

## **Incarnational vs. Relational Ministry**

by Rick Beckwith

*In the past it was necessary only for the Church to ring its bell for people to come in. Now, however, it is necessary for the Church to take the bell to the people.* - Pope Paul VI

*Barry had been on my prayer list for several months. He was the star fullback of his high school football team. I had yet to meet Barry, but I had watched several of his games and wished him “good game!” as he marched off the field. One Saturday some teens I knew invited me to join in a pickup football game at a park. I jumped at the chance and prayed for the opportunity to further cultivate these relationships for the sake, one day, of a hearing of the Gospel. Guess who showed up? Barry. It was not a Bible study nor a prayer group; just a fun afternoon of football. Two weeks later, he and another buddy invited me to go skiing with them. I’ll never know if it was consistent prayers for Barry, my afternoon at the park, or my incredible football skills, but I do know that the Lord opens doors when we are intentional to pursue them.*

To incarnate means to make something concrete and real; or literally, “to take on flesh.” An incarnational ministry, then, is one that models God’s plan where He took on flesh and entered our world in the person of Jesus Christ, so we could know and relate to Him personally. He did not wait for us to seek Him out but came looking for us! The *Hound of Heaven* has forever been a pursuer of His lost sheep! As Pope Francis said, “*Shepherds should live with the smell of the sheep.*”

Incarnational ministry is a form of relational ministry, an overarching term referring to that which invests deeply and personally in the lives of those involved. With incarnational ministry, a relationship is begun outside of a formal program, then followed up with a long-term vision for encouraging growth in the student’s journey with Jesus. There are no strings attached. We do not seek to establish relationships *so that* teens will come to our program. In fact, if a student chooses not to participate in our programs, we remain committed to their journey with Jesus, and, of course, to praying for them.

In the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14), Jesus underscored three priorities for his workers:

1. He wants his banquet table full, “...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pe 3:9).”
2. He wants his servants to go out and invite others. We cannot wait for teens to come to us; we need to go to them and make Christ visible through our lives, and our love for one another (Jn 13:35).
3. Do whatever it takes to find the Lord’s lost children and invite them to the banquet! It will not be easy, they will have excuses, they don’t comprehend the banquet awaiting them, and we are in the throws of a fierce spiritual battle. But, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Is 41:10).”

### **What did Jesus do?**

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood (Jn 1:14).” The scriptures paint a beautiful picture of God coming to us; seeking us out, not waiting for us to come to Him.

Do you know what the Achilles heel is for a Director of Youth Ministry? Being given an office! What teen ever decided to visit an office to meet up with a friend? The office is a distraction and temptation to hang out there instead of hitting the streets to be where teens are. Thankfully, Jesus didn't have an office. He didn't hang out at the synagogue hoping lost people would come to him for healing. No, he went looking for Zaccheus, for fishermen, for lepers. He didn't say, "Zaccheus, come to my meeting later where I'll be speaking." He went to him. Jesus was accused of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19)!" Every good youth worker should labor for such an accusation!

### **How Does Incarnational Ministry Differ from Traditional Approaches?**

<b>Incarnational</b>	<b>Programmatic/Traditional</b>
1. Seek the lost and enter their world	Offer programs for spiritual nurture
2. Invite teens into our lives	Invite teens to our events
3. Leaders spend time with sinners; lost teens	Leaders spend time with involved church teens
4. Speak in terms of <i>their</i> interests	Speak to teens about our interests
5. Relationships are of primary importance	Meetings and #s are of primary importance
6. Leaders are a fixture in youth culture	Leaders are a fixture at the church
7. Leaders know their audience well	Leaders know their message well
8. Messages are relevant	Messages are religious, difficult to apply
9. Relationships are long-term	Relate only while in the program
10. We love teens, period	We love teens so we might influence them

- 1. Incarnational leaders seek the lost and enter their world.** Jesus came to us. He didn't wait for us to come around to Him. He went out of his way to travel by boat to the Gerasenes because he knew there was a demon possessed man there. He went out of his way to visit Samaria because a woman was searching for meaning in life. In Young Life, we call this idea of going to teens where they are Contact Work, and we require a minimum of two contacts per week per leader. Our invitation to relationship *Earns us the Right to be Heard*. We go in twos or threes so we can model our love for one another – the secret sauce of our witness (Jn 13:35)!
- 2. We invite teens into our lives** – The Greek word for “Go” in the Great Commission, is better translated, *As you are going* (Mt 28:19).” If you play hoops, jump into a pick up a game with some teens in your neighborhood. If shopping is your thing, you and a volunteer can organize a trip to the mall with some teens. If your leaders don't enjoy spending time with teens, then perhaps they should volunteer in a different ministry.
- 3. With whom did Jesus spend time?** Lost people and sinners; lost teens. Luke 15:1-2 – “Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Q – What percent of our time do we spend reaching out to the unchurched or spiritually disinterested? To what extent is this group represented in our prayer strategies?
- 4. Jesus spoke in terms of his audience's interests** – He was completely relevant! Jesus talked to fishermen about catching men. He spoke to a woman carrying water about never having to thirst again. He healed a blind man and proclaimed He is the light of the World.

He feeds the hungry and claims to be the Bread of Life. “Everyone was amazed, praised God, and said, “We have never seen anything like this before (Mk 2:12.”

“The Church, as “the treasury of truths” leaves many teens shrugging their shoulders. Truth, to feel trusted, must work in real life, because teens place more confidence in what they experience than what is taught. “*The credibility of our message is directly tied to the quality of our love* (Mercandante).” Effective ministry is all about relationships!

5. **For Jesus, relationships were of primary importance** - “He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons (Mk 3:14).” “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the Gospel of God but our lives as well (I Thes 2:8).”
  
6. **Relationships are long-term** – It takes longer in today’s culture to become firmly grounded in the faith. Just look at the fallout after Confirmation! Therefore, leaders should plan to stay the course with teens long-term; at least for five years. I heard about a pastor in Falls Church who visits each of his graduates at college. What a beautiful picture of incarnational ministry!

### **Symptoms Your Incarnational Strategy is Working**

- a. You have names on your prayer list that have yet to attend a meeting.
- b. There is a regular influx of new teens rather than a static group.
- c. Students are catching the vision and inviting their friends; taking ownership in the ministry with you.
- d. Meaningful ministry is taking place outside of your meetings, just through relationships with teens.
- e. Your supervisor asks you how many teens outside of the church you know, and how teens are growing in their faith; not just how many are coming to meetings.

*Rick Beckwith has been sharing Jesus with young people his entire adult life. He has served on the staff of Young Life for over thirty years in a variety of roles including Sr. Regional Director for Metropolitan Washington, and Vice President of Strategic Initiatives internationally. He worked with a Catholic Community in France to assist them in becoming more effective in their youth ministry strategy. He is a Youth Apostle Mission Companion and a long-time friend with the community of Catholic youth workers in the Arlington Diocese. He and his wife Kris live in Chantilly and have three grown daughters.*