Incarnational Framework

AN INTRODUCTION
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Incarnation

The Incarnation is the mystery of Word made flesh. It is love with skin. It is God’s “yes” to a world that has long since forgotten its belovedness. Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (The Message). God moves into the neighborhood – not a high rent district or gated community, but into the low rent neighborhood in which most of the world resides. It’s here in the unforeseen and forgotten places that God takes up residence and reveals what’s been “hidden since the foundations of the world” (Matt. 13:35) – Emmanuel, God with us.

The Incarnation is an act of communication from God. The Incarnate One reveals the truth of who God is and the truth of who we are. The incarnation is the pattern of reality itself. And when we are inducted into reality by the Incarnate One, we become fully human and do things we never thought possible.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us…”

JOHN 1:14
Why The Incarnational Framework?

The most powerful resource in vulnerable urban communities is the leaders themselves. Unfortunately many faith leaders are not equipped to face the challenges of an urbanizing world. Even fewer have an incarnational vision of mission to free them to love their city and seek its peace. In a global and diverse network like ours, what’s needed is not answers, but a framework in which targeted and contextual questions can be explored. Questions can be engaged in full confidence that the Spirit is calling forth life in all things, inviting us to participate.

Our framework is designed to invite a robust conversation from a variety of theological perspectives and contexts in cities throughout the world. It does not suppress difference, but asks questions that keep the life-giving tension of difference alive so that it can be a gift and animate the network.
A FRAMEWORK THAT ASKS QUESTIONS; NOT A CURRICULUM THAT GIVES ANSWERS

Our framework is not a curriculum. It helps leaders assess their training process and create contextual training that induct others into the incarnational mission of Jesus.
What makes our framework unique is that it asks a series of questions concerning the **message**, **method** and **manner** of Jesus’ mission that frees up the **messenger** to love and serve. These questions are structured to help leaders and their organizations examine their own approach to formation while undergoing four major paradigm shifts.
The Incarnation forms in us a transformational perspective – a way of seeing that is consistent with Jesus’ message. When we see through the eyes of the world, we are enslaved to the myth of scarcity. This leads to chaos. When we see through the eyes of love we are set free by the liturgy of God’s abundance. This leads to authentic community.
SCARCITY
There is not enough. We see need, problems, deficiency, and lack. This sparks competition for survival and creates the conditions for violence.

ABUNDANCE
There is enough. We see the whole world as a burning bush ablaze with God’s glory and the city as a sacred place of God’s grace, filled with the resources necessary for lasting peace.
Why is a leader’s way of seeing important?

Jesus’ message was shaped by a particular way of seeing. We are interested here in cultivating a shared perspective that is shaped by the Incarnation and transforms the way we see our cities. In his book, And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation, Robert Barron summarizes it well:

“Christianity is, above all, a way of seeing. Everything else in Christian life flows from and circles around the transformation of vision. Christians see differently, and that is why their prayer, their worship, their action, their whole way of being in the world, has a distinctive accent and flavor.”

Stanley Hauerwas makes an equally bold claim: “We can only act within the world we see.”

If this is true, and we think it is, the most urgent task of leadership is learning how to see. We want to see our cities and her most vulnerable residents through the eyes of Jesus. This is our “distinctive accent and flavor.” Seeing through the eyes of Jesus gives us an asset-based vision of life that begins with God’s “yes” and is rooted in the assumption that there is enough—enough of all the ingredients for human flourishing in every context.
SEEING ABUNDANCE

Moses has an incarnational message – a way of seeing that transforms.

Moses grew up in Mathare, a slum of 500,000 in Nairobi, in a context of severe economic scarcity. Where others saw scarcity Moses could see abundant opportunity. He is building a 40 unit affordable housing complex that will be financially self-sustaining. The Incarnation transforms the way we see the world and serve our communities.
From Theory to Practice

The Incarnation forms in us a transformational practice – a *way of doing* that is consistent with Jesus’ method. When the Gospel becomes an abstract truth claim, concerned primarily with right belief, it leads to disembodied engagement that does more harm than good. But Word made flesh is Love with skin. It is embodied, practical, and always relational.
THEORY

Practitioners keep a safe distance from, and maintain control over, the challenges they address. They prioritize ideas, doctrines, and formulas over relationships and embodied truth that liberates.

PRACTICE

Practitioners make the road by walking. They engage the real world of relationships, where vulnerability, risk, and failure are baked into the process of becoming fully human.
Why does a leader’s way of doing matter?

Jesus’ method was shaped by a particular way of doing. We are interested here in cultivating a shared practice that is shaped by the Incarnation. Media analyst and communication expert, Marshall McLuhan, is perhaps best known for his phrase, “The medium is the message.” The way we communicate something is what is actually communicated. For example, if I tell one of my kids “I love you” by shouting angrily at the top of my lungs, the message heard by the child is that daddy is angry and quite possibly hates them. The medium is the message.

God’s medium is also His message: God comes to us in the flesh through Jesus, the most complete revelation of God. But God also comes to us in the flesh through those in whom we least expect to see God. We are not saved by ideas or theology or doctrine. We are saved in and through relationship, because reality is relational.

Sadly, much of Western Christianity for the last 500 years has located faith from the neck up, or what Father Richard Rohr calls the “control tower.” We feel compelled to get our ideas right and then go about the business of enacting them. Our addiction to “theory first, practice second” is dangerous. That is why the most successful approaches to city transformation call people from theory (above) into incarnational practice (below), as modeled for us in the life of Jesus.
PRACTICING ‘FROM BELOW’

William has an incarnational method – a way of doing that transforms.

For more than a year William led a Bible study in a Guatemalan gang prison by literally standing on top of the cage, speaking down to the inmates. Eventually he persuaded the prison authorities to let him get down into the cage.

The Incarnation transforms the method by which we serve. It calls us out of the disembodied realm of ideas and theory (from above) into a new kind of relational practice (from below) where we are transformed from the bottom up and the inside out.
From Rivalry to Peacemaking

The Incarnation forms in us a transformational presence – a *way of being* that is consistent with Jesus’ manner. When formed by the Incarnation, we hold tensions that others avoid, and we create room at the table for those who have been excluded. Enemies hold the key to our own salvation.
**RIVALRY**

A posture of engagement in which the other is seen as a threat, competitor, or foe. Identity is formed “over and against.” This creates scapegoats that must be excluded.

**PEACEMAKING**

A posture of engagement in which enemies are seen as friends who are necessary for shalom wholeness. Identity is formed “with and for.” This creates a community that is free of scapegoats.
What is it about a leader’s way of being that invites others in?

Jesus’ manner was shaped by a particular way of being. We are interested here in cultivating a shared manner, a way of being in community that is shaped by the Incarnation.

The final vision in Scripture is the New Jerusalem—the city of peace. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom, a richly textured word that is not easily translated into English. It is where justice and righteousness meet. It is the place of human flourishing. Shalom is a divine break-in. It is what happens when heaven breaks into the human condition and becomes visible. Shalom is our deepest intuition. It’s our deepest desire.

Incarnational leaders work for a vision of civil society rooted in the biblical vision of shalom. We practice unplugging from the violence of rivalry and exclusion, modeling ways of being in community in which enemies are embraced as friends and all parties are mutually transformed.

“In the end, I know nothing except what everyone knows, If there when grace dances, I should dance.”

W.H. AUDEN
PEACEMAKING

Wilna has an incarnational manner—a way of being that transforms.

Wilna helps lead the “Festival of Clowns” in Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa, where every year 20,000 leaders dress up as “holy fools” to speak truth to power in peaceful ways, advocating change in the systems that impact the most vulnerable. The Incarnation transforms the manner in which we love. It gives us a new heart—one that no longer needs enemies and scapegoats, no “us versus them,” no insiders over-and-against outsiders. Incarnational leadership insists that we are one and seeks peace in all things.
 MESSAGE

From Fear to Freedom

Being formed by the message, method and manner of Jesus’ mission frees the messenger to love their city into greatness. Leaders who undergo the Incarnation are set free to do things they never thought possible. They see God at work in all things. They translate vision into action, and dreams into reality. They build cities of peace for all people. Word becomes flesh.
FEAR

Fear binds us to the myth of scarcity, the danger of theory and the violence of rivalry. Fear enslaves us to the status quo.

FREEDOM

Love frees us from fear so that we can see and celebrate good news in hard places. Love frees us to do far more than we ever thought possible.
What does a free leader look like?

In the end, the incarnational mission of Jesus produces messengers who are free to love their city and seek its peace. Jesus frees us from the fear that binds us to the myth of scarcity, the danger of theory, and the violence of rivalry. When we are free of this fear, we can see through eyes of Jesus and delight in God’s abundance. We are free to serve incarnationally from below. We are free to seek the peace of the cities we love. The key to all of this is Gospel freedom.

The Apostle Paul says, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Freedom is the highest of virtues. It’s what makes genuine love and all the other virtues possible. Without freedom, our love is just one more tactical maneuver to curry favor.

Paul continues his reflection on freedom, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters... for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13-14). Paul is making the connection between freedom and love. The freedom of Christ leads to the love of Christ. We are set free to love. That’s it! If freedom does not lead to love, it is not the freedom of Christ. When we are free in Christ we lay down our lives in love. This is not muscular Christianity that needs to prove something to the world. It’s the winsome, life-giving result of having discovered ourselves loved by the one who sets us free. Love sets us free to love. That’s the virtuous cycle of the Gospel.
PEACEMAKING

Father Bill Bischel (Bix) enjoyed a kind of radical freedom seldom experienced by most faith leaders. Bix is a bit of a legend in Tacoma and the Pacific Northwest as a Jesuit activist. He was winsome, passionate, determined, and untamable. He embodied the Jesuit formation process designed to free us from inordinate attachments and enjoy Gospel freedom that releases us to do the will of God.

Bix was a free man whose relentless acts of freedom came with a price. At his memorial service it was said, “Bix imagined and lived an impossible road, and he asked us to walk it with him... He lived the life of Jesus in his body, his blood, his sinews and bones... His love for everybody burned him up... There was nothing left for him to give, and the Father came for him.” What freedom!
A Hermeneutic of Peace

Our framework helps leaders read Scripture “from below” through the eyes of Jesus, and those who have been labelled the least, last, and lost.

The primary question that our framework asks of Scripture is not, “What does Scripture say?” The more important question is, “Through whose eyes do we read the text?” Reading Scripture through the eyes of Jesus awakens us to reality so that we can see things as they are, not as we are and discover God’s heart for those on the margins.

Our framework is not prescriptive or dogmatic. It fosters dialogue with all faith traditions. However, it invites leaders to practice a hermeneutic of peace and explore the possibility that to be fully human is to be like God in whom there is no violence. It honors a long line of peacemaking traditions that practice a non-violent reading of Scripture and non-violent tactics of transformation.

“The beautiful answer is always preceded by the more beautiful question”

E.E. CUMMINGS
SEE AND CELEBRATE GOOD NEWS IN HARD PLACES
Our Animating Charism

There is a particular charism that animates this framework and brings it to life. It’s a way of seeing and celebrating Good News in hard places. This gift has been cultivated in vulnerable urban communities with grassroots leaders serving in some of the world’s most challenging contexts. It’s a gift that is born *from below*, in the lowest places. What we know from experience is that seeing God at work in difficult places takes practice. It also takes courage to join the party and celebrate what we see God doing. This is especially true when the party is more lively and colorful than we expected and includes people and places we didn’t anticipate.

This framework is designed to make our gift available to any leader or organization who wants it. But fair warning; as with any gift there are risks. In this case, to receive the gift of *seeing and celebrating Good News in hard places* is to risk becoming fully human, and to be fully human is to be completely free. As Jesus has made abundantly clear, being fully human and free is a risky thing.
Ready for more?

This is an introduction to a larger body of thought called the Incarnational Training Framework, which has emerged from more than 20 years of experience in and with incarnational leaders around the globe.

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How can we help?
Reach out for more information about how the framework can be a resource in your context.

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