

Spiritual Hope

Part 2: Incarnational Ministry

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Excerpted from forthcoming *The Quest for Hope in Slum Communities*,
Reprinted with permission ISBN 1932805-192 World Vision Press in partnership with Authentic Media
expected publication date Summer 2005

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Allison Miguel was helping to lead a group of university students through one of Cairo, Egypt's garbage-collecting communities. This team lived at the Coptic monastery located inside the garbage community. Every day the men of the community would return from the city with large mounds of garbage heaped on their carts and trucks. After the raw trash was dumped onto the dirt streets of the community, women and children would mount the rotting heaps and begin picking through the piles, sorting what could be reused or recycled from what could be fed to their animals. As Allison picked her way through the garbage-strewn streets, she saw a young girl on top of a pile of trash. Stopping to watch and pray, Allison was deeply moved. She prayed, "Oh God, how can I show my love and compassion for this girl?" Suddenly she remembered the stories of Jesus reaching his hand out to touch unclean lepers. Inspired by Jesus, Allison decided to climb the pile of stinking garbage to join the girl. As she began sorting, Allison was overwhelmed with nausea and repulsion, as the Cairo heat beat down on her. She prayed for strength to continue working for a few hours under the conditions in which this child worked every day.

God spoke powerfully to Allison that day. He assured her that he was in the garbage-picking business himself, sorting through the rubbish of our sins, looking for the things that could be redeemed. Rubbish does not repel him. One thing I find in Scripture that does repel God is arrogance. Association with the bottom rung of society is something for which God is famous. In one of the garbage communities of Manila, Philippines, is a statue of Jesus holding the type of garbage-collecting bag and sorting stick used by the people there. To these dumpsite scavengers, Jesus took on the identity of a fellow scavenger.

In Scripture Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). The fact that Jesus took on our reality has not escaped the attention of theologians. They refer to God's act of becoming human and planting himself into a first-century Palestinian peasant world as the incarnation. He not only draws near to us, he became one of us. That is how the Father sent the Son, and that is how the Son sends his followers. The relationships Allison developed over the course of the summer with this child and her family were monumental as she was knit into this family in ways that no missionary living on the outside could have been. To that young girl and her garbage-collecting family, Allison became a picture of Jesus that looked like them.

In his book *Companion to the Poor*, Viv Grigg describes his life as a missionary living in a squatter settlement in Manila, Philippines. It was in that slum community that

his journey toward a theology of incarnation took on new dimensions. With one foot remaining in the more-affluent, academic, and expatriate-missionary world and one foot in his scrap-wood squatter home, Grigg wrestles with questions of incarnation among the urban poor. Does God call us to live lives of destitution in order to reach the destitute? In this chapter Grigg explores what it means for the rich to have an economically-just lifestyle and what identification with the poor might look like.

Ken Baker, a missionary with SIM in Africa, wonders in his article "*The Incarnational Model: Perception of Deception*" just how far rich, Western missionaries can identify with the poor. Does living in a squatter settlement really engender solidarity and trust or does it raise questions and suspicions? Does voluntary poverty really open doors with those who are involuntarily poor? Baker raises some valid concerns about the incarnational model.

But if incarnation is simply the process of becoming real to those whom God has called us, then economics must remain part of the equation of becoming real to people who live in slum communities. The following readings are meant to engage us in the tricky process of standing alongside the poor without deceiving ourselves into thinking we have fully become as they are.

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