

Tentmaking Unveiled—“The Survey Says”

By Patrick Lai

After four years as a regular missionary, I resigned from my faith mission to follow Captain Kirk and “go where no man had gone before.” The parting words from my supervisor clung to me like a dare: “Tentmakers are not missionaries.”

Ten years later I had seen some of the fruit of tentmaking and shared my observations with my mentor Phil Parshall. He quickly pointed out the subjective weaknesses of my pro-tentmaking positions. He threw down the gauntlet when he added, “Everyone I know who does business as missions winds up doing all business and no missions.” Challenged, I invested the next six years surveying, interviewing and compiling data from 450 workers from many organizations and denominations serving throughout the 10/40 Window. Despite some limitations, this is the most extensive research done on tentmaking to date. Factors in the background, education, training, motivation, life, ministry and work of those serving in the 10/40 Window were identified and related to their effectiveness in serving Jesus Christ. Effectiveness or productivity is defined in terms of evangelism, discipleship and church planting. For comparison, a “worker” includes all types of missionaries, including tentmakers. What follows is a sampling of what we learned about doing business as mission. Bolded phrases represent those that improve the effectiveness of a tentmaker.

How to Train a Tentmaker?

In considering the worker’s pre-field education, training and experience, nearly fifty factors were studied. The most effective way workers can prepare to serve overseas is to **invest one or more years ministering with international students**. Candidates who desire to enhance their probability of being effective should be encouraged to minister with international students. Before moving abroad, effective workers regularly did **personal outreach, campus evangelism, house-to-house visitation, led one or more evangelistic Bible studies with non-Christians** and **described their involvement with the majority of new believers they helped to bring to Christ as a “close friendship.”** These points should be a part of any organization’s evaluation of prospective candidates. A good witness at home is more likely to be a good witness overseas. Workers who have a **daily devotional life** and workers who are **personally disciplined by someone more mature in the Lord** are also more effective.

Workers who have zero years of full-time Christian work experience before going overseas enhance their probability of being ineffective. Beyond one year, the number of years spent serving in full-time Christian work before going overseas has no bearing on effectiveness. The positions a worker held in a church before going overseas does not alter effectiveness.

The results also stress the importance of **missiological or cross-cultural training**. Having cross-cultural training does not guarantee success, but not having it increases the worker’s chances of being ineffective. Marriage is also a key variable. Workers whose marriages are not good (spiritually, emotionally and sexually) before moving overseas are likely to be ineffective. Prospective candidates need to have their marriages thoroughly evaluated and any major problems need to be resolved before going overseas.

A quick look at the pre-field workplace reveals that workers who told others they would be a tentmaker once overseas are less effective. Workers who said nothing about being a tentmaker are not more effective, but there is a mild indication that those who intended to be tentmakers are less effective. This points to a trend that workers/tentmakers whose primary focus is their work (their entry strategy job) are less effective. Those who worked in a secular job at home, similar to the type of work they are now doing overseas, are less effective. Workers who had training for getting a business started overseas are also less effective. Both of these points may seem unexpected, but my experience would agree that such workers are so committed to their jobs that they are all work and no ministry. As a tentmaker I would like to take issue with this, but as a missiologist I wish to accurately report the findings. If aspiring tentmakers wish to prove effective in evangelism, they must take a closer look at their motivations for serving overseas. We need to admit that tentmakers may become so focused on our work platform that we will not be effective in ministry. Our motivation needs to be God-centered, not self-centered. Tentmakers need training in integrating their job and ministry. The research provides several solutions to this problem, the primary one being solid accountability.

Although short-term trips do not enhance or hurt a worker's effectiveness, eighty percent of all the workers went on short-term trips. Nearly thirty percent of these workers had their short-term experience in the country where they are presently serving. Clearly short-term trips are a good recruiting tool.

Over eighty percent of the workers worked six hours a day or more in a secular job for more than one year. A majority of the workers had both Bible and missiological training. The workers prepared themselves in traditional ways by attending Bible school/seminary (sixty-five percent), missiological training courses (seventy-eight percent), short-term trips (eighty percent) and language training (fifty-five percent). Nearly thirty percent completed all four. This indicates that the need for proper training before going overseas is being recognized.

Workers who attended Bible college or seminary are no more effective than those who did not. That does not mean going to a Bible college or seminary is not valuable; it only means that such experiences neither help nor hinder the worker's effectiveness in his or her ministry of evangelism, discipling and church planting. Admittedly, this research did not explore the personal and spiritual value individual workers may gain from such training and how that training may impact the worker while living overseas. However, the traditional way of preparing workers for the field is to have them go to a Bible college or seminary. If organizations wish to send candidates to a Bible college or seminary to equip them in their spiritual life, or to serve in churches or among Christians overseas, this training may be valid. But for candidates intending to minister to non-Christians in the 10/40 Window, attending a Bible college or seminary does not enhance their effectiveness.

In evaluating the motivations of tentmakers, the two most common answers given are: (1) the country does not provide missionary visas (ninety percent) and (2) being a tentmaker is a more credible/natural way to witness than being a regular missionary (seventy-two percent).

How Do Productive Tentmakers Live and Work?

At least thirteen factors were considered in the survey.

1. Spiritual life. The strongest spiritual factor is that those who practice **fasting** as an important spiritual discipline scored high in effectiveness. Additionally, workers who consistently set aside special times to **study scripture, pray and meditate**, and workers who regularly **read Christian books or magazines or listen to message tapes** are slightly more effective. Both issues point to our need to feed our spirit regularly. Exactly eighty-five percent of all workers have a daily devotional; however, having a daily time in the word and prayer has no influence on effectiveness. Leaders should take note that thirty-nine percent of the workers expressed a need for more spiritual support from co-workers and leaders.

2. Social and personal life. Workers who said that **most of their closest friends are nationals, have nationals in their home** (not counting house-help) **three times a week or more** and **have taken a vacation with national friends** are more effective. Over seventy percent of the workers maintain a higher standard of living than their national friends. Yet workers who have a higher standard of living compared to their national co-workers score well in effectiveness. Although my personal experience reflects that living among the people is appreciated by the nationals, the research reveals that living above the level of the people has no negative implications on the worker's fruitfulness. Laborers who spend their free time with their family or alone are less effective. We may conclude that the more time we invest with locals, the more effective we will be. National friends who see our lives up close are more likely to be attracted to what they see. What we eat and how we dress is important, but not as important as how we relate to people. The importance of being with locals, or "logging hours," is repeated again in the understanding that workers who visit in nationals' homes three times a week or more are of good effectiveness.

A large number of workers (sixty-five percent) eat local food the way the locals do, abstain from foods locals abstain from and dress the way locals dress. However, these factors did not make a difference in their success in winning people to Jesus. Perhaps contextualization is not as important a factor in

reaching the unreached as we thought. The primary lesson to be learned is that the time a worker invests with the people and the worker's personal comfort living within the culture are much more important than strategy or contextualization. Well over seventy-five percent of the workers live in homes that are decorated with a mixture of items from the local culture and their own culture. Whether the worker's home is contextualized like a local's home, styled after their home culture or a mixture of both has no effect on effectiveness.

3. Home or sending church relationship. Sending churches are very involved in the lives of their workers. Exactly ninety percent of the workers were commissioned by their home church, and ninety-two percent are in regular contact with their home church. Nonetheless, home churches are not making much of a contribution to the effectiveness of their workers. The data shows that workers who **send out prayer letters, have over 151 people committed to praying for them and who receive communication from their sending church on a quarterly basis** are to a small degree more effective. Workers appreciated being held accountable by their home churches. Over sixty-five percent said they are satisfied with the spiritual and emotional support of their sending church. Moreover, thirty percent of the workers send prayer letters home on a monthly basis; twenty-eight percent do so bimonthly.

4. Identity and visa. Workers who have a tourist visa or social visit visa are found to be less effective. Workers who are **missionaries sent out by a mission organization and recognized as a missionary/Christian worker by the people they minister and live with** have good effectiveness. This reveals that those who are **perceived as missionaries both at home and overseas** are likely to be effective. Workers who are perceived as missionaries by friends at home, but something other than missionaries or Christian workers by friends overseas are also effective, but slightly less effective than those identified as missionaries. Workers who have a **resident visa, employment pass or work visa** are generally effective.

The visas which are most likely to be effective in order of priority are as follows: business, medical/health care, missionary, school teacher, engineering, computers/technical, science, TESOL/TEFL, NGO/social services, student and tourist. The visa a worker holds is not as important as how the worker is perceived by the locals. It is not who we say we are, but how we are perceived by the people.

5. Field or overseas church relationship. On the highest level of effectiveness are workers who are **regularly involved with a national congregation or house church that uses the local language.** This could be because the workers have already planted the church where they are meeting. Workers who regularly attend an expatriate/foreigner church or fellowship that speaks their own native language and workers who regularly attend an expatriate/foreigner English-speaking church/fellowship are often less effective. Whenever possible, workers should worship in the language of the people. Being in active fellowship with other tentmakers or missionaries in the area has no bearing on effectiveness. Although about half of the workers attend English-speaking churches, eighty-nine percent are in fellowship with other workers.

6. Witnessing and ministry overseas. The research validates a holistic approach to ministry in that workers who said, **"My consistent Christian life is commented on by others"** are very effective. Workers who **actively seek opportunities to verbally share their faith** are also productive. Laborers who **build strong relationships/friendships with over ten nationals/locals** also win souls. Finally, those who have **experienced a demonic confrontation** are effective. Workers who are active in evangelism should expect to deal with spiritual warfare issues.

Workers are not effective who find it hard to initiate conversations about their faith and who share their faith only when obvious situations arise. Also, laborers who prefer not to verbally share their faith; rather they let their lives be witnesses and workers who try to build relationships with people before sharing their faith are unfruitful. These questions clarify that workers who stress building relationships before sharing their faith are likely to be less effective. This may be due to the small number of relationships one person can be involved in at one time; little sowing yields little reaping. This is incentive for trainers to teach boldness and stress confrontational evangelism, proclamation and other evangelistic strategies.

7. *Adopted country/people group.* Receptivity of the local people does impact effectiveness. Those who said they work with a people group that has no indigenous church, where it is unwise or improper to share their faith verbally and where it is illegal to witness openly are less effective. Workers who said there are **no hindrances to local Christians evangelizing** are a bit more effective. The involvement of the local churches in reaching the unreached people group has no impact on the worker's effectiveness. The fact that local Christians may actively witness to unreached peoples does not impact a worker's effectiveness. These points indicate that although the worker's effectiveness may be helped by the openness of the country to the gospel, the activities of the local church have no impact on the worker's effectiveness. Whatever people group, religion or segment of society the workers are focusing on makes little difference in their effectiveness.

8. *Language.* Experienced workers will not be surprised to learn that workers who are **fluent in the local language** consistently scored among the highest in the research. When applicable, workers who said they **minister to the people in their heart language** scored better than those who minister in the trade or national language. Those who said they minister to the people in English or their native language are less effective. Workers who do not learn the language within their first three years overseas, rarely learn the language well. It is essential at the start of their service that all workers invest adequate time learning the language.

9. *Security.* Workers who have had to lie to ensure the success of a business deal are less effective. Obviously, our character will affect not only our walk with God, but our relationships with others as well. Workers who often **take risks** have a higher degree of effectiveness. The research shows that worries about security, the safety of one's family and stress caused by having to leave the field do not alter a missionary's effectiveness. Yes, it may impact other areas of his or her life, but it does not impact his or her outreach. Over eighty percent of the workers feel their church understands their needs for security.

10. *Accountability.* Workers who have a **clear strategy for planting a church** are very effective, while workers who do not have a clear church-planting strategy are normally ineffective. Laborers who **have someone holding them accountable in ministry at least once a month** have a better probability of being effective than those who are held accountable less frequently. Workers who said they had no goals in the beginning and that they had many family needs scored high in ineffectiveness. The value of setting goals is clear. Sending bodies need to help workers set goals at the beginning of their terms of service and evaluate those goals regularly. Workers who have emotionally-needy families are also likely to be less effective. This is a warning to avoid what Parshall calls "raising families overseas," meaning workers may spend so much time with their families that it adversely affects their ministry. Mission leaders should take note that nearly fifty percent of the workers wish they had more accountability in their lives. Eleven areas are listed in which workers would like more accountability; "character" and "relationship with God" are the top two. Churches should be asking their workers for their goals and results annually; these churches should also ensure their workers have regular accountability which helps them move forward in accomplishing their God-given goals.

11. *Team.* It is encouraging that ninety-three percent of all workers are on a team. Workers scored well who said they are **currently leading a team** and who had **recruited people to join their team or other teams or ministries**. Workers are more effective who **serve on teams where the team members are from more than one country**. Workers **serving with a team where the nationalities of the team members are a mix of nationals and locals** are slightly more effective. The data indicates the ideal team size is eleven or twelve members. A team becomes more effective as its size increases from three to twelve members; it then plateaus until fifteen members, after which the effectiveness of the team decreases. Workers whose **team meets weekly or bi-weekly** score better than teams which meet less frequently.

12. *Work/job overseas.* Workers who say that **most of their co-workers are from the people group they are reaching** are highly effective. Again, whether socially or in the workplace, the more time we invest with the people we are trying to reach, the more effective we will be. This is validated in that workers who said that most of their co-workers are expatriates or foreigners and workers who spend

less than one hour a day working with their target people scored poorly. If a worker's place of employment does not have at least a few local employees from the focus people group something should be done to increase their presence. The holistic approach is reinforced as the data shows that workers who **have received an official commendation or award for their work performance** have good effectiveness. Doing good work in the office will impact the worker's witness/ministry.

Workers who view their project/job as a cover to stay in the country and do little non-ministry work are not effective. Having a real job in a real workplace that allows flexible working hours seems to be the ideal tentmaking entry strategy. Tentmakers did not find their work as a hindrance to ministry

13. Money/salary. Nearly seventy-eight percent of the workers indicate they have sufficient income. The majority of workers (sixty-one percent) are fully supported by churches and friends. Of those who have tentmaking jobs, twenty-one percent are not receiving income from their work. The source of the worker's personal monthly salary, whether from churches, individuals or a secular job, has no impact on the worker's effectiveness. The data concludes that more money does not increase the probability of the worker's effectiveness; however, earning less than \$700 per month will enhance the probability of a worker being less effective.

General Insights

Workers who **have lived in their present country or among their target people group for more than five years** are found to be very effective. Workers who **see themselves as adventuresome** are likely to be effective. Six percent of the workers have doctorates, forty-five percent have bachelor or university degrees and thirty-five percent have masters degrees. Only three percent of all workers did not attend a college or university.

Men and women are equally effective. Age is not an issue either. Whether a worker's children are living at home or not does not change the worker's effectiveness. Finally, the organization the missionary/tentmaker is associated with has no impact on effectiveness.

The research validates that tentmakers have planted over one hundred churches and won thousands to Jesus. Each of us is determined to find a way to present the gospel to the unreached peoples of the world. The majority of these people reside in countries which restrict missionary access. They appear to be beyond the reach of the gospel, hemmed in by their own barriers. But we know that if the Church is to see "every nation, tribe, people and language" represented before the throne, it must break new ground. Business as usual will not do. We need to attempt some mighty unusual business.

Patrick Lai has been serving in Asia among Muslims for more than twenty years, first as a missionary and later as a T3 tentmaker. He has established two churches and several profitable businesses and currently oversees teams in nine countries. More information about tentmaking in the 10/40 Window and his research may be found at www.OPENNetworkers.org. Patrick may be contacted at PTL456@pmbx.net