

WHERE SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE MEET

Spiritual Formation & Integral Mission

EDITED BY STEVE BRADBURY & LYN JACKSON



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WHERE SPIRITUALITY & JUSTICE MEET: Spiritual Formation & Integral Mission

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INTRODUCTION

Steve Bradbury



Many a time during my 25 years working with TEAR Australia (a faith-based aid and development organisation) people would ask me, “Given all the time you spend visiting communities suffering great hardships, why aren’t you depressed, or disenchanted, or angry, or cynical, or...?”

Of course, there were times of deep sadness. Sitting on a bookshelf in my study is a lovely photo of three young South African girls. It is getting old now, slowly turning sepia. But Sindiwe, the beautiful, effervescent girl in the centre of the photo, never had the chance to grow old. A few months after I met her in Tennyson House, a shelter for homeless girls in Durban, she was reunited with her grandmother, a cause for much rejoicing. But a short time later, she died in the inferno caused by the firebombing of her grandmother’s tiny wooden home—a tragic death caused by a rent dispute. I wept when I heard the news.

Even now, nearly 20 years later, when I sit with the photo as I did a few days ago, I am filled with sadness. I keep the photo to remind me of the terrible circumstances in which so many people are forced to live and die. But neither sadness nor anger dominated my feelings during the many occasions I had the privilege of spending time in extremely disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

There is a simple reason for this: whenever I went into such communities, there was always someone holding my hand, often literally. That someone was a person quietly immersed in doing the work of compassion and justice, doing so out of friendship with Jesus, and love for neighbour. Being in their presence, walking with them in their context, albeit briefly, was to be granted a special taste of the kingdom of God. What lies at the heart of this Kingdom is hope and love, not despair.

These beautiful colleagues, of course, experience times of soul-wrenching distress, times when a cry of anguish is the only legitimate response. And the Jesus who stood outside the tomb of his friend expressed precisely such pain. His was a cry of deep grief and equally deep love. But also anger—anger at that which was profoundly wrong. This was not how things were supposed to be. So he acted. Jesus was neither immune to grief nor captive to it.

Where did Jesus find the strength to continue? And how do those called to serve the economically poor—people almost always pushed to the margins of society and often systematically exploited by those with influence and power—find the strength? This second question is the focus of this book.

Many helpful books have been written about spiritual formation, and at least some of them are by authors who recognise the need to integrate faith and service to the poor. But it would not surprise me if this collection of essays were unique, because each of

these authors is a transformational development practitioner.

The essays were originally written as part of their Master of Transformational Development (MTD) studies,¹ but far more important than that, each author knows from personal experience that our ongoing capacity to “do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God”² requires a God-nurtured resilience.

Jeffrey P. Greenman offers the following definition of spiritual formation:

Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, *for the sake of the world* (my emphasis).³

As the one given the honour of facilitating the MTD programme, I get to ask a lot of questions! With respect to the definition above, I asked: How do we cooperate with this work of grace, and what practices and habits may help us in this ongoing process of transformation? What has been your experience of the different spiritual disciplines in the nurturing of your faith and discipleship? What role can local communities of faith or Christian development NGOs play in enhancing the spiritual formation of members and staff? What role have they played in your life and work?

It was wrestling with such questions and others like them that emerged out of the students’ own experience, that resulted in the

¹ See Master of Transformational Development. N.d. Retrieved March 1, 2018 (<https://www.eastern.edu.au/courses/master-transformational-development>).

² Mic. 6:8. See also Matt. 23:23.

³ Greenman, Jeffrey P. 2010. “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective.” Pp. 23–35 in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, edited by Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

content of this book. I trust that you will learn as much as I did when I first read these essays, and that you will be as encouraged, challenged, and moved as I was.

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INTENTIONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY

Ruth Bryce



How does the experience of living cross-culturally in incarnational ministries in poor communities nurture our development as Jesus-following counter-cultural people?

Making a commitment to follow Jesus involves a lifetime of having our identity and character shaped, as well as growing in our understanding of God Himself. As Christians, we are invited to be transformed by the renewing of our mind and to embrace the abundant life which Jesus came to give (Rom. 8:29; John 10:10). Willard describes this process as being “inwardly transformed in such a way that the personality and deeds of Jesus Christ naturally flow out from them when and wherever they are” (Willard, n.d.:5). Seeking to live a gospel-orientated life is a counter-cultural experience, no matter where we are situated. Matthew’s record of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” provides many practical implications of the counter-cultural values on which God’s kingdom is based (Matt. 5). Averbeck (2008) asserts that while the Old Testament role of the prophet was specific to a few, the salvation Jesus offers widens this prophetic role to *all* Christians. All Christians are called to live lives that are distinct

from their surrounding culture, so that others may see God's glory. The defining distinctive is love.

Spiritual growth requires both an act of God's spirit and a persons willingness to learn and be shaped by Him. Cross-cultural experience is not a superior means of attaining this, or even a guarantee that spiritual growth occurs. However, for many who intentionally seek to know God more, being outside their own culture has an intensifying effect on their spiritual growth. This paper draws on writings on spiritual growth, reflections from cross-cultural workers, personal communication, and my own experience. The majority of voices in this paper come from those who have been involved in incarnational ministry for more than eight years, so while including many examples of difficulty, their reflections focus on what has helped them sustain this lifestyle over the longer term.

INCARNATIONAL CROSS-CULTURAL WORKERS

This paper is particularly interested in the spiritual growth of those involved in what is broadly known as 'incarnational ministry'. Typically, organisations and movements who use 'incarnational' language to describe their mission point to Jesus coming from heaven, becoming a man and living amongst the people to whom he came to reveal God. Jesus did not come in power and glory. He deliberately came in weakness and vulnerability; lived in a common home; and chose an outcast, lowly status for himself and well-known sinners to be amongst his disciples. However, through his death, Jesus ushered in a powerful new age of love and redemption available for all humanity.

Viewing Jesus' words as instructive—"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18;

ESV)—these organisations seek to enter communities, not in the powerful position of an outside expert, but in a learning posture which seeks to “share their lives with the urban poor and live out the Gospel among their neighbours” (Servant Partners, 2017).

Incarnational ministry is often promoted as a missional strategy—to come amongst those living in slums and share the good news of Jesus through experiencing life together. However, most incarnational workers see their relocation to poor communities as a prophetic act of obedience to God, dramatically rejecting the global trends of materialism and consumerism and orientating their life to kingdom values.

Bessenecker explains that incarnational mission aims to see communities transformed through offering an alternative story to the “meritocracy, resignation, cynicism, naiveté and complacency... (of) the destructive worldviews, social patterns and cultural narrative from which our globe suffers” (2010:60). Essentially, it echoes the calling of all followers of Jesus, to bear witness to him in living out the values of the kingdom, which he summed up in his two commandments: “Love God and love our neighbour as ourselves” (Matt. 22:37–40; ESV).

Foster describes an incarnational approach as “sacramental living... to do our work as Jesus would work if he were in our place” (2004:217). He affirms this as bringing religious life into everyday life, so that daily decisions, interactions, purpose and ministry give glory to God, because “people desperately need to see the reality of God made visible and manifest” (Foster, 2004:219).

Foster points to Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, as someone “who embraced devotion and work as a seamless garment”, a characteristic Foster regards as essential in the incarnational tradition (2004:215). Interestingly, Hammarskjöld lived far from the slums of the majority world,

illustrating that cross-cultural ministry among the poor is only one aspect of incarnational ministry. Thus, a defining characteristic of incarnational approach is living an integrated life, “keeping Jesus as our ever-present teacher” (Foster, 2004:220).

CULTURE

In any discussion on cross-cultural living, it is important to define culture. Lingenfelter and Mayers refer to culture as the “point of reference by which people comprehend themselves and others” (1986:122). While culture is related to nationhood, religion, and generational norms; it is not defined by them, as each group will have subgroups where their experience, traditions and beliefs hold them apart from others in the larger collective.

Culture is not something you can measure.... However, like an onion, you can “peel” culture and strip down its layers. The outermost layer... is what you can see, hear, and touch: artifacts, products, and rituals. The next layer of a culture consists of its systems and institutions. Systems and institutions, in turn, are based on certain beliefs, norms, and attitudes. These beliefs then stem from the core of the “onion”, the most basic values of any culture. (InterNations, 2015)

The onion analogy is useful as it helps to explain why changing clothing and participating in rituals do not mark a deep cultural change. It also allows for the experience some people living cross-culturally describe as ‘culture stripping’, “the slow peeling back of layers and layers of self—it’s painful but it’s good pain” (Pieh-Jones, 2013). The “good” aspect to the pain that Pieh-Jones alludes to is the self-revelatory process of understanding ourselves better.

Although it is painful, as we surrender what we find to the Father, who both created us and loves us, this can be catalytic for ongoing spiritual growth.

IDENTITY

Culture is closely linked to identity. Therefore, as we live immersed in another culture for the long term, it is not only our practice that changes; our identity is also influenced. Across different seasons of ministry, the level of importance cross-cultural workers place on their nationality fluctuates.

In my own experience, the first season of ministry was about investing our lives in a Cambodian poor urban community. We modified our lives so we lived in a similar house, ate similar food, and had similar rhythms and routines (apart from our weekly breaks outside). In many ways, we minimised our Australian-ness. Frustratingly, though, the community identified us by our foreignness. It was a significant victory when I started being referred to as “mother of Abby” rather than “the foreign lady”.

Nine years on, I am more comfortable with the title of “the foreign lady”; it is an obvious way to describe me! I have made peace with this, confronting some of the pride that pushed me to reject it. Whilst I still desire to be seen as someone who knows and understands my context and community, I am content with the realisation that as an “inside-outsider”, God has been able to use me to affirm and encourage kingdom values in local Christians, who find themselves at odds with local culture because of their faith in Jesus.

Greenfield also recounts this prophetic role: “Paradoxically for me, who sought to become an insider, one of the most significant roles I have played in the slum and in the Asian church is that

of a stranger, a prophet who comes with an outsider's alternative perspective" (Bessenecker, 2010:47).

A key stressor of cross-cultural life is dealing with ambiguity. There is an ongoing sense of not quite understanding the story we have just entered, but also ambiguity in finding our place within this new world. Cross-cultural living thrusts us into the midst of many cultures. Jones (2015) points out that mission life brings you into a plethora of different subcultures, and many are different from the anticipated culture you came to serve. For example, across my week, I work amongst multinational teams, enter the international school community, engage in the local Christian community, and live within the poor urban community. Each of these communities has its own culture, even though geographical proximity is high. Involvement in each of these stretches a person in new and different ways.

One of my high stressors during the early years was negotiating the frequent transitions between these different cultures, which often felt like moving between worlds (particularly expatriate and urban poor) within the same location. Within this daily transition, the complexity of our idealised identity (identifying and living in solidarity with the poor) made painful collisions with my seemingly contradictory actual living self (still enjoying peaceful café getaways away from the slums and Cambodian culture). I relate to Nouwen's assurance that growing in our identity in Christ as "Christ's beloved" is surely an anchor which holds us fast through both superficial and deeper identity questions (1992).

A common theme amongst incarnational workers is their own brokenness and limitations, and being confronted with the surfacing of undesirable values and attitudes.

I have cussed more, cried more, been more angry, had

less faith, been more cynical and... have become in many ways a worse person during my last two years of serving in Asia. (Parker, 2012)

Many incarnational workers tell stories of the devastating discovery that the honourable desires they demonstrated to the world in moving to the slums were not so pure. Hidden not far under the surface lies what Richard Rohr (1989) describes as the “shadow side” of our personality, polluting our motivation. Much of this awareness comes directly from being amongst another culture. “Most missionaries who become genuinely incarnated in another culture experience a heightened sense of moral and ethical responsibility. They become aware of areas of sin in their lives to which they had previously become blinded by their own culture” (Lingenfelter and Mayers, 1986:122). As this is revealed, we can choose to conceal this aspect of who we are, or turn towards it, work on it together with God, and reduce the power it has in our lives. Surely the latter is an example of the character refinement that Willard calls “renovation of the heart” (2002).

Longer-term cross-cultural living also brings opportunity to address false identities and idols. Pieh-Jones (2013) reminds us that the very identity of being a culturally sensitive, acclimatised, linguistically fluent missionary can become an unhealthy idol. Duncan (2005:8) shares his profound disappointment and underlying hurt to his pride following returning from incarnational ministry in Manila, revealing the idolatry that becoming a missionary had become.

As well as the ‘super missionary’ complex, incarnational workers can also fall prey to the ‘messiah complex’, when our view of the needs around us distorts our idea of what is required to save people. We forget that it is *Jesus* they need, rather than us. In

his teaching about healthy teams, Jack encouraged cross-cultural workers to attend to their spiritual life and practice spiritual disciplines as an antidote to this. Barker speaks of the importance of finding our own place in the team and ministry, and not being restricted by the example of people we look up to (2003:32). Honesty and humility before God involve discovering who He has made us to be, not putting on the mask of others. Cross-cultural living can help self-discovery and acceptance as God's child. Manning writes: "When I get honest, I admit that I am a bundle of paradoxes... To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life's story, the light side and the dark" (1990).

Trotter helpfully explores this idea of living with ambiguity, and holding the contradictions and limitations that we bring. She encourages her readers to embrace the 'and's in life, rather than living lives which are based on an 'either-or' paradigm (Trotter, 2015). Likewise, Foster urges us to draw near to God's grace: "This side of eternity we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that our God is big enough to receive us with all the mixture. We do not have to be bright or pure or filled with faith" (1981:78).

An opportunity exists, then, to view one's own culture and values from the perspective of an outsider. Brant helpfully uses the image of changing the spectacles you wear to illustrate how familiarity with more than one culture influences our perception of faith and culture.

What I learned... is that some people have mistaken the Good News to be changing... spectacles for new ones. We have reduced the Gospel to be an exchange of values and habits.... [I]n both cultures I reside in... there are good values and bad values... we are differently good

and differently bad. We are quite equally flawed, not one culture can claim superiority to teach the other much... there is more than one right way to be Christian. When you see Jesus differently, your walk with Jesus is going to look differently. (Brant, 2015)

Brant posits that spectacles from any one culture will only allow us to see certain aspects of the God we love, but not the whole kingdom of God. This partial revelation echoes 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then shall we see face to face. Now I know in part; then shall I know fully, even as I am fully known.” The cross-cultural worker has the opportunity to appreciate diversity as authored by God, “for all the less than appealing features of cultural and ethnic variety, important insights about God and his world go undiscovered if we avoid creative engagement with human diversity” (Elmer, 1993:23).

The apostle Paul’s imagery of us holding treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4) is a useful analogy as we consider the inherent bias and weakness of any given culture. Seeing our flawed yet partly redeemed cultures as vessels helps us be confident to experience God through different traditions, where “we worship God not the form” (Foster, 2004:217). This requires a humble acceptance that we may not yet know all there is to know of ‘kingdom culture’. This awareness appears to be a useful platform for spiritual growth, as it helps bring us into the posture of a life-long learner.

Lingenfelter and Mayers see opportunity in cross-cultural living for becoming more like Christ, especially in regard to what Paul described as “becoming all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9; NASB). Cross-cultural workers often have some of their Christian identity stripped away. ‘Markers’ that distinguished them as a

Christian in their home country may not be available or seen as culturally appropriate in their new context.

For some people, attending a church is not possible, or services may be so different they do not fulfil any of the needs that going to church did at home. For people who are used to sharing their faith eloquently, language learning reduces one's expression level to that of a child, rendering the speaker helpless to clarify their motivations (Barker, 2003:44). In cultures where local practice is often at odds with Christian understanding (for example, men frequenting prostitutes and viewing pornography; women gambling together socially), tensions arise between relationship-building and personal integrity.

Ambiguity abounds as indirect communication styles, and limited language and understanding of cultural cues and traditions bring about situations that are confusing. For a while at least, the worker's identity as 'salt and light' appears threatened. Their distinctiveness is attributed to their foreignness, not to their faith.

I still remember my joy and relief when, after six months of living in the community, one of my neighbours shared her question about why, as an obviously rich family, we allowed our children to play with other children in the community. "All the children, not just the ones from good families.... (You) allowed Vietnamese children to play too. This was very different to Khmer families—they did not allow this". It was one of those beautiful moments when I could share, with this lady who lived in the dirt floor squatter shack across the lane, how I followed Jesus and He taught that all people had value to Him, especially children.

Eight years later, I had the privilege of being with this same lady as her baby boy died from a liver condition. In the preceding weeks, she had, with confidence, dedicated him to Jesus, and today speaks of her son living in Jesus' house, healthy and with lots of

food to eat. To be honest, at the time she was commenting on our inclusive policy for child play, I had no idea which children were Vietnamese and which were Khmer, but the conversation was significant for me as a timely reminder of God's faithfulness and sovereignty in being able to take the clumsy attempts we make at showing love, and use them to touch the hearts of others. Seeking to find God speaking and acting in the everyday has grown my trust in God, and hopefully brings openness to his Spirit's prompting.

SUFFERING

As incarnational workers embed their own lives amongst people whose lives are ensnared in complex social, economic, and physical circumstances, they are confronted by some of the pain and suffering their neighbours experience. In personal interviews about spiritual practices, an experienced missionary describes her practice of bi-monthly fasting to combat the spiritual darkness encountered by those she works with: "We realised early on that there was not a lot that we could actually do to help people; much of what people were working through were issues that God would continue to heal and refine over their lifetime" (Bryce, Cheng, and Gumeat, 2015).

Matheson states: "When we pray with another person we are... saying that the difficulty is beyond our capacity... and that relief will come only if God intervenes" (2010:138). Powerlessness to improve circumstances and events can be very confronting. Workers often find themselves worn out by the ever-changing crises and continual needs which surround them. Haynes explains: "There is a random dynamic that goes with living in incarnational community in the slums... needs often catch us unprepared and are tailgated rapidly by others" (Bessenecker, 2010:139).

Barker (2003) shares details of crying out to God as his family listened to violence happening across the street. They felt powerless to help, paralysed by cultural complexities that meant that immediate intervention would bring greater shame and more violence the next day. Aside from family conflict; systemic evil including child trafficking, drug manufacturing, and mafia-style control are also often present in communities where incarnational workers seek to live and minister.

Prince shares how these experiences can lead to changes in how workers relate to God: “After a significant time among our friends in poverty, many of the prayers we used to pray, the worship songs we used to sing and the devotional readings we used to partake in no longer seem relevant” (Bessenecker, 2010:106). It can be at the very point of reaching the end of ourselves that God invites us to a deeper experience of him. Prince and Heuertz declare: “We crave a deeper well to quench the thirst of our soul and that of our neighbours” (Bessenecker, 2010:106). Viewing rhythms of rest and retreat as essential for their own longevity, Teague links this surrendering to God, as growing our trust: “Many situations—especially the worst—cannot be controlled. Or solved. Or helped. They just are and they require us just to 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” (2012:126).

Duncan (2006) and Toan (2012) both see a strong ‘theology of suffering’ as essential for longevity for incarnational workers. Duncan warns that without this, workers leave disillusioned and burnt out. Porterfield affirms this: “If we pick up our cross and follow Jesus on this narrow path of radical, wholistic love, we will have trials and suffering.” He goes on to explain that those who have a biblical theology of suffering are better equipped to “see how God’s sovereign plan can even use the suffering of His saints

to further His Kingdom and His renown” (Porterfield, 2006).

A static theology, developed prior to entry into the cross-cultural context, will be insufficient for the long-term. New cultural lenses, new levels of suffering, new revelations of personal frailness—all need to be integrated into our understanding of the gospel. Jack explains how Servant teams seek to support each other in their struggles and allow hard questions: “When faced with poverty, suffering and evil, we sometimes find ourselves forced to rethink our faith in new ways... we want our community to be a safe place” (Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor, 2013).

TEAM AND COMMUNITY

In researching spiritual practices of incarnational workers, Toan (2012) noted: “Responders valued their communities as helping to maintain spiritual practices, giving space for accountability, engendering encouragement, understanding the hardships and giving support”. Smith agrees: “Community is vitally important for sustainability in incarnational ministry... they need faithful brothers and sisters who will walk beside them in the pilgrimage” (Bessenecker, 2012:14). Living and working in a healthy community not only supports workers, but it is also a prophetic manifestation of the kingdom of God. Trotter (2013) recommends community life to cross-cultural workers to maintain a connection with the broader body of Christ:

We may lead very different-looking lives, but we bear the same image of God. We may shoulder different responsibilities, but we share the same human need for unconditional love and acceptance... I believe he (God) wants all of us to experience authentic, life-giving community.