

Radio Programming Roles

Chapter 4 – Incarnational Radio
by Frank Gray



Introduction

This booklet comprises the fourth chapter of *Radio Programming Roles* (2nd edition). The other chapters of the book are also published as stand-alone chapters in their own right.

It addresses the issue of how we incarnate the Gospel into everyday life and meet people within the context of their own lives and environment

The other chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 1 – Part 1: Roles Summarised
- Chapter 1 – Part 2: Appealing to a Wider Audience
- Chapter 1 – Part 3: For Middle Distance Listeners
- Chapter 1 – Part 4: Other Useful Roles
- Chapter 1 – All Fourteen Roles (Parts 2-4 combined)
- Chapter 2 – The Gray Matrix
- Chapter 3 – Dimensions of the Message
- Chapter 5 – Finding Answers
- Chapter 6 – Using New Technology

The entire book is not yet available in printed form but the whole contents can be found on the Web at <http://radioroles.com>.

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4 Incarnational Radio

Getting out of the studio

From the earliest time God has wanted to relate closely to the people of his Creation. Throughout the Old Testament we read how he dwelt among the Israelites through the Ark of the Covenant. Before the building of the Temple, the Ark spent much of its time resting in the tabernacle - a tent - that travelled with them as their mobile place of worship..

When Jesus came to planet Earth God took on human flesh and became one of us. He "dwelt among us" keeping up the same tradition and making the same point - that he wanted to closely identify with human beings. This was the essence of the Christmas story and it was lived out by Jesus in the 33 years of his life that followed. When the veil of the temple was ripped from top to bottom, at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, it made the point very eloquently that the way to God had now been opened up.

The notion of God dwelling among us also provides the template for us today - not just as his followers, but as Christian broadcasters.

Incarnational programs are journalistic, deeply rooted and grounded in the narrative of everyday life. They begin with people, and take the Good News about Jesus - by word, deed, or both - to individuals right where they are today. As such they ably demonstrate that Christians are not from another planet but are ordinary, compassionate, down-to-earth fellow pilgrims, struggling with the same issues of life, while relating to it meaningfully. This is because of their first person encounter with the Living God, the Author of the Universe.

Characteristics of Incarnational Radio

It is easier to specify characteristics than to provide a definition for Incarnational Radio - since it is so encompassing. Here are some characteristics:

- Close to the listener in both word and deed
- The presenter makes him/herself vulnerable
- The presenter moves outside his/her comfort zone
- The presenter on same level as the listener - not above
- Out of the studio and into the street, field, home or workplace
- Puts the listener first
- Empowers the listener by giving him/her the microphone
- Getting out into the community - or inviting the community in
- Demonstrates the presence of God's Kingdom

Broadcasts or programs that exhibit any of the above characteristics might be described as having "incarnational" qualities. But in the Christian context the constant characteristic, surely, is that each will in some measure reflect Kingdom values. Broadcasters, journalists, community workers need to be all doing the kinds of thing Jesus would be doing today in our communities, interacting with people in the course of their daily lives.

In Christian terms we might say that being "incarnational" is effectively extending Jesus' ministry in the world as described in the words: *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*¹. The literal meaning here is that Jesus "pitched his tent among us". A very tangible bridge had been built between God and mankind - and as his disciples we need to continue to demonstrate that. As Bishop Graham Cray points out:

*Jesus came to bless, to do good, irrespective of other people's opinion of his behaviour or their hostility. We are called to show the same character, becoming those for whom not to do good to others is unthinkable*².

Cray also introduces the idea of our role as being to bless others:

*It is the nature of the Kingdom of God as embodied in the life of Jesus, to bless. Jesus always brought a blessing; he always set out to do good. That was why he healed irrespective of people's broader response to his claims. His life was one of proactive goodness*³.

Some might ask if it is really possible to do this by radio, especially as radio was not around during Jesus' time on earth.

Others ask if we are in fact really describing community radio in another form. It is true that some characteristics could be used to describe aspects of community radio. It would not be hard for some community radio stations to be described as *incarnational*, but to suggest that *incarnational* is simply another name for *community radio* would be both limiting and misleading. For one thing, community radio means different things in different countries depending on the licensing laws. In many countries it is generally confined to local stations. Incarnational ministry can be performed through broadcasts from international radio stations. Moreover, a definition of community radio prescribes a specific genre of radio station and assumes a specific style of ownership and access by the community. See Wikipedia⁴ for a description of Community Radio.

Participants in FEBC's 2008 *RadioFest* were moved by Keiko's "Showcase" on Compassionate Ministry. It highlighted her counselling program *Keiko's Mailbag*, a longstanding daily feature of FEBC's Japanese service. In each program she focuses exclusively on one letter from a listener and seeks to let Jesus minister through her to that listener who has opened up their heart.

¹ John 1:14

² Comments on Mark 3:1-6 in *Encounter with God*, Scripture Union, June 21 2008

³ Comments on Mark 1:40-45 *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union, June 17 2008

⁴ <http://www.wikipedia.com>

We might call such a program "incarnational" - but it is not community radio in the accepted sense. It is broadcast via medium-wave from Korea to Japan. It can also be heard via the Internet.

Attitudes and relationships are critically important too; how the presenter positions himself relative to the listener has a lot to do with it. Stepping out of the station and coming alongside people is a major characteristic. The presenter needs to be vulnerable, open to be challenged or interrogated - even disagreed with!

Let us examine the characteristics more closely. They fall into four basic groups which we now look at in turn...

Relationship to listener

- **The presenter not above listener but on same level:** Other types of radio broadcasting may put the presenter at an elevated level above the audience. This gives the impression that he speaks from a position of authority - or even superiority. But in Incarnational radio the presenter becomes a facilitator or enabler - or even takes on a servant role, rather than a position of power. The power to speak is given to the listener and the community that he represents.

- **The presenter makes himself vulnerable:** This means that the presenter is prepared to open up to his listeners revealing what he is thinking or feeling. This could mean not pretending to have all the answers. It could mean revealing specific struggles, or kinds of weakness or failings. Put positively it means the presenter is willing to show that he is just an ordinary, fallible person who is not much different from listeners in the audience.

- **The presenter puts the listener first.** A good shopkeeper makes his customer feel important and does everything to help him find what he needs to buy. In a similar manner the presenter makes his listener feel important and understood. Very often this is conveyed through tone of voice, through the things being discussed, through attitudes expressed. Those things that most interest the listener are the first things that the presenter needs to be talking about.

Physical presence

- **Close to the listener in word and deed:** In the context of community-oriented radio the station and its staff become part of the community in which it is located. This means the presenter has unlimited opportunity for getting out among his listeners in the community, talking to them, interviewing them and generally getting to know them and their interests. The programs may also spill over into becoming community

projects, raising awareness of social issues, campaigning for improved living conditions and working in partnership with other initiatives as appropriate. Nothing could be more incarnational than this. This is especially true as we dwell on the fact that Jesus literally *pitched his tent among us*.

- **The presenter moves outside his comfort zone:** Going outside of the studio and into the neighbourhood means the presenter gives up his cool studio for the heat, dust and flies of the real world outside. But more than that, he expresses his own vulnerability and reveals himself as a normal, compassionate, human-being. By so doing he is saying that he cares, that he is not afraid of getting his hands and feet dirty...
- **Out of the studio and into the street, field, home or workplace:** Where does he go? Let's try to be more precise... Basically he goes where his listeners are. This could be in people's homes, in schools and colleges, in factories, offices - or even in the fields. He might go to visit people in hospital. He might find himself visiting government departments. He might even go where listeners would like to go if they had the opportunity.

Empowering the listener

- **Empowers the listener by giving him/her the microphone.** This is a key element of Incarnational radio - the act of giving the microphone away! It gives the listener the right not only to speak - but to be heard. Symbolically it is very significant - but practically it is also powerful as it gives the listener and his community a voice, something they have never had before. In doing this Incarnational radio empowers the community to speak about their own problems and also suggest solutions. More than that, the listener and his community together engage in helping find the solution. They become part of the solution rather than being mere recipients of aid and the solutions that others want to provide for them.
- **Getting out into the community - or inviting the community in.** This may be a useful alternative or a variation on the theme of empowering the listener. Sometimes the listener can be invited to the station to appear in live programs. Failing that, he can be on-air through phone-in programs

The Demonstration of the Kingdom of God

- ***The Kingdom of God is here!*** These were the opening words of Jesus' ministry as recorded in the Gospel of Mark⁵. The whole of Jesus' ministry was built around a demonstration of what this meant in practice. It was extraordinary in its scope and breadth. His actions and activities all served to live out in practice his teaching as summarised concisely in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), which has also been described as his manifesto. It was revolutionary for his day, challenging the status quo, meeting the needs of the poor, elevating the status of women, healing the sick, accepting social outcasts. And on top of that he demonstrated his authority over the forces of nature. Is it hardly surprising that he drew large crowds and filled the synagogue when he taught there?

- **How can we as broadcasters deliver the same message today** (where it is equally needed)? The poor are still with us. There is much injustice. There are many outcasts, voiceless people who have no say - yet who need to be heard. There is much greed, and resulting poverty. There are many homeless and destitute as the gap between rich and poor widens. There are many women and children who are abused and exploited. What are we going to do about it?

- **People need to be shown an alternative lifestyle** - a Kingdom one! We need to be broadcasting in such a way that we are heard to say "This is what following Jesus means today!" "This is Kingdom living" "This is living right-side-up in an upside-down world".

- **As Christian broadcasters we become the "Living Word"** to our listeners as we take the written word and incarnate its meaning into everyday, contemporary life.

Why bother about Incarnational Radio?

The question needs to be asked for a number of good reasons. We may even have our own doubts, wondering why we need to go beyond simply talking about Christian belief and the need to be "saved". Even when convinced of the need to put our belief into practice and outwork our faith in 21st century life, we still need to know how to explain it to churches and supporters who have not yet arrived.

Here are a few basic considerations:

⁵ Mark 1:15

Biblical

As we read of God's consuming passions in the Old Testament we are impressed by his outrage against injustice and wickedness of all kinds. We find that he is deeply moved with the plight of the widows and orphans and constantly demands that righteousness prevail. He expresses his outrage that religious practices such as fasting take precedence over the needs of the poor and says they are a mockery⁶.

The Levitical law had a lot to say about providing for the needs of the poor and laid down guidelines for such practices as gleaning the left-over wheat.

In the New Testament James picks up the same theme writing that true religion is caring for the widows and the orphans in distress⁷. He rightly goes on to point out that faith and works are needed in equal measure: our faith saves us but it is our actions that validate and verify/authenticate the spiritual changes that we claim. "Faith without works is dead!" he declares⁸.

"Whole life discipleship" is a phrase used often by Cray. He writes:

Life and doctrine go together. As we believe so we live. Our lives show what we have chosen to believe even if that contradicts what we claim to believe. The choices of our hearts are revealed in our words and deeds⁹.

Alistair Campbell also comments on this in writing about Psalm 100:

The word translated 'worship' can also be translated 'serve' and this reminds us that worship cannot be limited to singing in church but involves the offering of our whole selves in active service. We need both: without praise service becomes mere busyness; without service praise becomes nothing but an emotional spasm¹⁰.

Theological

Bryant Myers in his book *Walking with the Poor*¹¹ describes the theological basis for transformational development (which is what Incarnational radio is all about) in terms of a story, the end of which is the end of history. At the end of history there will be - finally - no more tears, or death, crying or pain. There will be no more famine or drought, because everything is made new¹².

The point of the story is to show that since the beginning of time God has been at work redeeming his people and restoring everything that fell apart at The Fall. At the centre of that story are the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus -

⁶ Isaiah 58: 6-7

⁷ James 1:27

⁸ James 2:17

⁹ Comment on I Timothy 4, *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union, 10 July 2007

¹⁰ Comment on Psalm 100, *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union, 27 April 2008

¹¹ Bryant Myers, 1999 Orbis Books

¹² Revelation 7:16, 21:3, 4

the pivotal points in human history. The goal of this story is to reconcile all things, on earth and in heaven with Christ as the head. It is a story in which we are all invited to participate.

Missiological

A lot is being written these days about the missional nature of the church and what this means in practice in contemporary times. "Holistic church planting" is a term used to convey the basic truth that mission is much more than verbal alone, but extends to practical demonstration of Christian love and compassion as well. Many stories are coming to the fore of churches engaging the community through practical programs of help. The Word becomes flesh in improving people's living conditions, in restoring broken relationships, in improving health and sanitation, access to clean water, in raising the status of women and orphans.... the list goes on and on...

Examples of Incarnational Radio in Practice

DXFE Davao campaign against corruption (Philippines)

- In 1997 Arnel Tan became station manager of DXFE in Davao. He first thought that preaching was the best way to communicate the Gospel but he came to discover that you can't be preaching all the time. You can't be isolated from life if you want to make a difference. He was anxious to make an impact in homes, community and government. Meanwhile the regional Office of the Ombudsman, charged with weeding out corruption in government, was looking for a way of getting closer to the people. Station DXFE which had extensive coverage, was not sponsor- or advertisement-driven and therefore non-partisan, was deemed to be a good choice. And so the partnership developed in what proved to be a good match.
- That year also saw the height of many allegations of graft and corruption by high-ranking government officials and it was time to restore public confidence and an image that had been tarnished. Ombudsman Elman drove the resulting program *Magtanong sa Ombudsman* which aired for 30 minutes every Thursday morning. For several months no calls came in and co-anchors Elman and Tan merely discussed the Ombudsman's office, its functions and services. And then the calls started coming... A woman needed help getting her pension released to her, a church pastor suffered verbal abuse from a local health officer. A sky-cable TV channel was displaying lewd images during children's viewing time, so this matter was taken to the appropriate government department. The complaints came thick and fast and were dealt with to the listeners' satisfaction.
- Two years later in 1999 DXFE was awarded the Most Outstanding Corruption Prevention Unit award in Mindanao for its valuable contribution in the field of graft prevention and public assistance.

Keiko's Mailbag (Japan)

- Showcased at the 2008 *RadioFest* in Hong Kong Keiko talked about her long-standing mailbag program. In that nightly program she isolates one listener's letter and then responds personally on-air to that listener. She describes the need for listening to her listeners, and to not respond according to her own thinking, but as the Holy Spirit guides her. It sends the message that *this is the station that understands you*. And if she cannot fully understand the depths of the problem the listener describes Keiko is not afraid to say so. Her biggest challenge is the temptation to respond according to her own thinking rather than depending on God to give her the words.
- The program calls for Keiko's total honesty and integrity, and in so doing she makes herself vulnerable to her listeners. She sees being honest as the most important thing. She also meets her listeners as equals - even to the point of how she replies. If they write by hand she or her team also write by hand. If the listener sends an e-mail then they respond by e-mail.

Safe driving in Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia)

- When most drivers don't notice the faded pedestrian crossing lines on the road is it enough to air spots to remind them to give way? WIND-FM (FEBC Mongolia) staff made a large cardboard STOP sign and took to the streets to interview drivers at pedestrian crossings. While one person held the sign, another asked drivers about their understanding of pedestrian crossings. Their physical presence made that one crossing safer, and the live vox-pop encouraged drivers to start looking more attentively for all crossings.

This Life has an Answer (Thailand)

- Directed towards adults and families this daily 30-minute program made by Pittaya provides encouragement to listeners while addressing many of the problems of family life. It is a practical program, addressing people's real needs, such as collecting and sending out clothing for those in need. It provides an open channel, too, for listeners to assist and provide for other listeners whatever help they can – whether in cash or in kind. One Chinese family sends in a regular 1000 baht every month (about \$30), motivated by the fact that their mother had been helped through the broadcast.
- The program has generated some interesting feedback. Many contacted through the program have gone on to become church members. Praying for listeners and their particular needs – health, husband, children, those affected by floods, etc.- is a regular feature of the program.

The program has now been running for 8 years in Bangkok. It generates many phone calls and FEBC-Thailand staff often respond with personal visits to listeners. It has also been successful in one of

the provincial cities in the northeast – Korat -- but FEBC staff have no access to the feedback. The overall response is around 300 letters per month – plus many phone calls to the follow-up department in what is best described as a team approach that well integrates both on-air and off-air ministry.

Bihar Flood Response (India)

- FIRST Response, FEBC's emergency response team, was on the scene immediately following the Bihar Flood disaster in September, 2008. Working with partners, FIRST Response India, whom they had trained just 3 months earlier) they fielded a team to the flood-affected area. This team, using a studio-in-a-suitcase, produced 60 minutes of programs daily for broadcast via shortwave. These programs included live interviews with officials, medical teams and affected people who fled to the state capital. Many of these were encamped along the railway and road embankments for many kilometres.
- There was a significant response from people hit hardest by the floods. As soon as the first program was broadcast listeners began calling a special number set up for the broadcasts. They also used SMS (text) messaging. They shared their experiences, asked for help and asked questions they needed answers to.

Postscript

If you want to engage in further discussion on this topic kindly visit the Radio Roles web-site using either the Contact Us tab or the blog.

You can also read up more about The Gray Matrix at the dedicated web-site:

<http://thegraymatrix.info>

Further Information

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