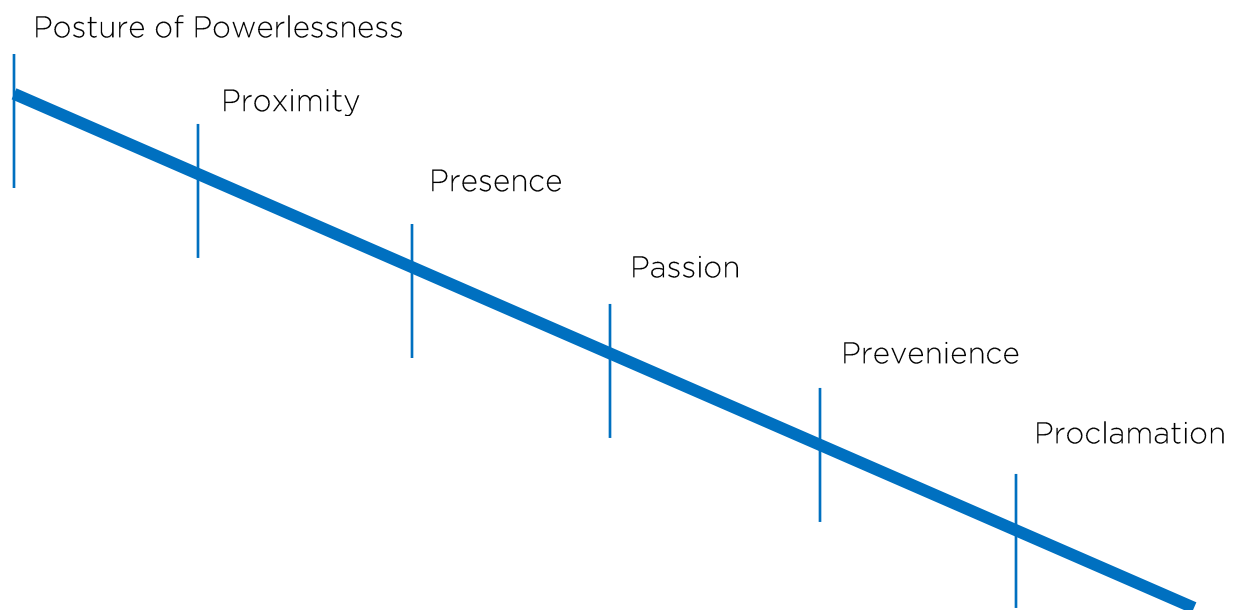


John 1:1-18 describes the incarnation of Jesus, when He took human form and moved into the neighborhood. God drew near and became one of us; identifying fully with all that it means to be human. In his book, *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch writes, “The central thrust of the incarnation was that by becoming one of us, God was able to achieve redemption for the human race...” If God’s way of reaching His world was to incarnate Himself in Jesus Christ, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be incarnational.

How then do we participate in mission? What does it look like to be incarnational?

The following framework is a guide for how we can join God in His mission and relate incarnationally to those in the places we have been sent.

The 6 P’s to Incarnational Mission



When we choose to live incarnationally we not only model the posture and practices of Jesus; we also create environments to participate in mission in ways that are contextual, organic, and relational. Mission becomes something that fits seamlessly into the ordinary rhythms of life, friendships, and community.

The Six P's to Incarnational Mission

Adapted from Untamed by Alan and Deb Hirsch and Road to Missional by Michael Frost

1. Posture of Powerlessness

While we can probably find many images in our culture of powerlessness, perhaps none is more obvious than that of a baby whose survival is totally dependent on others. Therefore, to think of Jesus as a dependent, vulnerable, and even needy baby is perhaps one of the most difficult things to grasp in God becoming man. The great challenge for us is to recognize that to be weak, needy, and even powerless is part of the human condition, not something to be abhorred. When we give up our sense of power and control, we can truly become human in a way that conforms to the image of Christ (Philippians 2:1-18). When one applies this to our missionary calling in the world, it means that we come very humbly among a group of people. Like Jesus, we don't come into town wielding a sword (or a stick, for that matter) or riding in like the cavalry. Nor do we come legislating people's morals or flaunting celebrity, money, and ego. Rather, we come to subvert evil and brokenness through Christlike service. Following our humble Lord, we can never approach incarnational mission in an arrogant manner. Missional disciples must not expect to conquer by power or by force; they must use the same means as Jesus: steadfastness in the truth, acceptance of being misunderstood and rejected, and a willingness to achieve victory through redemptive suffering.

2. Proximity

This practice is largely focused around issues of what we do about geographic setting and relational closeness. Once again it draws its inspiration from God's action in Jesus. God became a man not only in order to identify with us (presence), but also to live with and among us (John 1:14)! He was no recluse, keeping a safe distance; he literally immersed himself in people. Much of his time was spent just hanging out and getting to know the people around him. Jesus didn't expect people to come to where he was, as we so often do, but rather went to them. He hung out in their social spaces, markets, and synagogues, and visited their homes. In other words, he came into direct proximity; he was near to them (Matthew 9:9-13). Being incarnational is about how we live out what it means to be little Jesuses in the community we are in. For each of us this will look and feel very different, as there are many aspects to being the hands, heart, and feet of Christ in a given context. The places we find ourselves, whether through circumstance (for example, Paul in prison) or through the choices we make about where we decide to set up home (be it in the suburbs, urban settings, or the slums of India), will to some degree determine our perspectives and actions. And how we live out the incarnation will look very different depending on the context God has called us to.

The Six P's to Incarnational Mission (cont.)

3. Presence

The missional stance draws inspiration from the fact that God was fully present in the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus was not merely some representative of God, a prophet, or an angel. He was God, 100 percent, fully present, in human flesh (John 1:1-16; Col. 1:13-20; Heb. 1:1-4; 1 John 1:1-3). If God is one of us, he knows our situation, our struggles, our yearnings, our temptations, our bodily functions and limitations (such as aging), and so on from direct experience (Heb. 4:14-16). It's hard to comprehend the meaning of this profound act of identification with us. At the very least it means he knows us, loves us, and has our very best interests at heart. We can trust him. Part of living like Jesus will mean taking a given culture or people group seriously and deeply investing in them. We will need to take significant time to understand their history, their stories, their heroes, their books, and so on, in order to get their take on things. It is about immersing ourselves into their lives. When we are present with a people, we take their culture and concerns to heart. This will require us to listen; and as we listen, we will be given clues on what piece of the good news we should start with.

4. Passion

While the act of the crucifixion was a one-time historical event summed up in Jesus's very own words ("It is finished"), Jesus still continues to suffer every day for you, for me, and for a lost humanity. As disciples we need to ensure we have incorporated a theology of redemptive suffering into our understanding of God, for this helps make sense of what we ourselves, or others, may experience. We also need to cultivate a sense of empathy or compassion for the other. This, in our minds, squares with how Jesus responded to others (John 11:31-35, Matthew 9:35-38). He not only identified by experiencing the limitation that humanity brought, but he extended himself to feel what the other was feeling. We have called this an incarnation of the heart, and believe it is essential if we are to embody what it is to be like Jesus and to offer this gift to the rest of humanity. Identification on the level of the heart implies a certain intimacy with the people you are trying to reach. Identification, as we've said before, is understanding their stories, their heroes, their books, and their take on things. To incarnate on the level of the heart means we begin to feel their stories, their lives, and their pains. Our hearts and compassion are thereby activated. If we are called to a particular people group or subculture, we need to understand the angst and pain the group may carry. Incarnation of the heart can be costly, so we often avoid it. However, it is too easy for us to just engage our minds or even bodies for the cause and sake of the gospel. Engaging the heart completes the picture. Jesus didn't fulfill his mission on earth through mere forced obedience to the Father's wishes; his heart was engaged, and he was moved with compassion to act on behalf of a lost humanity.

5. Prevenience

God doesn't limit his presence to baptized Christians – he is an unrelenting evangelist. He is always at work in his world – right in the thick of things – in sinful people's lives, including our own (Acts 17:27). Not all respond to him with welcome, but that doesn't seem to put our God off very much – he's persistent, he's insistent, and he's got a lot of mercy. John Wesley called this reality “prevenient grace” (preparatory grace), and he built his entire ministry squarely on it! He really believed that God was always preparing the way for the preaching of the gospel, that he was at work in every person, wooing them into relationship in and through Jesus. It is sound biblical doctrine. We don't “bring God” with us into any situation – he's there long before you or I arrive on the scene (Mark 1:14-15). We simply need to discern God's prevenient work in people's lives and join with him. All of us are living testaments to this truth. All disciples, regardless of our stories, are called in some way to practice prevenience – to somehow discern the traces and activity of God in people's lives and so join in the *missio Dei* (the mission of God), God's grand redemptive activity in his world.

6. Proclamation

Jesus came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14), and there is no question that we are called to the same task (2 Tim. 4:2). Aside from how we have individualized the proclamation – making it about personal salvation and narrowing the meaning of the gospel in the process – we have generally been quite good at this aspect of incarnational ministry. There is no doubt that the follower of Jesus must be both willing and able to share in the ministry of evangelism. We are, in the end, messengers: it is an essential part of our purpose in the world to deliver the message. But we must do it in ways that are entirely consistent with the message; otherwise our lives will discredit the very message we seek to deliver. This is where personal witness and evangelism must be yoked together. Jesus is the Word. His life and teaching are one and the same. He is his own message – he is the good news. We, however, being broken and sinful, do not have this level of integrity, so we have to learn to integrate life and message in order to legitimize what we say. Following the logic of the incarnation itself, our message is heard properly only when we have gone through the process of identifying with people, hearing them, understanding the issues they face, humbly living with them, and knowing how they experience and express their search for meaning. If we do this, we will have earned the right to address the hearts of the people and bring salvation to them. If we don't do this, we will simply impose a cultural Christianity on them, and they could well end up in a worse situation than before (Luke 11:24). This is what the Pharisees were guilty of in doing (Matt. 23:13, 15), and what we should be very wary of in our own lives as we seek to evangelize the lives of others. We therefore think that proclamation follows best after practicing the preceding “P's” of an incarnational lifestyle.