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## Incarnational Librarians: Liaisons Moving into the Neighborhood

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# Incarnational Librarians: Liaisons Moving into the Neighborhood



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## ABSTRACT

The concept of “incarnational ministry,” which is often taught in cross-cultural ministry or missions training, offers practical value to academic liaison librarianship, namely: getting out of the library and going to where the users are, being a life-long learner, and modeling humility during interactions with patrons.

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*“The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14, The Message)*

*“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.” (Philippians 2:5-8, The Message)*

In my career before librarianship, I served overseas in campus ministry. Before departing to my host country, I participated in cross-cultural missions training with my sending organization during which we dug deeply into the concept of “incarnational ministry.”

We encountered this concept in the book *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* by Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers. The central point of the book is that “Jesus Christ is the only faithful example of divine love in interpersonal relationships and communication – the reality of the love of God in human experience” (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 1986, p. 14). The book seeks to explore scriptural principles for building relationships cross-culturally for ministry. According to the theology of the incarnation as described in the book, Jesus Christ was a two hundred percent person – fully one hundred percent God and fully one hundred percent human. However, while we are to imitate Jesus in his incarnational ministry, we will never fully reflect him in our lifetime. Lingenfelter and Mayers call incarnational, cross-cultural Christians one hundred and fifty percent people, as they

take on characteristics of their new culture, though never fully, while some parts of their old culture and context, though not all, are chipped or stripped away.<sup>1</sup> They state, "...if we are to minister successfully to the members of a different society, we must learn about and participate in their culture; we must even learn to do things in their way rather than our own" (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 1986, p. 122).

With that in mind, what can the incarnation of Jesus and the practice of cross-cultural incarnational ministry teach librarians, particularly those who do academic liaison work? While Christian librarians are always called to be like Christ, to love God, to love our neighbors and to serve others, concepts from incarnational ministry can point us toward another way. Incarnational ministry can not only help us to show the love of Jesus, but also train us as we engage in the everyday types of activities we do in our liaison work: research consultations, teaching information literacy, and collection development, among other duties.

The first concept we can apply to librarianship is to "move into the neighborhood," according to *The Message* translation of John 1:14. From my point of view, this means that we should get out of the library and go where our users are. We could go into the departments of our liaison areas and knock on doors, invite our faculty out for coffee or lunch, find a faculty jazz band or pickup basketball game to join, or drop by student social hours or club activities. The backbone of liaison work is relationship-building, and while we can build relationships during more formal instruction sessions, committee meetings, and colloquia (all of which are great opportunities), much benefit will grow from hanging out with the people in our liaison areas (Filgo & Towers, 2020).

The second concept is about learning. One of the most significant lessons I took to heart from missions training was the importance of learning language and culture. The fact that I had to spend a large portion of my day in language classes was not a burden, but a joy, as I sought to embed myself in the new culture. It wasn't a hurdle to ministry or something I had to check off on a list of to-dos before "real" ministry could begin – it *was* ministry.

I remember having the profound realization that because Jesus came to earth as a baby, rather than a grown adult, he literally had to learn to walk and talk. He did not

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1 Lingenfelter and Mayers expand on the ideas of cultural anthropologist Malcolm McFee (1968) regarding levels of acculturation when challenging cross-cultural ministers to become "one hundred and fifty percent people." They estimate that you can gain about seventy-five percent of another culture and retain about seventy-five percent of your own, thereby becoming a one hundred and fifty percent person. Lingenfelter and Mayers state, "as finite human beings we are constrained by the limitations of our own minds, our life histories, and our personal abilities. Few of us have the emotional strength to endure the changes that full incarnation in another culture [as Jesus did] would require... the goal of becoming at least partially incarnate in the culture of those to whom we minister is, by God's grace, within our grasp" (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 1986, p. 121).

know how to speak – perhaps “abba” was his first word? He had to grow up and go to school in first century Palestine. How much and when he knew about his mission on Earth is a debate for theologians. What we do know is that as a boy, he was found in the temple, learning from the priests and teachers of the law. In my host country, I had to learn many basic things as well. Why could I not communicate any better (and sometimes worse) than a toddler? Why did I do the wrong thing and have to be corrected? I often felt like a baby or child when trying to communicate or interact with people in this new culture.

Perhaps you have a new liaison assignment to a department in which you have no background. You do not know the vocabulary or jargon and you feel like a child in clothes too big for you. Take heart – you can learn! Remember your training as a librarian. Just as you help a student understand the background in a subject new to them, you can use those same tools to learn: “get background knowledge from reference sources, locate important articles and books in the field, and read review articles to get a good overview of the state of research” (Filgo & Towers, 2021, p. 18). You could also petition your supervisor to audit an introductory class in the department, which as a bonus comes with extra embedded engagement with students in the discipline.

The last concept is humility. This may be one of the hardest lessons of incarnational ministry. We are steeped in our own context and culture, and it is hard to be humble enough to admit when “our way” may not be the best way or even a good way to live, work, play, or worship. This is where some of those edges of our own culture can be stripped away. The Message version of Philippians 2:5–8 says that Jesus’ incarnation was an incredibly humbling process, as he set aside the privileges of deity and became human.

What could it mean for librarians to set aside the privileges of librarianship? Do we even acknowledge that we have privilege? I would argue that having access to as much information as we do, as well as having the ability to search for, retrieve, and evaluate it is an enormous privilege. Are we able to set that aside when we interact with patrons who do not have that privilege in order to listen well and understand their perspective and the challenges they face with information access? Do we approach our work with the arrogance of someone who has all the answers, or do we ask good questions and really listen to the answers? Being humble and laying aside privilege has the ability to transform our interactions with our patrons, because it can help us see them and rectify power imbalances (Hurley et al., 2019). Do we treat a faculty member asking a question with more respect than an undergraduate or a visitor asking a question? Being able to put aside our own preferences or biases with humility can help us see where cultural, racial, gender, religious, or economic differences might be preventing us from providing excellent service.

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy speaks frequently about humility. Issues of privilege and humility can be found throughout the “dispositions” for each frame, but the dispositions for the frame “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” are particularly relevant here:

Learners who are developing their information literate abilities:

- develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives;
- motivate themselves to find authoritative sources, recognizing that authority may be conferred or manifested in unexpected ways;
- develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview;
- question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews;
- are conscious that maintaining these attitudes and actions requires frequent self-evaluation (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015).

The value of humility drawn from the incarnational ministry of Jesus can help liaison librarians to reflect on their information privilege and to set it down when needed in order to serve others.

Ultimately, incarnational ministry is about following Jesus’ example in building relationships cross-culturally. The culture that liaison librarians encounter could be the “world outside the library building,” a new discipline or area, a patron whose worldview is radically different than our own, or something else entirely, but we can still be effective in our work by building relationships the incarnational way: moving into the neighborhood, being a learner, and embodying humility. †

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen Hampton Filgo is the Director of the Liaison Program, Research & Engagement at the Baylor University Libraries. Her recent book, *Liaison Engagement Success: A Practical Guide for Librarians*, was published by Rowman and Littlefield. She can be reached at [Ellen\\_Filgo@baylor.edu](mailto:Ellen_Filgo@baylor.edu).

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