

Don't Call Me a Tentmaker

Read about the deep soul-searching journey of a mission leader who has experienced both sides of the mission-ministry issues, who no longer wants to be identified as a "missionary" nor as a tentmaker, who has moved from tent-talking to tentmaking and now is strategically presenting the Gospel in the marketplace to the lost and especially among the unreached of the world. The personal frustrations shared in this article are given as a healthy warning to those not following biblical principles of what it means to be God's servant representative in the ordinary marketplace of life.

by Gary Taylor

I am now a businessman. Some will still call me a tentmaker. But I now shun the description. Why? With fervent intentions to better serve the vision for tentmaking I nourished for so long, I made a near-fatal choice in starting my own journey. I chose tentmakers and missionaries as shipmates in my effort to bring creative, fresh means of normalizing the incarnation of Jesus Christ into my area of the marketplace. I wanted to move from whatever tentmaking was—and was not—to something more enduring, practical and effective—something more biblical.

Too harsh? I am just now barely recovering—three years after launching my own business enterprise. I have lost thousands of dollars in real money along with multiple hundreds of hours fruitlessly trying to serve wonderful, sincere, visionary, but inept missionaries and tentmakers. This has more meaning if you remember that lost time is lost money and opportunity, especially to an entrepreneur who has mortgaged the ranch, literally.

I am not whining, but I am certainly sobered of my naiveté. I nearly lost it all on a mistaken notion that those missionary adventurers and

visionary spirits I had served alongside for so long would now be my kinsmen. My "Kingdom Company" was designed to provide legitimate, profitable platforms for creative access church-planters and national Christian leaders needing economic support. Fellow-supported missionaries would be my productive colleagues in a unique business venture right down their alley—partners in ministry and business.

What an idea! Serving by working alongside those we intend to grasp the Gospel. Then, staying at their side in business and relationships until they embrace it in ways that will multiply naturally. It might even look like the concentric circles of true discipleship about which we have talked so much and seen so little.

Means Versus Ends

This conclusion may puzzle some who know I have put virtually my life's blood for 14 years into helping shape the "tentmaking" cause. Others who know my somewhat iconoclastic and independent nature will find this conviction no surprise. I am sorry if some find my views a challenge, maybe even an affront. But, if I yell

loudly enough the emperor is without clothes perhaps some will be provoked to sort more carefully through the biblical perspectives on how to most naturally give all he has—gifts and warts—to the Great Commission's unreached component.

One thing is sure, I have seen the issues from both sides. Most who read this article will be ministry professionals. I, too, have been in supported ministry. For 14 of the 24 years most call "ministry," I have been working hard to help forge the unreached peoples paradigm through my special interest, creative access "tentmaking." I was part of founding of the mission agency Frontiers and had field leadership posts for seven years. I was co-founder, chairman, and administrative manager at various stages in the US Association of Tentmakers (now Intent). Today, my own creative access facilitating ministry, Strategic Ventures Network, is in its ninth year.

So now I view things differently. I no longer identify myself as a missionary nor a tentmaker. I even fuss over describing myself as in "ministry." From my business platform, I've discovered an irony. I now see myself more effective in touching the unreached and the common everyday

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lost than in any of my mission management years. To be more accurate, I could say I have moved from tent-talking to actual tentmaking.

An Explanation

If you have ever put all you have on the line—in sports, ministry, or business—you know the feeling of others not carrying their weight. The sinking feeling is offset by the grit to plunge on toward the goal anyway, alone and with a revised plan. In two years of establishing a new telecommunications protocol for the hotel and tourism industry worldwide, I lunged with gusto to the thought that in virtually any country expatriates could be given platforms of creative access and national Christian leaders would have income for family and service.

So I made those people searching for creative access my highest priority. This Kingdom company had as cornerstones: expand the Kingdom of God; to introduce Christ the Savior among the unreached; to touch for Christ all fellow strugglers; and to be a model of godly business virtue for its sake alone. You would think God's nobles on the frontiers would seize the moment. But "seize" is a verb from another culture. "Receive" is more like it. I found few who could change the pattern, who could lean into a different and harder plow on new ground. Let's face it...I found few in the missions industry who could work in the normal secular sense of the term. It seemed very few cues remained from pre-missionary work-life to guide them into producing for their living and witnessing for their calling.

What's the Score?

I have traveled to 14 countries, trained over 100 ministry (mostly) enthusiasts, both professional and lay. After expected attrition, I was

quick to thrill with others that we had 18 tentmakers and nine nationals with a heart for ministry among the 39 certified agents making the first cut. Not a full year later, and several more thousand dollars and untold email and phone hours later, we are making a success of the business.

Our "successes" in ministry are forming a thrilling pattern, but we overplayed it to suggest we are shaking the earth. But both successes are without most of those typically hailed in our churches as "ministry" types. My company's strategy took a big turn when we counted those who were serious about energetically marketing our product, following policy, and producing minimal sales quotas. For the whole wide planet, our truly successful agents—our prime team—numbers about 11.

I see my marketplace as fruitful in unexpected ways. I have worked with wonderful people, like a Sicilian lover of Jesus with two nonbelievers, who he wants to see come to Christ.

There is the Eastie, a former east German Communist army major, now a "Taylor-made" capitalist who, just today, faxed in his first hotel chain agreement. He is the one that was with me weeks ago near Poland when I got word that my father died. He consoled me. And he reminded me that we had not finished the promised talk about God. It will be a while (and I hope it is never!) before he is in "ministry" instead of earning a living the capitalist entrepreneurial way.

In South Africa, marketplacing the Gospel had to wrap further around my representative before I can rejoice too much. But I have just found that pattern again. His business partner identified himself as a believer in response to soft email evangelism. This agent is responsible for our most prosperous string of hotels by far. It seems the former hotel general man-

ager's request for prayer may be springing from a deeper source than his hunger for more success in launching our services.

Among our representatives who have caught the vision for serious profitable business as the most defensible explanation for presence in a restricted access country is one church-planter in North Africa. He performs professionally and acts credibly. He uses our business, professional memberships, and his forgivable search for good golf partners as "hooks" to Gospel hearings in his rich marketplace full of barren souls.

You can see my point, then, when I stated to a friend that, given a standard, well-qualified seminary-trained missionary and a crusty but godly man with a vision and real performance-based work experience, I would race toward the latter whether in my business or in my role as a sometime counselor in church-planting.

Missions in Frustration

I didn't enter business lightly. What would lead me to put up my ranch and my savings to finance the venture over which I am still at risk? It was not some lifelong dream, and it was not even to care for my family, since by now we had emptied the nest and could live frugally on ministry support. I entered business in frustration. For all we had postulated, researched and convened about, there have been few models of tentmaking which had succeeded in the goal stat of planting churches, penetrating an unreached people barrier or fulfilling a major "ministry" objective. It was more than frustration; it was a lust for integrity to defend a noble cause I loved. Tentmaking seemed to be dying like a beautiful Ferrari out of gas on the Autostrada.

The costly experiments of others encouraged me. The successful but hard to reproduce model of Dwight Nordstrom gave me hope. I moved further into business and I ran across dozens more of non-Western men and women of faith producing various effective models naturally—even “strategically”—presenting the Gospel in their marketplaces. Most of them did not know that the organized West had spent uncountable hours and dollars creating a name to go by, however curious and impossible “tentmaking” is to explain from English.

That frustration resulted in a life-changing discovery. I did a fresh survey of how God communicated His will and His Good News to mankind. Surprisingly, it unearthed neither the word nor the pattern of “tentmaking” as I knew it. I did find some remarkable personalities who, at the time, were known by a wide variety of trades and professions. Today’s Bible readers know them as the Fathers and Saints of the Faith. Curiously, not a TESOL instructor, a 10-year “student,” a “consultant” or a bootstrap “importer-exporter” was found among them.

I did find respected men and women who lived for God and stood tall before mankind. While not of their rank, I decided to take up a position alongside Abraham the landowner, Daniel the statesman, Peter the fisherman, the Carpenter, the seller of purple, and Paul the Pharisee/church-planter and, yes, occasional repairer and maker of tents.

A refreshing air has settled on my quest to serve Him with my best and His gifts. I have found new companions to lighten the frustration and give me hope that my efforts can make a difference in the terribly vast world of

unreached souls Jesus died for. I have begun following their threads throughout Scripture. I have restated my own call to service as that of taking the Great News of salvation to the lost through the marketplace. That covers a lot of ground. And it changes what I now do for 18 hours a day...penetrating the barriers to the lost and saving the ranch.

Soul-searching Territory

While it is sometimes convenient as a general reference, “tentmaking,” is imprecise¹ and does not provide us

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the overarching consistency of what I now enjoy calling “marketplacing the Gospel”.

Framing my sense of evangelism and discipleship for the unreached in a marketplace context also moves me to new soul-searching territory. Trying to be effective for the Gospel outside the normally accepted structures for “ministry” requires a new tough look at life’s issues faced by most in the workplace. Production quotas, sales volume, pieces delivered, quality control, professional ethics, competitive edge, a testimony of fairness to employees, suppliers, and competitors seldom rule the day for the professional in ministry.

So, is my concern only a matter of rephrasing the thinking patterns of evangelicalism? No! It is time to step

back and look at yet another “new paradigm” as the operative reference.

The current one came to us quite normally in the course of Protestant history laced with hierarchical Catholic roots. The church and its leaders wore collars to their elevated pulpits. The community assigned serious churchmen halos. Even after the uniform changed, the bifurcation of clergy and lay remains, often subtly, while informal worship leaders and pastors try hard to elevate the layman as the heart, soul, and hands of the church. The soil is more fertile but in the developed West it has not yet warmed enough to sprout much.

Pioneer mission efforts seeking fresh inroads and fresh partners at home suffer the most because of the very conservative nature of most fervent world evangelization supporters. They are slow to move off the “successful” traditions of clergy-based missions. With very limited and slow-moving exceptions, the scene in denom-

inations buried in years of their own subculture makes this a U-turn by the near-blind in the dark. A Baptist layman may witness like crazy with the electronic Gospel in an evangelistic phone card.

A Good Idea Gone Bad

The new paradigm must be the old one. It is high time to return to preparing our young people early in the church cycle of teaching to think in terms of the Daniels, and the Peters and the working class of Scottish revivals, and the craftsmen/industrialist/pioneer Moravians. It is time to channel youth into a pipeline of world-changers who see winning the world in their short “life which will soon be passed.” Urge them into thinking “strategically” how their gifts, inter-

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ests, and skills will take them to those where they can serve best with those God-shaped skills to those who need them most. Those skills ought to be useful, marketable, transferable marketplace skills. And the context of their learning, like the execution of their vision, must be nursed in the bosom of the classic call of Christ's Church to "serve and to save the lost."

Before trying to change the entire structure of the Church from Sunday School to Missions, let me return to my beginning. From my experience, I am unhappy with the way "tentmaking" has gone. I was disappointed in the general state of missions before that and wanted to do something about it, thus my stint as a tentmaker activist. But the idea went the wrong way. It settled over the pews as a fiscal concept, more often rescuing the church's quandary over how to finance expanding and more costly missions without raising much more money. And it became a popular but very unrealistic alternative to those wanting to go but not willing to ask others to help or even send them.

Marketplacing the Gospel

Let's change our thinking. To preserve the core vision that sprung tentmaking as a term, let us mission visionaries and doers force the strategic issues—doing what Paul did, earning a living because the church could not or would not support him. Even partially supporting our ministry is not the strategic point. That is logistics. The net strategy must be, "How do we present the Gospel best in such and such a culture with such and such a vision?" The answer is not to figure out how to afford to get up close to people until they get the Gospel. The answer is how can we best connect with them with the Gospel and grow them in the faith.

There can be little doubt that this is best done in the marketplace. *This is the place of convergence.* It's the natural place where the yet-not-reached people are going about their daily lives. The woman at the well was doing her job when Jesus "chanced by." The shepherds were working in the fields. The fishermen were out in the deep toiling with their nets. Even Nicodemus left holy ground to seek Jesus out at night.

In Conclusion

God intersects with our dysfunctional lives outside the temples. The convergence zone for his second millennium followers will still be where men and women spend most of their time and energies. The new paradigm figures out first what is needed in the culture to establish a "normal" life of living faith—not artificial, not transplanted. I say its side-by-side, the way Moravian craftsmen did it, and not dodging the ultimate question "Why are we here, really?"

I say it is skilled businessmen, professionals, teachers, even skilled laborers deciding to locate their factory, their (true, professional-based) consulting, or teaching where it will make the most sense, among the lost of the world. Some could even dare to deliberately (strategically) build a whole new enterprise by developing products and services that will span cultures and accommodate broad sectors of "ministry" goals. We need those willing to dare, to risk it all, and to lean as far into the challenge as God will enable them.

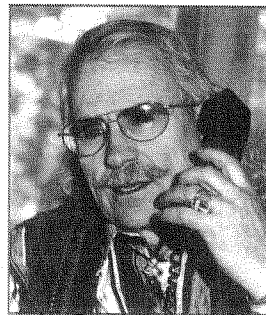
I say it is not "missionaries" to the unreached and inaccessible frontiers of the Gospel, or even missionaries as extemporaneous entrepreneurs who will prevail. I say it is those same "called" men and women thrusting of their passion for the "classic" mission call, not just the traditional one. Go

"where no man has gone" and do it the way it has not been done if you must.

Any such "new" paradigms will falter for their newness until it becomes a movement. But it has to start somewhere! In my case "tentmaking" as a concept started and faltered for the right reasons. But it did finally get the attention of the church's "everyman" and even got mission societies doing some new things, mostly on the side and quietly. To escalate to a movement, it has to come from the Father. It already has. We got diverted. Let's take the spirit which catapulted many into at least considering a life of on-field pioneer ministry and revisit its biblical base. Let's all take up our position alongside our Father and the fathers of our faith.

Footnote

1. Clarke, Carol, *Just What is Tentmaking*, IJFM September issue 1997



Gary Taylor is a graduate of Wheaton College, he was a Navy fighter pilot as well as staff of Campus Crusade for Christ for

ten years. He also served as a pastor for two years, and co-founded Frontiers, Inc., and served for seven years as its field director. Gary founded Strategic Ventures Network, a tentmaking consulting firm. He also co-founded and chaired the US Association of Tentmakers. In 1989 he founded Taylored Communications International. TCI is a "kingdom company" to serve and to expand the Kingdom of God, providing serious business platforms in telecommunications especially among the unreached. You can respond to his article by email: gary@tayloredcomm.com