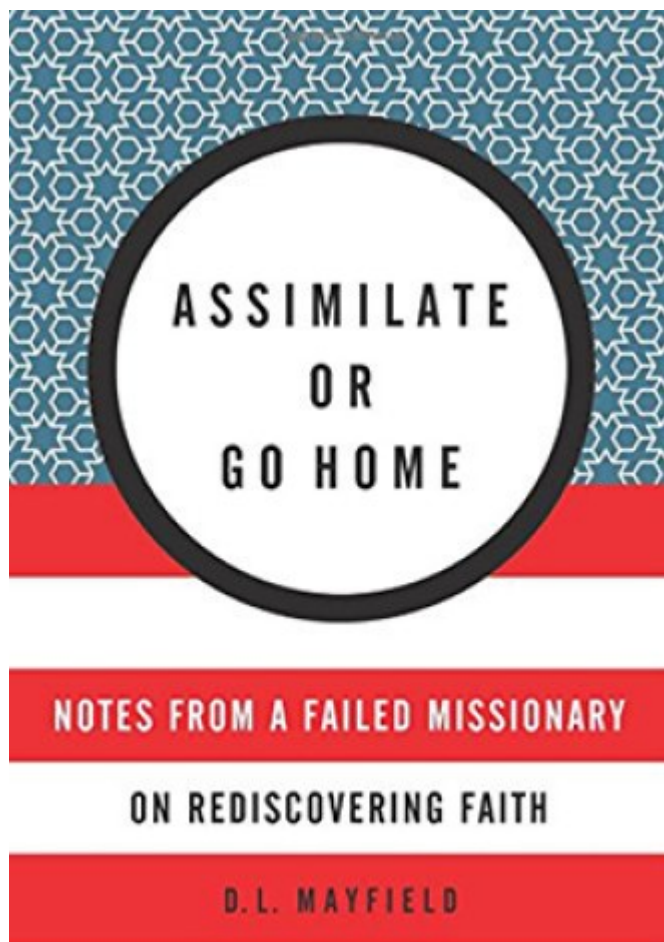


A do-gooder's tale

D. L. Mayfield wanted to help Somali refugees. She ended up mostly baking them cupcakes.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [January 18, 2017](#) issue

In Review



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Assimilate or Go Home

Notes from a Failed Missionary

D. L. Mayfield

HarperOne

Most of the essays in this artfully composed collection are structured according to the same plot: a well-meaning missionary is turned inside out and upside down by the harsh realities of the mission field. At first read the repetition grated. I expected D. L. Mayfield to provide an overarching story, a narrative thread. I wanted the narrator to play the part of protagonist, overcoming hardship to claim victory in the end. But this isn't how it works, especially not for a self-avowed "failure."

At one point Mayfield reflects upon her missionary colleagues who have been at work far longer than she, the people who have "seen stories as they really are: long term and full of miracles and crushing disappointments, a constant tale of being saved and relapsing back into ourselves." These are the kinds of stories Mayfield tells. You don't get from her happy endings and tidy morality tales. You get theological and ethical ambiguity. You also get extremely uncomfortable with your own extremely comfortable life (if, like me, you are a reader who lives with relative privilege).

Mayfield presumed as a child that her missionary aspirations would take her overseas. Instead, she finds herself involved—an insufficient word if there ever was one—with the Somali Bantu refugee community in her hometown. As is frequently the case with vulnerable and economically disadvantaged groups, the refugees who land in Portland, Oregon, land in the margins.

Mayfield describes dilapidated community centers, cockroach-infested kitchens, apartment complexes seemingly unfit for habitation. "The deeper you went into the complexes, the more the curtain of the Western world fell away: here, time stood still. Nobody had cars, nobody had jobs: everyone came with their culture weighing heavily on their backs and precious little more."

Mayfield is a visitor into this world, and she quickly becomes dissatisfied with being more tourist than true missionary. She therefore does something mildly radical in a culture that values upward mobility: she moves into the neighborhood, opting to live among the people she feels called to serve.

Before you roll your eyes and write Mayfield off as a well-meaning but ill-advised do-gooder, know that Mayfield has already rolled her eyes at herself. At times she is scathing in her self-critique. She reveals the underside of her missionary zeal. There

is a part of her that isn't there out of love for Jesus or concern for the poor, but because she wants to be known as an extraordinarily faithful Christian. "I didn't see how I placed myself at the top and was eager for others to do the same. I didn't see how that meant my neighbors and refugee friends became my stepping stones in attaining the love of God; I didn't see how it meant that I was using everyone around me in real and devastating ways."

Having developed an aversion to such casual exploitation, Mayfield becomes frustrated by the fresh-faced youth groups who show up to offer tone-deaf and presumptuous vacation Bible schools to the children of the projects only to disappear back into the suburbs at the end of the week. She even stops inviting her own friends to volunteer for refugee support programs, having grown weary of their tendency to pop in just long enough to take selfies of themselves in action before losing interest in the enterprise.

Although she does become credentialed to teach English as a second language, the lion's share of Mayfield's ministry is neither teaching nor preaching. "I have the much less interesting spiritual gift of showing up and sitting on couches." She never really knows if her presence is effective in any way and generally suspects that it's not. Still, she is utterly committed to abiding with her friends in the margins, even if it means that her most tangible offering is a steady stream of her Funfetti cupcakes.

Upon baking a batch for a woman who was "moving away to be with a man I was sure was the cause of all her hurts and bruises," Mayfield wonders, "How much longer can I keep making these damn cupcakes?" Her cupcakes aren't saving anyone from abusive relationships. They aren't creating opportunities for disenfranchised youth. They aren't even emblazoned with "JESUS LOVES YOU" in pink gel frosting. They are literally just cupcakes. Empty calories. But they are the symbol of everything this "failed missionary" has become, all that she has learned in her long, open-ended sojourn among the "least of these." "As it turns out, I never did magically turn into one of my missionary heroes. Instead, I'm just somebody who likes to bake cakes." Somebody who likes to bake cakes—and be in real relationship, and bear witness to the kingdom of God.

"The world is so much worse than we would like to believe," Mayfield muses. This is what I suspect, and what I fear. "And God is so much wilder than we are being taught. We can study the kingdom of God, but we can never contain or subdue it. Reading about it will never equal the experience of it. That we must discover for

ourselves, and we will find it where God always said it would be: on the margins, in the upside-down kingdom.”

This, too, is what I suspect. And, as I rest easy on the laurels of my privilege and possessions and cockroach-free kitchen, this too is what I fear.