

The Place of the Local Church in Tentmaking

Many Christians and churches are fully aware that traditional missionaries will never be able to complete the Great Commission by themselves. They now realize that if the world is ever to be evangelized, it will have to be accomplished by tentmaking type missionaries who use their vocations as entry platforms among unreached peoples.

by Danny D. Martin

Most mission-minded churches are now aware of tentmaking.

Twenty years ago almost none were. When a businessman from the local congregation was transferred overseas, he was viewed as leaving the church. There may have been a farewell party, but there certainly was no thought that this businessman would in any way be accountable to the Lord or his church for the ministry he might develop overseas.

But the times are changing. Due in large part to the educational efforts of Dr. Ralph Winter of the US Center for World Mission, many congregations are now aware that traditional missionaries will never be able to complete the Great Commission by themselves. They cannot get visas into many of the countries that contain the world's unreached peoples. So if the world is ever to be evangelized, it will have to be accomplished by lay people who use their vocations as entry platforms among unreached peoples.

For missions committees who are used to dealing only with traditional full-time workers, this has created a crisis. How do they handle all these lay people who want to get involved in missions? In some cases, local churches have had to develop new sets of policies for tentmakers. But most missions committees still need help to determine their role in sending tentmaking missionaries. Fortunately, our mission handbook (the Bible) has adequate instructions for the local church seeking to know its role in this vital area of ministry.

Equipping

"...pastors and teachers to pre-

pare God's people for works of service...." (Eph.4:11,12)

The role of church leadership is thus to equip people for ministry. Everyone. Does your church take this seriously? Every Bible school has a curriculum designed to produce uniform knowledge in its students before they are allowed to graduate. Every church should have the same program and objective.

Instead of offering a smorgasbord of entries in Sunday School and small group meetings, there should be a basic curriculum which every new believer is required to complete before assuming leadership within the body. For many within the church, this will entail a program of mentoring rather than attending classes and taking exams. The focus should be on correct living rather than theoretical theology. Has the local church equipped each believer to be salt and light within their community? Yes, theology is important, especially biblical theology, but the test of true theology is in the way it is lived out in our lives for a hurting world.

Screening

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." (Acts 6:3)

No one knows a believer better than his local church. They are the ones who have watched his spiritual growth and the development of his leadership potential. It is true that the senior pastor may not know all the inside information about every member. But he should certainly know someone in the body who does. Perhaps it is a cell group leader. Perhaps a good friend or

mentor or Sunday School teacher.

I suggest that each applicant for tentmaking submit his decision to the elders or missions committee before accepting a position in another country. It is critical to have the blessing of the local church before embarking upon a ministry overseas. Only members who have proven themselves to be full of the Spirit and wisdom should be approved for ministry.

One church in Singapore actually went to a young couple they believed would make good missionaries, and asked them to consider going after completing their training. We need proactive churches!

Sending

"So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." (Acts 13:3)

Every tentmaker should have a commissioning service before leaving for the field—just like any and all missionaries. In a commissioning service, the congregation commits themselves to pray for their new workers. The tentmakers go under the authority of the local church who has approved them for ministry.

This is not to be taken lightly just as ordination is not taken lightly. There is a direct line of accountability from the tentmaker to the sending church, even when they work with and through a mission agency. The leaders of the church retain spiritual authority over those they have commissioned and sent.

Supporting

"And because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked

with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue.... When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching...."

(Acts 18:3-5)

Many churches mistakenly assume that tentmakers do not need financial support. After all, they are "self-supporting workers." Paul was self-supporting at Corinth, at least for a while. He was only available on the Sabbath to minister in the synagogue. But after Silas and Timothy arrived, things changed drastically. Paul was now available to preach full-time. What happened? It appears that Silas and Timothy brought financial support from the churches of Macedonia, thus making Paul's continued employment unnecessary.

Most jobs overseas do not pay well. Therefore, most tentmakers must raise at least partial support in order to survive. I have discovered that tentmakers receiving support from local churches also get more prayer support from those churches. Tentmaking missionaries also feel a greater degree of accountability to them. Partial support also allows the tentmaker to have more control over his time, and thus his ministry. Many tentmakers who work 50 to 60 hours per week to keep their bosses happy in their target country have little time left for ministry.

Encouraging

"The men were sent off and went down to Antioch where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message." (Acts 15:30-31)

Tentmakers are very often located in countries where there are very few support systems. They do not have access to Christian bookstores with their volumes of books and tapes. Mail and e-mail systems may be unreliable. Satan uses

these difficulties to discourage tentmakers as he has done with regular missionaries in the past. Tentmakers can soon feel forgotten and abandoned by their friends.

They face the additional difficulty of security. Neither they nor their friends are able to write clearly about their ministry situation and their prayer requests. People back home might begin to wonder whether they are really doing anything useful for the Lord and the advance of His Kingdom. Sometimes tentmakers are not sure themselves!

Local churches can do much to encourage tentmaker missionaries. They can send letters and tapes and e-mail messages. Sometimes they can visit their tentmaking missionary. One friend from my home church sends us the local sports page and a tape of our church's service each week. He is our lifeline to our church family back home.

Reporting

"On arriving there (Antioch), they (Paul and Barnabas) gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them..." (Acts 14:27)

This was the nature of Paul and Barnabas's ultimate accountability. They told their sending church all that had happened on their missionary journeys. In the same way tentmakers need to report to their local church leaders and congregation what God has done through them. Usually security is not as much an issue and they are able to speak freely about their ministry back home. Members of the church are able to ask questions and perhaps be challenged themselves to consider missionary service to the unreached of the world.

There is little doubt that local churches are a key ingredient to the success for the tentmaking movement, but there is a price to pay. God readily

bles churches who are willing to prepare and send some of their best leaders to the unreached of the world. Churches can now develop strategic partnerships with tentmaking missions to pro-actively take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. May it happen! Maranatha!

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