

Tentmaking, Business as Mission and Marketplace Ministry

Tentmaking is the most strategic vehicle for global mission in the 21st century. (For the purposes of this paper we will restrict the word “tentmaking” to its application to cross-cultural mission, though increasingly people in part-time ministry in Canada apply the word to themselves when they take secular employment to support their ministry.)

Tentmaking is a Biblical metaphor taken from Acts 18 where Paul supported himself in global mission by making tents in order not to burden the church with his support (1 Thess.2:9). But tentmaking is strategic for many more reasons than compensating for declining church support:

1. Secular employment gains access to unreached people who might otherwise be inaccessible because of unavailable visas for full-time Christian workers such as missionaries, church planters and evangelists.
2. Tentmakers model normal work-day Christian living which is the lot of most people.
3. Tentmakers usually have the support of hostile governments who value the transfer of skills, foreign capital, and contribution to their national agendas more than they fear contamination by a foreign religion (Christianity).
4. Tentmakers reduce the cost of mission to the churches and individuals who send them.
5. Tentmakers have credible local identities which reduce the accusations of hidden agendas such as being agents of the CIA.

Marketplace ministries is a wide category which encompasses tentmaking, Business as Mission and even people such as business chaplains who are supported workers involved in the business community.

Business as Mission is a smaller sub-set of tentmaking because all the qualities of tentmaking apply to them. People in BAM are entrepreneurs who have the skill of starting and maintaining successful business enterprises. Some BAMers prefer to use B4T (Business for Transformation) to distinguish themselves from

Christians who start businesses overseas primarily for profit rather than ministry. The advantage of BAM even over tentmakers, is that they can control whom they hire and the values that will be followed in the marketplace, and the forms of witness allowed. Tentmakers are generally subject to the rules of their employers, whether businesses, governments or local institutions.

Some people refer to Tentmakers as “job-takers”, and BAMers as “job-makers”. The people we all want to avoid are “job-fakers” – those who set up shell businesses in order to gain visa access but do not actually have a profitable business.

All tentmakers are witnesses to the good news of the gospel. Witness involves more than words and even in contexts of limited verbal witness, tentmakers can honour God with the quality of their work, their character and their personal relationships. For tentmakers who are married, Christian marriage itself is a witness to the gospel.

Tentmaking – the dark side

There are dangers implicit in tentmaking. We have already alluded to “job-fakers” who demonstrate a lack of integrity, but there are other so-called tentmakers who are simply Christians employed overseas but who have no calling or intention to use their employment as a platform for witness to the Kingdom. Another problem is the lack of emphasis on language learning and acculturation which limit a tentmaker’s effectiveness. Unless tentmakers are associated with a sending agency or their church, they will be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of cross-cultural living and witness. All too often historic sending agencies are poorly structured for the flexibility and unique pastoral care needed by tentmakers. An added challenge is the cultural divide between tentmakers and supported workers who may be part of the same context but misunderstand their different callings.

Having said all that, tentmaking remains the most strategic approach to global mission in the 21st century.