

THE CHALLENGE OF TENTMAKING

Serving God through one's profession and business overseas

What is a tentmaker?

The apostle Paul carried on his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18.3) on some of his missionary journeys, and many people since have followed this example, taking their businesses and professions to other cultures and continents. Thus the word 'tentmaker' has passed into Christian vocabulary.

A tentmaker, simply put, is a disciple of Jesus Christ who is called by God to a cross-cultural ministry using marketable skills and services. It is recognised as a valid and important aspect of world mission, and in no sense inferior to any other type of service.

Not too many people are actually sewing tents together as part of mission today, (though there may be some: a number of people have set up small craft businesses). Those who go overseas are more likely to be teachers of English, administrators, businesspeople, bankers, water engineers, architects, students in overseas universities, secretaries or physiotherapists. Their jobs may be offered by companies, Governments or international aid organisations and arranged before they leave their home.

Why so important now?

Before the advent of organised missionary societies about 200 years ago tentmaking was the normal pattern for overseas Christian service.

Today, tentmaking has a new imperative. Many countries now restrict Christian evangelism in some way. The escalating costs of maintaining missionary families abroad has also caused many agencies to rethink the advantages of tentmaking.

And even in countries that receive traditional missionaries, tentmakers meet people of different professional and social classes in a natural way. Their place alongside others at work gives them a credible identity and easy point of contact. Friendships develop which earn the tentmaker a right to be heard.

All ages can be part of tentmaking: including young people, young families, and those retired or facing redundancy. Those just out of college may need to gain some years of experience before their expertise is welcomed. On the other hand those who have faced redundancy, or taken retirement but still have lots of energy, may be particularly sought, and may be fully ready to proceed abroad without much delay. Still others are already on overseas

contracts but are wondering what their contribution to Christian service can be.

Work and witness: Do they really mix?

Paul provides us with a good model. His primary motive as an apostle was to preach the Gospel, whether in lecture hall, matted living room or smelly backstreet. But his workbench was also a 'platform', as he was able to demonstrate his faith through hard work, integrity and business ethics. At the same time he could avoid being a financial burden on the infant churches (Acts 20.32-35; 1 Thess 2.9; 2 Thess 3 6-10).

We may not share Paul's specific apostolic call, or his gifts, but God does call us whether at home or abroad to use our work to glorify Him. A calling to use our God-given skills and experience in an overseas setting is no less worthy than a call to a specific country.

In practice there can be difficulties. Our companies and organisations may allow us very little time to prepare adequately in the UK, learn the language and become acquainted with the culture. We may also be expected to be a part of the expatriate community to an extent that makes contact more difficult with national people. There will be pressures from our employer demanding that extra time we had reserved for our special 'Christian' work. Indeed we may find that there is very little time left for witness.

In view of this, would-be tentmakers need a clear understanding of the nature of Christian witness.

- Western distinctions between Sunday and Monday, spiritual and secular, are unhelpful. We should see our entire lives as ministry. We can honour God in our workplace through our behaviour and attitudes, the quality of the products or services we provide, and our integrity and morality. In some parts of the world Christian morality contrasts sharply with the behaviour of other Europeans, and this invites questions.
- Tentmaking is not 'cover' for gospel preaching. Tentmakers obtain visas for a specific job of work, which they are required to carry out in an exemplary manner. A tentmaker should thus have no ethical dilemmas about being a first-class professional and a first-class witness for Jesus Christ, and should be happy and confident with holding and explaining that identity.

Self-support is not the key issue

Our self-support can be an advantage in that we are not paid by the church or any Christian organisation. This can give us an independent credibility to the faith we seek to share.

But self-support is not essential, and those on local salaries often have to be supplemented by payments from their home churches and elsewhere. More important is that:

- God has called us to use our gifts and skills in a cross-cultural situation.
- We take opportunity to share the Gospel sensitively and with integrity. The work itself will be one means of testimony, and depending on the circumstances may be the only way.
- We are recognised and commended by our home church, and most of us link with a mission society or agency that can encourage us through the difficult times. Whenever possible we link with a national church in the country of service.

What other qualities do we need?

Many. But here are just a few: -

- A marketable skill, preferably with some years' experience.
- A good relationship with God and – this is vital -- a sustained prayer life.
- Good biblical knowledge.
- A growing ability to witness for Christ, ministry skills in evangelism, teaching, discipleship.
- A mission heart and a sense of calling.
- Growing self-acceptance, love for others, a servant heart.
- A biblical perspective on issues relevant to work and ethics, social matters.
- An excitement about other cultures, or at least an awareness that we need to understand other cultures.
- A flexible and adaptable approach to others who are different.
- Respect for other Christian workers with different roles and perceptions of ministry.
- An ability to set objectives realistically, while being open to God's unexpected demands and provision.
- Good physical and psychological health.
- The ability to cope with culture stress, family stress, isolation and loneliness.

But is it for me?

How do we know if 'tentmaking' is for us? There are missionaries and others who tell amazing and exciting stories of God's leading, but often guidance comes in undramatic ways. A calling does not have to be to a specific country: it may be to use our God-given skills and experiences overseas in a number of countries over our lifetime, or perhaps for a shorter period during our career.

Guidance may involve spreading out all the available information and job opportunities all over the floor and praying through the various possibilities. What is important is that we ask ourselves the following questions: -

Do I desire to serve the Lord?

"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart"
(Ps 37.4 NIV)

Am I reading His word and praying to know His will?

"Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path"
(Ps119.105 NIV)

Am I an "overseas type"?

Some people have a buzz of excitement about living in other cultures. God gives us many different giftings and personalities and not all of us are going to be "overseas types". Some will recoil at the thought. God normally uses our natural giftings, adding to them spiritual ones through the Holy Spirit. He has plans for us which we can expect will complement the way He made us.

But excitement about life overseas is not everything: we also need to check our motives carefully. Tentmaking demands a servant heart and often real sacrifice, both to our careers and in personal ways.

God always knows our situation and will supply our needs as we trust Him (Romans 8.28). Training can be part of the spiritual equipping.

A strategy

If we decide this may be for us, we should start to plan a strategy that will involve becoming experienced in our chosen profession, being in fellowship with our church, and also being practised in cross-cultural communication and other ministry gifts.

Examine the options

Why not begin by looking in the newspapers and professional journals for the sort of jobs you would like when you are qualified? See what countries they are in. Find out about those countries and the sort of strategic opportunities you might find there for sharing the Gospel. Ask mission agencies and others who have worked in those countries. Build up a file. Pray about the responses you get. Talk it all through with someone in your fellowship whose judgement you trust. Lay out your ideas to God. Let Him step by step show you what He wants you to do.

If you have not decided on a career, or are open to a change, it may be right to consider training as a teacher of English as a foreign language (TEFL/TESOL). There are many challenging openings and intensive training can be as little as five weeks.

Should I go with an agency?

The experience of many people is that we need an agency with whom to relate and which can encourage us. Some who have completed one term independently opt to be linked with an agency for subsequent assignments. Many work situations overseas can be lonely and vulnerable, and it is very difficult to survive spiritually. Some going independently have had to be bailed out by other mission groups, diverting time and energy from other callings.

If it is possible to be part of a tentmaking team this can pay enormous dividends.

What if my job already takes me overseas?

Some of us are Christians who go overseas as part of our professional and business lives, and want to be part of mission while we are there. Some have become excited to be involved once they see the strategic opportunities in their country of service, but there are many thousands of other Christians working abroad who need to capture the vision and be encouraged to reach out cross-culturally.

To be effective in that new role we need to prepare ourselves spiritually, to seek affirmation and encouragement of our home church, and to be accountable to other Christians for our work for the Lord. Training is less easy once we are overseas but courses may be available during home leaves.

Where does the home church fit in?

Your church needs to affirm you and encourage you, and perhaps also formally to 'send' and commission you. If this has not yet happened you may need to explain your vision and perspective carefully so that they see the importance of your work overseas for God.

They should be involved in your training (see Appendix A) and ensure that you have basic ministry experience in friendship evangelism and other skills such as running an evangelistic Bible study in a home situation. They should help you to set realistic objectives about what you can achieve in your Christian work abroad. They will wish to stand with you during your stay abroad, to pray for you, and to be in frequent touch with you.

How can Global Connections help?

Global Connections (formerly the Evangelical Missionary Alliance UK) promotes and represents world mission throughout the UK, and will help where it can to elaborate points in this booklet. It has a special Business and Professional Group that, among other things, seeks to help those who are tentmakers or those thinking about it. Global Connections will put you in touch with member agencies as required, and will help with further advice on preparation and training for tentmaker service.

For more information, visit <http://www.globalconnections.co.uk>.

What specific preparation is needed?

Tentmaking is not a quick, cheap, easy way to the mission field: in many ways it is more difficult than traditional missionary service and often requires more preparation and training. Indeed, many who have simply packed their rucksacks and gone have returned disillusioned.

Apart from the training and experience that you will take overseas in your professional, business or trade area, you will need spiritual and practical preparation to be effective in tentmaking. A brief look at the checklist on pages 10-11 may seem intimidating but there are few short cuts and it is really necessary to be prepared in most of these areas. I

You may have already undertaken some of the training, unwittingly, in your local church. Your own fellowship is the best preparation ground for you to develop a dynamic spiritual life and to learn the communication and relationship skills that underlie friendship evangelism.

You will need to decide the best approach to your training. You may be able to spend time on a Bible College course looking into mission issues in depth. Even so, a number of topics relevant to tentmaking may not be covered and you should consider, perhaps in discussion with the college authorities, whether the syllabus meets your particular needs. On the other hand, you may only have a few weeks to prepare for an overseas assignment and may be interested in one of the shorter courses listed below.

CHECKLIST OF TOPICS FOR TENTMAKER PREPARATION AND TRAINING

1. The Call to Go

- ❑ God's heart for mission from Genesis onwards
- ❑ The Great Commission
- ❑ The unfinished task and the present day challenge
- ❑ The growing number of 'tentmaker only' countries
- ❑ The nature of a "call" both to a country and in relation to using skills and experience

2. The advantages of tentmaking, both strategic and practical

- ❑ The Biblical mandate
- ❑ Biblical and historical examples (eg Moravians)
- ❑ Opportunities for the professional and business person today

3. The tentmaker's biblical and doctrinal foundations

- ❑ Knowing the Bible, achieving biblical and doctrinal competence
- ❑ Dependence on the Holy Spirit
- ❑ Doctrinal stability, in relation to the uniqueness of Christ, and a biblical view of other religions
- ❑ Clarity about which truths are essential to the Gospel, and an understanding of with whom we can work together

4. The tentmaker and his/her job

- ❑ Work as ministry; one's whole way of life
- ❑ Pursuing excellence as a means of testimony
- ❑ The bi-vocational dilemma: the problem of time, and the possibility of conflicts of interests with one's employer

5. Spiritual Preparation

- ❑ Spiritual birth, growth, and maturity
- ❑ Maintaining one's life in God
- ❑ Assessing one's natural and spiritual giftings, including leadership
- ❑ Emotional and psychological readiness
- ❑ The issue of survival, support, encouragement
- ❑ The tentmaker called to servanthood
- ❑ A growing love for others
- ❑ Resolving issues with others
- ❑ A healthy approach to marriage and singleness
- ❑ A witnessing life, developed in a local church situation

6. Other aspects of Personal Preparation

- ❑ A considered view of world moral issues, and an ability to articulate them
- ❑ An ability to manage time
- ❑ Assessing suitability for a particular country
- ❑ Adjusting to a different security situation, surveillance, security of communications

7. Ethical Issues

- ❑ Credible personal identity in the country
- ❑ Ethical use of time
- ❑ Ethics in the marketplace

8. Accountability

- ❑ How to ensure it. The possibility of mutual accountability
- ❑ Setting realistic and measurable objectives

9. Identification with the host culture

- ❑ Language
- ❑ Understanding the nature of culture, how to separate culture from issues of faith and Christian behaviour
- ❑ The extent of identification, living conditions etc
- ❑ Understanding the particular culture and world view
- ❑ Balancing the relationship with one's own country with that of the new country
- ❑ Overcoming our prejudices, helping those of the host country to overcome theirs

10. Developing skills in evangelism and discipleship

- ❑ Friendship evangelism
- ❑ Leading an evangelistic Bible study
- ❑ Discipling others
- ❑ Church planting
- ❑ Dangers of inadequate training

11. The roles of the home church and local national church

- ❑ The home church vision of the tentmaker's work; their prayer, support, and encouragement
- ❑ Prayer letters and information on activities
- ❑ The tentmaker's relationship with a local national church, where that is possible and wise

12. Teamwork

- ❑ The advantages of teams. Are 'lone rangers' ever justified?
- ❑ Forming a team from tentmakers already established in an overseas location

13. Spiritual Warfare

- ❑ How Satan attacks the family, the team
- ❑ Entering enemy held territory, dealing with demonic powers

14. Personal, vocational and family stress

- ❑ Culture shock and stress: its nature and remedies
- ❑ Burnout, and leaving the country early
- ❑ Rest and relaxation away from the work location

CENTRES THAT PROVIDE SHORT COURSES SUITABLE FOR TENTMAKERS

➤ **7 or 14 week courses entitled "Across the Cultures"**

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Horton Road
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Tel: (01452) 308097
Fax: (01452) 503949
E-mail: admin@Redcliffe.org.uk

➤ **20 day courses entitled "Preparing for Change"**

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Bawtry
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DN10 6JH
Tel: (01302) 710020
Fax: (01302) 710027
E-mail: Bawtry_Hall@compuserve.com

➤ **Day, weekend, or longer courses specifically for tentmakers**

TASK

13, School Road
Bradenham, Thetford
Norfolk
IP25 7QU
Tel: (01760) 440200
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COLLEGES OFFERING LONGER TERM COURSES THAT INCLUDE MISSION AND CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES

All Nations Christian College

Easneye, Ware, Herts
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Fax: (01920) 462997
E-mail: mailbox@allnations.ac.uk

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Glenburn House, Glenburn Road South, Dunmurry, Belfast BT17 9JP
Tel: (01232) 301551
Fax: (01232) 431758
E-mail: staff@dna1.dnet.co.uk

Bible College of Wales

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Tel: (01792) 203463
Fax: (01792) 290488

Birmingham Bible Institute

5 Pakenham Road, Birmingham, West Midlands, B15 2NN
Tel: (0121) 440 4016
Fax: (0121) 440 3175
E-mail: bbi@charis.co.uk

International Christian College

110 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0PS
Tel: (0141) 552 4040
Fax: (0141) 552 0808
E-mail: college@icc.clara.co.uk

London Bible College

Green Lane, Northwood, Middx HA6 2UW
Tel: (01923) 826061
Fax: (01923) 836530
Email: mailbox@londonbiblecollege.ac.uk

Moorlands College

Sopley, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 7AT
Tel: (01425) 672369
Fax: (01425) 674162
E-mail: enquiries@moorlands.ac.uk

Redcliffe College

Wotton House, Horton Road, Gloucester, GL1 3PT

Tel: (01452) 308097

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Trinity College

Stoke Hill, Bristol BS9 1JP

Tel: (0117) 9682803

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DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES**“Culture to Culture”****St. John’s Extension Studies,**

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Tel: (0115) 925 1117

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E-mail: ext.studies@stjohns-nottm.ac.uk

“Working Your Way to the Nations”**TASK**

13 School Road, Bradenham, Thetford, Norfolk, IP25 7QU

Tel: (01760) 400 200

E-mail: roger@taskgb.freemove.co.uk

South Asian Concern

PO Box 43, Sutton, Surrey, SM2 5WL

Tel: (020) 8770 9717

Fax: (020) 8770 9747

E-mail: 10026.3641@compuserve.com

SOME MISSIONARY SOCIETIES THAT RECRUIT TENTMAKERS

Action Partners Ministries

Bawtry Hall
Bawtry
Doncaster DN10 6JH
Tel (01302) 710750
Fax (01302) 719399
E-mail: info@actionpartners.org.uk

Arab World Ministries

PO Box 51
Loughborough
Leics LE11 0ZQ
Tel (01509) 239525
Fax (01509) 264820
E-mail: 74754.1321@compuserve.com

AOG World Ministries

Elmdene,
Nascot Place
Watford, WD17 4QT
Tel(01923) 232630
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Church Mission Society, UK (CMS)

Partnership House
157 Waterloo Road
London SE1 8UU
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European Christian Mission

50 Billing Road
Northampton NN1 5DH
Tel: (01604) 621092
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E-mail: ECMBritain@compuserve.com

Frontiers

PO Box 7
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Tel (01604) 233535
Fax(01604)250053
E-mail: info@bsb.frontiers.org

WEC International, Bulstrode, Gerrards Cross, Bucks SL9 8SZ

Tel: (01753) 884631, Fax: (01753) 882470, E-mail: 100546.1550@compuserve.com

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Fax(01691)778378
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Tel(01892) 545520
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E-mail: info@sim.co.uk

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