

## REVIEW

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# Being Light: Navigating the Blogosphere for Faith-Based Development Professionals

by Jeffrey Bloem

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Consider lighthouses. They communicate knowledge to the public, preventing potentially deadly accidents while safely guiding travelers. They are easy to see from afar. Without lighthouses, ship captains would have to sail tentatively, constantly worrying about making a potentially deadly mistake.

Blogs and podcasts are a bit like lighthouses. They communicate knowledge to the public. They are easy for many to access. Without blogs we would not have as much access to the knowledge we need to perform our work effectively.

But what if there are too many lighthouses, or, more to the point, too many blogs and podcasts? Some might argue that they are now so numerous and varied that it has become difficult to identify quality sources that provide reliable and relevant information. This is why reason, learning from others, and triangulating information from multiple sources are so important. Lighthouses are not the only resource of value to ship captains. Maps, compasses, GPS systems, and reason are also of great value for sailing safely. In the world of relief, development, and advocacy work, we too can use reason and other tools, including blogs and podcasts, to access the knowledge we need.

In this short review, I provide a brief overview of some of my favorite blogs and podcasts that I have engaged with over the last ten years. Some of these resources are relatively new and currently active, while others are less active but contain a treasure-trove of useful information. I hope you will find something helpful. The discussion is organized into three categories: (i) faith-based blogs, (ii) non-faith-based blogs, and (iii) podcasts.

### Best Faith-Based Blogs

This first category focuses on blogs that write about development and humanitarian action from an explicitly faith-based perspective. This category is likely the most familiar to *CRDA* readers and members of the Accord Network. In fact, the two blogs featured here are both managed by members of the *CRDA* editorial board. There are other excellent and worthwhile blogs—such as those by Richard Stearns, Peter Greer, Ron Sider, or Shared Justice by the Center for Public

Justice—but the two blogs below are more rigorous, active, and focused on relief, development, or advocacy.

1) *The Better Samaritan*, by Kent Annan and Jamie Aten  
(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/better-samaritan/>)

Annan and Aten help run the Humanitarian Disaster Institute (HDI) at Wheaton College. Hosted by *Christianity Today*, their blog, *The Better Samaritan*, represents an accessible extension of their work with HDI. The blog features the ideas of both Annan and Aten, as well as those of frequent guests who specialize in Christian theology, missions, African studies, development, humanitarian assistance, refugee resettlement, philanthropy, and more.

Two recent posts from *The Better Samaritan* blog highlight this variety in content. In “What Standard Should We Use for Loving Our Neighbors in Crisis?” Annan and Aten argue that serving others in their most vulnerable moments is a holy and sacred task. Therefore, we had better be good at it. In “5 Tips for Getting a Job in Humanitarian Aid,” guest contributor Sarah Wilcox provides job advice for folks who want to work in relief, development, and advocacy. Blogs are particularly helpful in providing space for individuals to write about their experiences finding meaningful and effective work in our field. Later on, I mention several other blogs that aim to provide career guidance.

2) *The Shrewd Samaritan*, by Bruce Wydick  
(<http://www.acrosstwoworlds.net/>)

Bruce Wydick is a development economist and professor at the University of San Francisco. His blog, *Across Two Worlds*, aims to bridge the perceived gap between academics and development practitioners. The core theme running through every one of Wydick’s posts is that each of these “worlds” can benefit from listening and engaging more with the other.

This theme is displayed well in a post from 2015 entitled “What Secular Academics Can Learn from the Faith-Based Development Community.” In this post, Wydick argues that secular academics should adopt the view that humans are multidimensional and complex social individuals. Particularly in a discipline like economics, secular academics too easily reduce humans to being simple, selfish, profit maximizing computers, which can lead to misguided policy recommendations. Wydick also pushes back in the other direction by highlighting that the faith-based development community would do well to adopt the commitment of secular academics to rigorous program evaluation and research in understanding what works best to serve the poor.

Another excellent post in *The Shrewd Samaritan* is a set of reflections on 24 hours of being homeless in San Francisco, something Wydick did to get a flavor of what being homeless is like. The post reads like an hour-by-hour diary. Although Wydick is careful to point out that “being homeless” for only 24 hours is not really comparable to the true, day-in-day-out grind of being homeless, the experience led him to reflections about how global poverty compares and contrasts with poverty in the United States.

## Best Non-Faith-Based Blogs

Christians can also learn from non-faith-based blogs. These blogs will likely be the familiar to CRDA readers and members of the Accord Network. Again, I highlight two excellent blogs, but some others worth your time include: Jeffrey Paller’s *This Week in Africa* newsletter (providing links on a weekly basis on all things related to Africa), Rachel Strohm’s blog (where Rachel aims to amplify African voices in research and policymaking), and Martin Ravallion’s blog (Ravallion writes from a career of experience measuring poverty and informing poverty-alleviation policy).

**1) *Development Impact***, by The World Bank (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/impacetevaluations>)

The World Bank’s *Development Impact* blog is a highly active and consistent resource for news, insights on new research, and discussions about research methodology curated by some of the most well-known development economists in the world, such as Berk Ozler, David McKenzie, Jed Friedman, Florence Kondylis, Kathleen Beegle, Marcus Goldstein, and Dave Evans. The blog also holds an extensive history of over 1,500 posts from the past ten years. A recent post summarizes the blog’s history and asks, “Did our blog posts age well?”

A classic post is David McKenzie’s 2011 discussion of the Millennium Villages Project. In this post McKenzie engages with an ongoing (at the time) debate among development professionals about the effectiveness of the Millennium Villages Project led by Jeffrey Sachs. A key theme in this specific post is an aim to tie public commentary together with academic research in an effort to break down barriers between development practitioners and researchers.

**2) *Chris Blattman’s Blog*** (<https://chrisblattman.com/>)

Between 2012 and 2016, Chris Blattman created one of the most active and widely read blogs in international development, economics, and policy. Currently, Blattman posts much less frequently and his blog has been largely taken over by Jeff Mosenkis on behalf of Innovations for Poverty Action, with a “weekly links” post that summarizes the past week of news in international development, economics, and policy. These weekly links are worth subscribing to, but the most valuable content is still Blattman’s archived blog posts.

Blattman’s archived posts are a treasure-trove of excellent advice. For example, “Getting a job in international development,” and “What MA, MPA, or MIA program is for you?” and “How to get a PhD \*and\* save the world,” all helped me, along with so many others, to navigate the early part of our post-undergraduate career. In addition, I made his 2010 post on “How to write an essay” required reading in my international economics class this past semester.

Blattman often writes about development policy, based on his own research. Some of my favorite posts include his 2017 post, “Do sweatshops lift workers out of poverty? This experiment might surprise you.” and his 2014 post “Cash transfers: The index fund of international development.” Blattman’s informal writing style may take some getting used to, but his commentary remains surprisingly useful today.

## Best Podcasts

Podcasts are another medium that has grown substantially in recent years. There are many podcasts that are both well-known and worth listening to. For example, Kent Annan and Jamie Aten have their own podcast linked to *The Better Samaritan* blog. But I will once again highlight two podcasts that are relatively new and may be of particular interest to CRDA readers.

**1) *The Accord Research Alliance Podcast, by the Accord Network***

(<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-accord-research-alliance-podcast/id1292714350>)

Nathan Mallonee, Kristen Check, and Rodney Green from the Accord Research Alliance produce a podcast that features conversations with leaders working in Christian international relief, development, and advocacy. The podcast provides insights and opportunities for shared learning from within the Accord community. This podcast is really a must-follow for *CRDA* readers.

These conversations not only provide interesting discussions of the work of specific individuals—such as Michael Woolcock, Mary Kay Gugerty, Jamie Aten, and Bruce Wydick—but they also provide introductions on topics such as the importance of a theory of change, measuring spiritual metrics, implementing randomized control trials, and partnerships between implementing organizations and universities. I am looking forward to seeing this podcast grow and develop in the future. For example, it may be an excellent outlet for authors of *CRDA* articles to discuss and share their findings in an alternative medium.

**2) *Faithful Economy*, by Steven McMullen**  
(<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/faithful-economy/id1533993289>)

Steven McMullen is an Associate Professor of Economics at Hope College and the host of *Faithful Economy*, a podcast launched in late 2020 and sponsored by the Association of Christian Economists. The podcast focuses on facilitating thoughtful conversations at the intersection of morality, theology, and economics. So far, the podcast has included conversations with many economists—such as Scott Cunningham from Baylor University, Bruce Wydick from the University of San Francisco, Denise Daniels from Wheaton College, Art Carden from Samford University, Rob Tatum from the University of North Carolina Asheville, Stephen Smith from Hope College, and Edd Noell from Westmont College. Economists are most commonly featured, but sprinkled into the field are philosophers and theologians, like Greg Forster from Trinity International University and Jordan Ballor from the Acton Institute.

These conversations often take the form of long conversations that aim to dig deep into the granular aspects of the guest's work. Each episode generally focuses on either the moral or spiritual implications of economics or the economic implications of moral thinking. These

conversations may not directly relate to relief, development, or advocacy, but most apply indirectly.

## **Be a Lighthouse**

The challenge in taking full advantage of blogs and podcasts is that almost anyone can write a blog or record a podcast. This is, perhaps, the biggest strength of blogs and podcasts, but also their biggest weakness. On the one hand, anyone can contribute, so blogs and podcasts can provide relatively unfiltered and honest discussions. Contributors do not need to convince an editor or an anonymous group of peer-reviewers to get their ideas and perspectives out. This is helpful because sometimes the information we consume in formal outlets has been vetted and edited so thoroughly that the true voice of the author hardly survives in the finished product. On the other hand, anyone can contribute, so blogs and podcasts can be misleading and unpolished. Contributors may not have discussed these ideas and perspectives with others. This can be harmful because the information may not be trustworthy or rigorous.

Here is where we can all play a role. As consumers of blogs and podcasts, we can play an active role in shining a light on the resources that we find helpful, reliable, and relevant. This does not mean that we all should go out and start our own blog or podcast (although some should do that!). It does mean that we can all share useful blogs and podcasts within our sphere of influence. We can also provide feedback to authors and hosts, telling them what sort of topics we would like them to cover. This will help enhance the ability of blogs and podcasts we appreciate to shine a bit brighter in sharing knowledge with a wide audience.

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