

In “Taking Poverty Personally”, I wrote that the welfare system is a necessary evil. If we all lived in a healthy way, and met our responsibility to others, it would not be needed. In “Reading the Bible Poorly”, I traced the biblical tradition of active compassion among the poor. Serving the poor is not just an optional extra, but participation in the work of God. That means we all need to take poverty personally. We cannot rely on others to do it for us, because we are *all* part of a church that is, for better or worse, modelling Christ to the world. But we are unused to imagining the shape of involvement with the poor – what would it look like?

In Distrust of Models

In thinking about this article on the shape of participating in God’s work amongst the poor, I have really been struggling to know what to write. There is a plethora of theologies, models, diagrams, approaches and theories about the appropriate shape of incarnational mission. All of these have their place, and all are more articulate than anything I can set down here.

What then do I have to contribute? Another model? Another theology that will cover the flaws of previous theologies? Another approach that accounts for every eventuality that we will face in this task? No. I don’t have any of those. I could regurgitate some, but I don’t believe that will lead us anywhere new, for our problem is not generating evermore sophisticated models, but remembering what we have forgotten. My previous article (“Reading the Bible Poorly”) attempted to remember the biblical tradition of active compassion among the poor. Our task is to enact that tradition now, which is where models come in. But the idea that a model of mission can guide us in *our* time and *our* place is perilous, as all contexts vary invariably.

Perhaps this post-Christendom time has made us nervous – we feel the need for models and defined approaches to mission, so that we can step into the unknown future more confidently. This is understandable, but uncertainty about the shape of things is never adequately resolved through more theology, models or anything suchlike. We move forward by moving forward – authentic action opens up space for authentic reflection.

What I am going to offer is a few formative discipleship memories of my own, that opened up space for authentic action and reflection, along with practical implications for a life spent among the poor.

Formative memories

I

At age 16, my bible study group went to an underage disco. We prayed the Lord’s Prayer as we walked around. Afterwards we met to talk about our experiences. I felt that it was an artificial experience. I could always walk away from that disco, and more honestly, I don’t like discos! I was struck that to serve the poor from a distance is not biblical. We must live with them, sharing their life as much as we can.

- Incarnational mission means placing our very bodies among the poor. This could mean moving to a poorer area or making your home a place of hospitality for the poor.
- Generally, we will need to give up things in order to more closely identify with the poor. These things could be income, unnecessary ‘stuff’, time with friends & family and other privileges.

II

While staying with InnerCHANGE in San Francisco, we witnessed their involvement in local committees to change living conditions for the better. UNOH Mission in Springvale lobby for asylum seekers in their community. Urban Seed speaks up for the homeless in the CBD. The Catholic Workers in Los Angeles get arrested for protesting the billions going to war instead of the poor.

- A prophetic voice against injustice is an essential part of mission. It reminds us that God not only cares about interpersonal relationships, but about the systems that allow people to become poor.

III

Dissatisfied with leading a local church youth group, a few of the leaders quit. We began building relationships with students at the local high school. We had no programs, just ourselves. We spent two lunchtimes a week kicking the footy, chatting with the smokers, playing basketball and generally feeling uncomfortable! It was often difficult to explain exactly what we were doing. We eventually attempted to open a drop-in centre, as space for young people was an issue for them.

- Relationships are the key to involvement with the poor. I think that that much time should be spent in just “hanging out” with people, even if these feels unproductive.
- A community development approach: we need to focus on the issues of our community as a means of serving them, and work to enable the poor to address the issues that affect them.

IV

Along with two other households, we made our homes places of hospitality. We had a “visitor’s evening”, always made sure there was someone home to be “dropped in on” and had plenty of large meals. As we worked with young people, lots of marginalised young people spent time at our house, and some stayed for a while. This was not always convenient!

- Hospitality is crucial. As well as being reflection of God’s hospitality towards us, welcoming someone into your home communicates that you care about them.
- A discipleship of interruption. Being open to someone coming over when it is ‘not convenient’ is an important missional discipline. Planned events are often more closed to God’s work than spontaneous ones.

These memories and notes may not give much clarity, but then the shape of Christian mission is *never* clear, until one settles in a place for a time. To have clarity about the shape of Christian mission among the poor, we must commit ourselves to a place, to some people, and begin to ‘have a go’. It is from there that we can discern the movement of God. It is from there that we can begin to more clearly see God’s concern for the poor in the Bible, and it is from there than we can and shape the church into a body that takes poverty personally.