

Incarnational Ministry – some thoughts on how to maintain a healthy spiritual life

by Pam Toan

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well

1 Thes 2:8

Introduction

This topic is of particular interest to me for two reasons:

- I have lived incarnationally in the past.
- Some of the team for whom I have pastoral responsibility here in Cambodia, live incarnationally.

However both my own experience and my observations have suggested that those who practice incarnational ministry, who share their lives with others, face a high level of demand on their personal, emotional and spiritual lives, as well as on their family, professional and social life. So, in view of my role as a spiritual director, my question is:

“How is it possible to maintain a healthy spiritual life whilst engaging in incarnational ministry?”

Method

In order to try to answer this question and to suggest some ways in which it might be possible to sustain a healthy spiritual life I have undertaken the following:

- I have asked 12 people who have in the past, or are currently, living incarnationally, to complete a simple questionnaire (see Appendix 1). These are referred to throughout as “responders”
- I have had in-depth interviews with 5 of the above people.
- I have read current literature on this subject.
- I have reflected on my own and others’ experience.

For the purpose of this project I have used my own, very broad definition of incarnational ministry – i.e. “meaningful presence and engagement in an area that is different from your normal place of working and living, for the purpose of extending the Kingdom of God” – so I have given questionnaires and interviewed people who have taken deliberate steps to move out of a comfortable life and into a lifestyle that is different and challenging. This means that although I have included a number of people from Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor who are based in Cambodia in my survey I have also included people living incarnationally in Thailand, New Zealand and United Kingdom. Although most were working with the urban poor in these various settings a few were working in more rural locations.

In Part 1 I have begun by looking at the major causes of stress on the lives of incarnational workers using the questionnaire and in depth interviews as the main source of information, but also the writings of leaders and thinkers in this area. From there I have gone on to in Part 2 look at the things which incarnational workers are already doing which aid their spiritual health and then I have looked at the things which they would like to do or to have available to them. In Part 3 I have considered some things which may aid incarnational workers to more easily maintain a healthy spiritual life.

Part 1: Stressors in the lives of Incarnational Workers

Environment

Those who do incarnational ministry may well find themselves living in a depleted environment. Results from the questionnaire show that living among poverty in such an environment was the single, highest cause of stress. The emotional pressures of living amongst the really poor, who will be hungry tonight when you eat your meal, who will die from illness when you can pay for treatment, is huge. Add to this the unrealistic expectations of local people that you have access to funds that can help them or that you can solve their insoluble problems and it is easy to understand why resilience is so important in workers.

Also mentioned in the questionnaires were heat, noise, traffic, dust, rats, water and air pollution. These can cumulatively be very draining.

Community

Another key factor identified in the literature for maintaining a healthy spiritual life is community. T Aaron Smith writes

“Community is ... vitally important for sustainability in incarnational ministry ... they need faithful brothers and sisters in Christ who will walk beside them in the pilgrimage. By approaching spiritual growth communally, incarnational leaders are able to encourage others in their walk with God, as they themselves are also encouraged”¹

Results from questionnaires show that responders value their communities citing them as helping to maintain spiritual practises, giving space for accountability, engendering encouragement, understanding the hardships and giving support. Kristan Jack, writing of Servants of Asia’s Urban Poor gatherings to share a weekly meal together, says

“After the shared meal we worship, share our struggles and joys with one another, and pray together. This is often a time when tears flow as we try to help ‘carry one another’s burdens’.”²

This seems to paint a picture of a vibrant living and caring community which supports the team members as they live incarnationally.

However results from the questionnaire also show another side to community. Of the 12 responders half identified team relationships as being one of the key regular stressors. During in-depth interviews one worker described her team as “toxic” and another wept in sorrow and frustration.

¹ Smith, T Aaron. Living in the Neighbourhood: Developing a Sustainable Incarnational Ministry among the Urban Poor. Pomona, 2012, page 142

² Jack Kristin (Ed.). The Sound of Worlds Colliding: Stories of Radical Discipleship from Servants of Asia's Urban Poor. Phnom Penh. 2010 page 211

So clearly although community is very important, when it breaks down it can be damaging and add to the stress that workers are already under.

It should also be recognised that for those who do not work in teams, loneliness can be a major issue. To live in a neighbourhood, whether urban Cambodia or rural England, where few understand your purpose in being there, and some of those may believe you are foolish, is not easy and demands a strong sense of call and a high level of commitment.

Attitudes and Emotions

Responses to the questionnaire indicate that negative attitudes and emotions can be as difficult as community as a stressor. Responders cite attitudes such as

- feelings of guilt
- feelings of failure
- developing a “messiah complex”
- confusion due to moving between affluent and poor communities
- self condemnation
- attitudes of other Christians regarding the health and well-being of children
- attitudes of other Christians who exalt incarnational workers

Kristen Jack observes

*“it is so easy for us to be dragged down by a sense of failure, despairing that our little efforts aren’t making any difference at all”*³

David Teague notes

*“Many situations – especially the worst – cannot be controlled. Or solved. Or helped. They just are and they require us to just be. In that being – in our relationship with the person we are serving – we have to trust the presence of Christ to minister through us”*⁴

So these attitudes are to be countered by developing a closeness to Christ which will sustain and give hope in the most difficult of circumstances.

Heuertz and Prince describe the early years of incarnational ministry as feeling “a lot less like the Samaritan fresh off the donkey and more like the half-dead guy on the side of the road.”⁵ This experience led them to “press towards intimacy with Jesus through individual and collective rhythms of prayer, Sabbath, silence and solitude”⁶

³ Ibid. page 210

⁴ Teague, David. *Godly Servants: Discipleship and Spiritual Formation for Missionaries*. Kindle edition, 2012 page 126

⁵ Bessenecker, Scott A (Ed.) *Living Mission: The Vision and Voices of the New Friars*. Downers Grove, 2010. page 107

⁶ Ibid page 107

Health/Family Issues

About half of responders cite health (both physical and mental) of self or family as a major stressor. Some of this is clearly linked to the earlier topic of environment, but responders indicate some of this can also be linked to spiritual ill-health due to neglect of the disciplines of solitude, silence and rest. Tiredness was also mentioned by half the responders; this is not surprising when many live in noisy, crowded slums.

Those who live incarnationally may be taking children into slum areas where health can be an issue. Children will probably grow up in an area where drug and alcohol misuse, prostitution and domestic violence are in their neighbourhood.

Part 2: Things which help sustain spiritual health

Responders to the questionnaire cite a number of things which currently help to sustain their spiritual life including their own personal devotional life and their membership (or not) of a church.

Prayer

This was clearly indicated by responders to be by far the most important factor in sustaining spiritual life. They cited being encouraged by prayer groups, prayer spaces, centring prayer, contemplative prayer, the practise of examen and the use of prayer books. These were all part of the daily routine practised by incarnational workers. Heuertz and Prince state

“... because the need for transformation in our neighbourhoods is so great, we press toward intimacy with Jesus through individual and collective rhythms of prayer, Sabbath silence and solitude. Without the riches delved in contemplation, we have nothing to give.”⁷

Clearly prayer is the mainspring that energises incarnational workers and changes communities.

Resilience

Responders recognised the need to nurture healthy attitudes. They list resiliency, self awareness, realistic perceptions of what can be achieved, and choosing not to feel guilty for taking time out when necessary. Workers need a high level of resilience to deal with all the pressures and stress of working incarnationally without damage.

Green Pastures

Most responders saw the need for times of rest and refreshment. So they talk of the need for time out of the city, green spaces, nature, gardening and other ways of refreshing themselves. Some noted that things as diverse as running and listening or making music

⁷ Ibid page 107

can be their “green pasture”. Some also indicated that this is where they can best feel connected to God. Jack, citing the example of Jesus, states

“... for survival and longevity, we need to periodically retreat to places of stillness and quiet where we can be alone with God and our own soul.”⁸

Scripture

One third of the responders mentioned Bible reading as important for sustaining spiritual life. However I noted from their responses that for some people prayer seems to be so closely linked with Bible reading that they did not enter them as separate items.

Other

Things such as journaling, art, reading, and home church videos were all mentioned as helpful to maintaining spiritual health.

Church

This received a mixed response. Some were very enthusiastic about their church, finding it a place of friendships, community, worship, receiving teaching and prayer. Others clearly found church difficult saying it was draining, meaningless in their circumstances and inward looking. A couple do not actually belong to a church at all because their experience has been so negative.

The Wish List

There was opportunity on the questionnaire for responders to list things that they do not have or do which might help to sustain spiritual health. This “wish list” is headed by the need for a good, “green” space where there could be regular times, in nature, for prayer, quiet and retreat. For those living in an impoverished environment clearly there is a need to find oases of peace and rest for spiritual refreshment.

About two thirds were looking for a person or group who could aid them – so spiritual directors, mentors, accountability groups were mentioned. My observation of Cambodia is that there are few green, quiet spaces and even fewer spiritual directors.

Part 3: Finding a way forward

In the light of the above it seems that it should be possible to find a way forward which will help to sustain spiritual health in incarnational workers and which I can use in my work as a spiritual director here in Cambodia and when I eventually return to UK.

Calling and Recruitment

It seems clear that to undertake this difficult and challenging work it is important that workers have a strong sense of being called by God. Smith states

⁸ Jack Kristin (Ed.). *The Sound of Worlds Colliding: Stories of Radical Discipleship from Servants of Asia's Urban Poor*. Phnom Penh. 2010 page 212

“Calling is a vital component of sustainability. 87% of incarnational leaders surveyed mentioned calling as key to long-term sustainability among the urban poor”⁹

However the call should be accompanied by recognition by others that this is a true call of God. To enter incarnational ministry workers need to have the support of their sending church and acceptance by the organisation they work with. In her chapter on recruitment to mission agencies, Gardener suggests four aspects of health which will promote *“hardiness, innovation, creativity, personal and spiritual maturity and relational skill and compatibility.”*¹⁰ She suggests that these should be explored as part of the recruitment process.

- spiritual health including relationship to God and the Body of Christ and perceptions of the world
- emotional health including hardiness, lifelong learning and resilience
- relational health covering self-awareness and getting along with others
- physical health.

It seems that if all these were recognised before entering incarnational ministry the effect of many of the stress-ors discussed in the first section of this project may be countered.

It seems from my research that teams can be a major cause of hurt and stress and that the arrival of new team members can be a catalyst for dysfunction to emerge. Perhaps one way forward would be to ensure that new team members share the vision and values of the team. It might also be useful to engage trusted, outside intermediaries to bring the team together to talk through difficult situations. However when workers are already under immense pressure, there may come a time when the team is so dysfunctional that a decision is taken to break it up and reform it and this needs to be handled with great care by those tasked with this.

Some responders entered incarnational ministry with their children, living in depleted and difficult neighbourhoods where their children witnessed many of the things which characterise the lives of poor people such as hunger, violence and prostitution. Parents can be pro-active in talking to their children about what is happening around them and be balancing this with good education and healthy relationships. Children can also be helped to practise the spiritual disciplines of prayer and listening to God to encourage them not to be overwhelmed by their experiences.

Strong Theology

To thrive in incarnational ministry workers need to have a strong theology which includes understanding of God’s protection and of suffering. Smith again states

⁹ Smith, T Aaron. *Living in the Neighbourhood: Developing a Sustainable Incarnational Ministry among the Urban Poor*. Pomona, 2012, page 137

¹⁰ Gardner, Laura Mae, *Healthy Resilient and Effective in Cross cultural Ministry*. Bandung, 2013 page 9-17

*“It is important to have a theology and spirituality of suffering and struggle because without it we may lose hope in God in the midst of our suffering.”*¹¹

There is also a need to have a theological understanding of the biblical foundation for incarnational ministry as there are some critical voices. Amongst other critics, J Todd Billings in Christianity Today says some incarnational missionaries

*“claimed they did not need to bear witness to Christ. Instead, they were simply called to become “incarnate” in the second culture. The slogan in these circles is to “live the Good News rather than preach the Good News.”*¹²

Billings’ complaint is one of many, but my own experience is that incarnational workers seek to share the Good News with both their words and their deeds and that this is their reason for entering this ministry although they may need supervision or mentoring to aid this.

Resources

There is now a considerable body of writing about incarnational ministry, growing out of the experiences, good and bad, of workers and this is very helpful. However having a firm theological base before commencing work and a good understanding of the spiritual disciplines would be very helpful.

In many areas there is a shortage of space for retreat. Cambodia is such a place with its constant noise and pollution. However there is a growing awareness of the need for places of retreat and a developing range of facilities. Money to pay for these retreats is also a problem for some workers and this is an area where an understanding sending church could help.

People who can act as mentors, accountability partners and spiritual directors can also help. I think (bearing in mind that teams can be a cause of stress) that having someone outside the team to talk to in confidence could be very useful.

Time Out

It seems that it would be useful to have agreed times out of their neighbourhood written into the “job description” of incarnational workers. It can be tempting to think that it is wrong to take time out of the situation when the need is great and one’s neighbours have no choice but to stay. However Bessenecker points out that Mother Teresa’s renowned Missionaries of Charity take one day a week, one week a month, one month a year and one year in six in what they refer to as “thoughtful rest”¹³. This is as well as their daily balance of work and prayer. These experienced incarnational workers are demonstrating the way to ensure strengthening of spiritual health.

¹¹ Smith, T Aaron. Living in the Neighbourhood: Developing a Sustainable Incarnational Ministry among the Urban Poor. Pomona, 2012, page 156

¹² Billings, J Todd, “The problem with Incarnational Ministry” Christianity Today Vol.56 No.7 (July/August 2012) Online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/july-august/the-problem-with-incarnational-ministry.html>

¹³ Bessenecker, Scott A (Ed.) Living Mission: The Vision and Voices of the New Friars. Downers Grove:, 2010. page 108

Strong Spiritual Life

We have already noted the temptations to activism and developing a “messiah complex”. The antidote seems to be in developing a strong spiritual life and practicing the spiritual disciplines both before and during incarnational ministry. Smith notes

“The best preparation for incarnational ministry ... is focusing on developing one’s relationship with Jesus. 61% of incarnational leaders stated that focusing more on spiritual disciplines would have better prepared them for life among the urban poor.”¹⁴

It seems that in view of the difficulties associated with working in teams, that a spirit of forgiveness and thinking the best of others can grow out of a strong spiritual life in which the practice of the disciplines are encouraged.

Some workers are so focused on alleviating poverty and misery around them that they are impatient to get involved. However my in-depth interviews showed that development of a strong spiritual life both before and during incarnational work was felt to be key in sustaining both spiritual life and ministry.

All the incarnational mission websites I visited place a high value on spiritual disciplines such as personal and communal prayer, and some specifically name simplicity, celebration, and formation of spiritual disciplines amongst their foundational values.

“Being” not “Doing”

As indicated above, it is not possible for one person or small group to end poverty and restore health and joy to a neighbourhood. Teague rightly notes

“Missionaries are doers. We’re trained to serve and to help. Yet, incarnation ministry require us to learn to be, not just to do. Being is a much harder lesson to learn.”¹⁵

So to be effective in incarnational ministry workers must learn first to “be” in their neighbourhood: to just spend time with people; to build relationships and to understand what is happening. Then they will have earned the right to be heard, to make suggestions towards change and to aid neighbours to develop projects to alleviate poverty and its many evils.

¹⁴ Smith, T Aaron. *Living in the Neighbourhood: Developing a Sustainable Incarnational Ministry among the Urban Poor*. Pomona, 2012, page 135

¹⁵ Teague, David. *Godly Servants: Discipleship and Spiritual Formation for Missionaries*. Kindle edition, 2012 page 135

Postscript: Into the Wider Context

I have been struck again and again, while researching for this project with the sense that, as Christians, we are all called to incarnational ministry. Certainly the issues facing those working with the urban or rural poor may be tougher and their experiences may be difficult, but we are all called to be “Jesus” in our homes, schools, offices, clubs and especially amongst our family and friends. So, many of the suggestions made in Section 3 can apply to any Christian in any context. For example we can develop a strong sense of God’s call to our own context, a well understood theology, the use of resources (training, places and people), taking appropriate time out and developing a strong spiritual life through the practise of the spiritual disciplines. And in the final analysis it is who we are, (our being), which speaks far more clearly in our own context than what we do or say.

My time in Cambodia is likely to finish in the next couple of years and as I seek a way forward to using my training as spiritual director in my home country it may well be that this will be part of the thinking that informs the choices I then make.

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Servant Partners: Transformation Alongside the Urban Poor –
<http://www.servantpartners.org>

Servants to Asia's Urban Poor - <http://servantsasia.org>

Urban Neighbours of Hope - <http://www.unoh.org>

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Appendix 1 - Sample Questionnaire

Thank you for helping me.

I am writing a Special Interest Project for the Spiritual Directors' Formation Course. It is tentatively titled "Sustaining a Healthy Spiritual Life during Incarnational Ministry"

I have defined Incarnational Ministry as -"choosing meaningful presence and engagement in an area that is different from your normal place of working and living, for the purpose of extending the Kingdom of God"

Please could you tell me briefly:

What are the particular stress-ors from living/working incarnationally in your situation? (regular and repeated stress e.g. noise, pollution)

Do you face any major problems/life issues from living/working incarnationally? e.g.

health, children's education, cultural (mis)understanding

What helps you to sustain your spiritual life?

What are the things that make sustaining spiritual life difficult?

Where is God? Where and how are you best able to connect with Him?

In what ways is church helpful /unhelpful while living incarnationally

Is there anything that might help that you do not have/do?