

Tentmaking State of the Art

To appreciate fully the panorama of Christian service and experience which is identified by the term, we need to consider the variables and diversity by which tentmaking in the U.S and in the Western world in general are distinguished.

by Carol Clarke

In mission circles today people use the term “tentmaker” to mean different things, but most at least agree that it does not refer to the production or sale of camping equipment. The term has biblical origins in that it may be used to refer to a “secular” occupation of the apostle Paul or the source of livelihood for Aquila and Priscilla as recorded in Acts. Today tentmaking (in the context of the USA and other Western countries as well) is an umbrella term applied to a rather wide variety of Christian service opportunities, practiced primarily in an overseas, cross-cultural ministry environment.

Over the last twenty years, various organizations and individuals have attempted (with limited success) to define or prescribe what shape tentmaking should take. From the Lausanne Congress in Manila in 1989 emerged the seven statements of the Lausanne II Tentmaker Declarative Appeal:

The Global Consultation on World Evangelization (GCOWE, 1995) produced the Seoul Statement on Tentmaking which concludes with a seven-point challenge to the churches, educational institutions, and mission agencies worldwide.

The Tentmaker International Exchange, an international network focused solely on tentmaking, held its first international congress in 1994 and as a result, has published a simple, yet inclusive tentmaker definition:

“Tentmakers are Christian witnesses from any nation who because of their skills or experience gain access and maintain themselves in another culture with the primary intention of making disciples for Christ Jesus and, where possible, to establish and strengthen churches.”

While most organizational definitions of tentmaking sound relatively compatible at a surface-level, the nuances of tentmaker definitions become apparent when one analyzes the practice of those who may be identified as tentmakers around the world. Because of the diversity in views of what makes a tentmaker, tentmaking is better described than prescribed. What follows are some of the variables that make tentmaking difficult to define.

Financial Support

Some fully-supported career missionaries may be identified as tentmakers, strategy coordinators, or non-residential missionaries, particularly those who work in the “10/40 Window”, that portion of the world where the least evangelized peoples live. Other tentmakers, however, may be fully supported by marketplace employment; they require no donor support and take no mission agency funds.

In frontier mission areas, jobs which provide full support (at least by Western living standards) are often scarce. Tentmakers in such areas may have full-time employment, but because their salaries are low, they must supplement their incomes with donations.

Geographic Boundaries

Some agencies send tentmakers only to so-called creative access countries in the 10/40 Window; others would say that tentmaking is a viable Christian service option worldwide. Some promote tentmaking in an open country which allows missionary presence as an apprenticeship for tentmaking in more demanding frontier mission environments. A few programs promote tentmaking

as a means of providing bi-vocational pastors in unchurched or needy areas of the home country.

Training for Ministry

Those who choose to affiliate with agencies will find that tentmaker training requirements range from no training or little training to graduate seminary degrees. Some agencies recruit committed lay-persons who have completed a few seminary courses or other types of specialized training. Agencies which send teachers overseas often require a 4 to 6 week pre-service training session.

Sense of Calling

The sense of calling is often directly related to “intentionality” before going overseas. Some hold that tentmakers must be sent from a local home church. Those who have moved away from their home churches for seminary or ministry experience, however, may not have a single “home church” which functions as their sending base. For purposes of nurture and personal accountability, they often relate to churches and fellowship groups in-country more than to a local church back home. Some agencies seek applicants who have a definite sense of calling and long-term commitment to a particular target people group or country. Other tentmakers feel called to cross-cultural ministry wherever the opportunity arises, but not necessarily to a specific people group. Experienced field observers sometimes note, however, that in terms of ministry what one says before going overseas is not as indicative of calling as what one actually does while in-country.

Job-Related Ministry

For some, the job is just a way to get a visa for “creative access countries” which would deny visas to missionaries. For others, the job is real but it is merely a way to legitimize being in-country or to make the money needed to support “real ministry.” For others, the job or marketplace is the place of real ministry, and they see their work context and contacts as the primary platform for ministry.

Length of Time Spent Overseas

Some apply the term “tentmaker” to persons who live and work or study overseas, even for periods of less than a year, such as one academic year. Others assert that tentmakers must live and work overseas at least one year or more. Still others would identify as tentmakers only those who make a long-term commitment to living and working overseas.

Type of Employment

Some hold that any type of employment which is morally upright is worthy of a tentmaker. Others would exclude embassy staff, government workers and military personnel because these occupations require political allegiances which may be in conflict with ministry interests. Similarly, employment with a major multinational or host-country corporation is acceptable for some, but raises conflict of interest questions for others.

Entrepreneurs, both on their own and working through mission agencies, often assert that only entrepreneurs have control of their time and business lives while overseas. They, therefore, see entrepreneurship as the only effective (albeit expensive) tentmaker platform.

Although not even recognized by some as viable tentmaking platforms, the most common overseas employment opportunities are found in the fields of teaching and working for non-profit organizations in health care or relief and development. Teaching English as a

second or other language is a job skill widely-sought in the international arena.

Level of Disclosure

It is natural to assume that the political and religious climate in the country would govern the level of disclosure by tentmakers. While this is certainly a key factor, some tentmakers operate more openly than others, even when working in the same country. Some overtly identify themselves as Christian witnesses and disclose to anyone who asks their affiliation with a mission or non-profit cause. Others reveal their identity to only a few close friends in-country.

In some instances, tentmakers never disclose their calling and commitment to ministry to anyone outside their home country. The rationale for non-disclosure may be related to more than personal security. Concern for the safety of those whom they might disciple or concern for co-workers motivate some to keep their identity secret.

Diversity in Tentmaking

There is confusion about tentmaking even in regard to Biblical examples. The apostle Paul often comes to mind first when one thinks of tentmaking. Yet, leading tentmaking practitioners express differing opinions as to whether or not (and why) the apostle Paul stopped making tents at a certain point in his ministry. In fact, they do not even agree about why Paul started making tents in the first place.

Others disagree with using Paul as a tentmaker model at all, since he was an itinerant preacher. They hold the view that tentmaking is the province of laypersons, such as Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18) or other “lay” Biblical figures.

This litany could go on, but what, you may ask, is the impact of so much diversity in the field of tentmaking? There are at least three ways in which these differences impact those who

practice tentmaking, including those who want to learn more about tentmaking.

First of all, the differences have the potential to divide or tear down the Body of Christ, both in the West and in developing countries. In search of the ultimate definition of tentmaking, mission conferences and tentmaker meetings have at times degenerated into “blame and shame” sessions as differing views of tentmaking have come into conflict. Judgments about the effectiveness of one kind of tentmaking vs. another sometimes give rise to judgmental indictments of the work, life, and ministry of fellow servants of God.

There is wide diversity of opinion, for example, in regard to what constitutes integrity in the life of a tentmaker. Those who are open about their faith overseas, for example, sometimes look on “undercover tentmakers” as persons living a lie. Some are sympathetic to the pressures placed on a family which chooses not to disclose its tentmaking ministry. Others, however, see this as taking unnecessary risks and jeopardizing the psychological (and perhaps physical) well-being of not just the tentmaker but his or her family, too. Furthermore, they may assert that Westerners in frontier mission areas in particular are usually so visible that their identity is not as well hidden as they might think.

Lack of Cohesiveness

As a practical consequence of such diversity, the tentmaking movement has lacked the cohesiveness of other groups within the evangelical mission movement. In fact, some would counter that it has never developed into a movement at all. It takes great wisdom on the part of tentmaker groups to decide when to accommodate and when to isolate themselves from differing views of tentmaking. In seeking to scout out models of “real tentmakers,” they have, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not, excluded or denigrated the work of those who have differing views of the tentmaker’s task.

The most unfortunate implication of this lack of cohesiveness, however, may well be the diversion of focus away from the needs of a hurting, alienated world which needs the touch of God and the Gospel of Christ.

Secondly, the differences in views of what makes a tentmaker greatly complicate communication about tentmaking. Every author, speaker, or practicing tentmaker enters into dialogue with his or her own notions about tentmaking. These notions naturally infuse their opinions and views of what constitute the life and role of the tentmaker.

To understand fully what someone is trying to say about tentmaking, the reader or listener must process the underlying assumptions as well. When authors provide a definition or clear description of tentmaking as they see it, they provide a window through which the reader may understand the ministry option clearly as they see it. Some authors have sought to abandon the term "tentmaker" altogether in favor of more descriptive or distinctive terms, and coined terms such as "business" (combination of business and missionary) have also emerged.

Engaging in dialogue with authors or speakers is, of course, the single most effective way to find out the basis for their assertions. For readers who cannot engage in the give-and-take exchange of conversation, the task is more difficult, but certainly not impossible. Clues as to the writer's biases about suitable employment for tentmakers or Biblical models, for example, are often found in the text, especially if one is aware of the need to look for them. Due to the diversity of views expressed in tentmaking literature, (including the articles published in this journal), readers must be astute in reading between the lines with discernment.

Celebrating the Diversity

Finally, the differences in views of tentmaking may offer cause for cele-

bration. Rather than focus on the differences as divisive, tentmaking advocates can choose to celebrate the myriad ways in which God chooses to allow human involvement in the work of the Kingdom. Tentmaking clearly means different things to different people, but that also means more opportunities and options for those who are seeking to find God's place for them in overseas service.

God is blessing committed Christian professionals around the world, and they in turn are blessing the nations to which they are sent. God is certainly using Bible college and seminary graduates, but there are also opportunities for lay-persons, especially in highly marketable professions such as computer programmers, English teachers, engineers, athletes, health care workers, entrepreneurs, and scientists. In fact, there are tentmaking opportunities somewhere in the world in practically any profession one could name.

Creative ministry options often defy consistent definitions; that is also part of their appeal. Persons exploring tentmaking options must grasp how important it is to ask questions and clarify what others mean when they discuss tentmaking options. It is just as important to have an understanding of the terms of employment for work with a mission agency as with any marketplace employer.

Conclusion

Reputable sending agencies (and employers) do not mind questions—they welcome them. Obtaining information and asking questions, even hard questions, up front can save the prospective tentmaker time and prevent mismatches in finding the right option for future ministry. Those who feel compelled to a ministry option some would identify as tentmaking often must persevere in searching for like-minded servants of God. If one agency or mission group does not define tentmaking as they do or provide tentmaking

options with which they feel spiritually compatible, they should prayerfully keep looking until they find one that does. Even those who choose to go overseas on their own should pray and seek for like-minded believers with whom they can establish relationships for accountability and nurture purposes.

By praying and being open to new possibilities, potential tentmakers may discover that God's plan takes them into uncharted waters. Likewise, mission organizations and sending agencies should ever be alert to God's leading in new directions. Whatever our circumstances, we should all be open and alert to the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and in His work.

We can all rest on the fact that the Creator of the universe is at work within us creating a new vision for making known to the nations the sovereign majesty, power, and glory of God. In today's world, that vision might lead to an avenue of service which some of us would identify as tentmaking.

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