

# Successful Tentmaking Depends on Mission Agencies

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by J. Christy Wilson Jr.

In the history of missions, successful tentmaking has depended on a close association with mission agencies. For example, Protestant missions in Korea started with a tentmaker or self-supporting witness by the name of Dr. Horace Allen who was a Presbyterian physician with the American Embassy there in 1884. When an assassination attempt was made on the life of one of the princes, the royal family requested that Dr. Allen help save his life. After he did, he was asked what gift could be given to him to show adequate appreciation. He replied that he would like permission to start a hospital where he could assist other Koreans the way he had the prince. Permission was granted by the government and Protestant missionaries were allowed to come and work in that nation.

Thus, the successful tentmaking of Dr. Allen brought Protestant missions to Korea. The first missionaries to follow him there in 1885 were the Rev. Horace Underwood sent out by the Presbyterian Board, and then the Rev. H. D. Appenzeller sponsored by the Methodists. This cooperation between a tentmaker and mission agencies was the key to God's great blessing on Christian work in that nation. Later on, Dr. Allen became the American Ambassador to Korea.

## **The Seoul Statement on Tentmaking Includes Mission Involvement**

At the Global Consultation on World Evangelization held in Seoul, Korea May 17-26, 1995, a significant statement on tentmaking or self-supporting Christian witness was issued. This docu-

ment which was produced by around 50 participants summarizes the concept of tentmaking as it applies to missions today. It also clearly brings out the importance of association with mission agencies. Quotations in italics from parts of this document demonstrate the need for the cooperation of mission agencies with tentmakers if their ministry is to be successful. These statements are as follows:

*"We rejoice in what God has done and is doing through Christians with fully supported missionary status. While in no way detracting from established missions, tentmaking is integral to reaching the world...Tentmakers must be sent out by and have a close relationship with a local church in their home country. Where possible, they should seek association with a mission team in the field. They must also have a close link with congregations in their adopted nations. Along with effective prayer support, tentmakers need association with structures of accountability provided by churches (Acts 13:1-3), mission agencies, missionary teams and local fellowships in their country of work.*

*"Approximately 80% of the world's 2,500 least evangelized people groups live in countries which do not grant missionary visas. Thus many thousands of tentmakers must be recruited, trained, nurtured and placed in order to provide a gateway into these areas...*

*"The AD 2000 and Beyond Tentmaker Strategy Group urges all churches, educational institutions and mission agencies to adopt the following goals:*

- 1). To encourage Christian lay men and women to seize opportunities to take up residence and work where Christ is not named in order to extend God's Kingdom...
2. To embrace the crucial role that tentmaking affords, and the key position congregations and mission agen-

cies play in mobilizing and equipping laity for world evangelization.

3. To identify and enlist professionally trained tentmakers for cross-cultural cooperative witness among the unreached people groups and cities.

4. To make available workshops and materials for training tentmakers in the Bible, missions, biographies, linguistics, anthropology, non-Christian religions, inter-personal relations, area studies, church planting and other training as needed...

5. To secure greater cooperation by congregations, missions and coordinating agencies in assisting tentmakers in their preparation, placement, language learning and adaptation to alien cultures. Prospective tentmakers should also seek and welcome such involvement...

6. To nurture tentmakers abroad through faithful pastoral care. This includes prayer backing, accountability structures, careful communications and personal visits to the field. There are millions of Christians already working abroad who need to realize their potential and to be equipped to be effective witnesses.

7. To assist tentmakers with reentry shock into their own culture, to debrief them and to facilitate their challenging and recruiting of others into tentmaking work.

*"We in the AD 2000 & Beyond Movement commit ourselves to the expansion of strategic partnering between various national, international, church and mission agencies concerned with tentmaking. In the words of William Carey, who was both "the father of the modern missionary movement" and a "tentmaker" himself, let us "expect great things from God, and attempt great things from God.*

## **Tentmakers in Afghanistan and Their Partnering Mission Agency.**

When we wanted to go Afghanistan in 1951, missionaries were not

allowed. But the government wanted teachers for their educational system. My wife and I, therefore, went to Washington, DC, and I signed a contract with the Ambassador at the Afghan Embassy to teach English in that country. They paid my way and gave me a small salary.

After we arrived in Afghanistan, while reading my Bible I saw that this was similar to what the apostle Paul did. He was a self-supporting missionary as a tentmaker. I was a self-supporting missionary as a teacher. In a few years, we had over 70 Christian tentmakers in Afghanistan. After we had been there for 15 years, the government allowed medical doctors, nurses and teachers of the blind to enter the country as regular missionaries with the skills needed to help their people. Today the International Assistance Mission has over 100 workers from 28 different agencies and 13 countries in that nation. [or Afghanistan] Here we see the fruit of cooperation between tentmakers and mission agencies.

### **World Evangelization Requires Both Missionaries and Tentmakers.**

Dr. Tetsunao Yamamori in his book *God's New Envoys* points out that by the year 2,000, 83% of the world's non-Christians will be in areas of the world which do not allow traditional missionaries. Thus, if they are to be evangelized according to the command of Christ, these restricted places will need to be reached by tentmakers.

Once when I was going down a main street in Kabul, Afghanistan, I saw a young man who was completely out of context. At first I thought he might be a Rabbi because he was wearing a big black hat and a black suit. He also had a large red beard. He was so much out of context there that I stopped and asked him if he spoke English. "Yes I do," he said. "May I help you, since I know the local language?" I asked. He responded, "I am looking for someone by

the name of Christy Wilson." I wondered why he was looking for me, since I couldn't figure out what kind of a person he might be. I found out that his name was James Lowery, and it turned out that he was a Mennonite from Ohio, dressed in Amish like garb. I noticed then he didn't have any buttons on his black suit, just hooks and eyes.

I asked him what he was doing in Afghanistan. "My wife and I are working in Swat," he answered. Swat was a Muslim state in northern Pakistan that was then completely closed to missionaries. I asked him what he was doing there. "I'm teaching English in a government secondary school," he said. "And my wife and I are having the time of our lives. We entertain the students in our home, and we're teaching English by using the New Testament as a textbook. The students have never seen the Bible before." Later I met his wife and she was wearing a white Mennonite prayer veil on her head.

Since I knew that no missionaries were allowed in Swat, I asked, "How did you and your wife ever get into Swat?" "I had never heard of the place," he replied. "I applied through the State Department under a Fulbright Fellowship to teach English in Germany, and they sent me to Swat instead."

The Holy Spirit has scattered Christian professionals like this couple all over the world as witnesses for Christ. He and his wife were today's "tentmakers," or self-supporting witnesses teaching English in a closed Muslim area of the world. They were also connected with a Mennonite mission board.

### **Many Mission Agencies Today Have Tentmaking Branches.**

God has blessed fully-supported missionaries in a wonderful way. But with an estimated 80% of unreached people groups in areas that do not allow regular missionaries, tentmakers who can get into creative access areas will also be

needed in order to complete the evangelization of the world according to Christ's commission.

Another type of tentmaker is a non-residential missionary; or one who lives in a place where fully supported missionaries are allowed, and then makes frequent trips as a tourist in and out of a closed area to reach an unreached people group there. In this way, even though they are funded by churches, they can operate in creative access areas as tentmakers.

More and more mission agencies are becoming involved in tentmaking. At the latest count, 74 boards in North America have tentmaking branches. These are very important since they can help tentmakers with proper training and orientation, with prayer backing, with language learning, with counsel regarding work on the field, with assistance for culture shock, with church planting, with conservation of the converts, with reentry shock when they return and with help to get them another position. Mission agencies can also use those who have been tentmakers to help recruit others.

### **Churches Adopting People Groups Through Mission Agencies.**

When churches try to adopt people groups and send tentmakers to them without the assistance of mission agencies, it can lead to fruitless effort and great disappointment. For example, one congregation tried to adopt an unreached people group only to find that they did not exist. It turned out to be the name of a language which was spoken by people who had already been reached. Such needless efforts can be avoided by working through mission agencies whose leaders would know the areas and the peoples living there who need to be reached.

The Adopt-A-People Campaign, which is headed up by the Rev. Jerome Hannaman, updates a list of mission agencies every month that have the means

to assist churches and individuals in selecting a group to adopt.

Recently, I attended a conference in Korea where Youth With a Mission was seeking to send business men and women to unreached people groups all around the world. They were to be business tentmakers who would try to plant churches where as yet there were none, but would also be associated with their YWAM Board.

If tentmakers are to be successful, and not be like “loose canons” around the world, it is necessary for them to work in close association with mission agencies.

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