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Let’s Try Something Different

*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

--Albert Einstein

“We stand at the dawn of the greatest missionary period in the history of the church. For the first time in history, the church can present the gospel in an understandable form to every human being on the face of the earth” (Charles Van Engan, in a presentation at Andrews University Swallen Lectureship, March 2001).

It is awesome to be part of this exciting missionary period. We are on the cusp of history, entering new territories, meeting new people, introducing them to our best friend, Jesus. Many people, unknowingly, probably have most of the proper qualifications already.

Missions, however, has changed in the last twenty years. It has changed in the last ten years. We do not need the types of workers for mission service we used to. It is difficult to answer young people, raised on the 19th and 20th century mission stories. They ask, “Where is my place in mission? How do I become a missionary?” They are young pastors, teachers, nurses, etc.; and I must tell them that these positions are now being filled with trained nationals. They are no longer needed or wanted with their traditional training and expectations. The divisions, colleges, and universities around the world are training their own people to do the job missionaries used to do and they do not require expensive relocation. It takes a lot of money to send a missionary out to a distant land.

Mission has changed because the world has changed. One of those changes is called Globalization. This means that the world is a lot smaller than it used to be. Oh, not really smaller in size, but it certainly seems so. We communicate faster, get places quicker, and people are going all over the world for jobs.
Reflect on the following facts:

- Over 79% of the world’s population is closed to traditional missionaries, but open to people with needed professional and vocational skills. This is particularly true with the 10/40 Window (that part of the globe between the 10th and 40th parallels, stretching from North Africa, eastward to the Pacific).
- Even if all countries were open, we could never finish the task without mobilizing lay people.
- The global job market has exploded with hundreds of thousands of jobs—God has opened doors to the nations. “See, I placed before you an open door....”

Strange as it may seem, the first “missionary” in the Apostolic Church was not a professional missionary, he was not even a professional theologian. He was an entrepreneur. I prefer to think of Paul as a professional businessman who followed the trade routes of the Eastern Mediterranean cities, plying his trade of making tents. These were not camping tents, not even living tents, they were most likely market tents used by traders in the marketplaces. Similarly, people are needed and may find a place as a twenty-first century “tentmaker” or marketplace professional, to take the name of Jesus where religious-professional missionaries cannot go.

What is a tentmaker? “Tentmakers are Christian witnesses from any nation who, because of their skills or expertise, gain access and maintain themselves in another culture with the intention of making disciples for Jesus Christ and, where possible, to establish and strengthen churches” (excerpted from the Dec. 16-17, 1987, “Tentmaker’s Consultation” at the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, IL).

Conventional missionaries cannot obtain visas to North Africa, the Persian Gulf States, Turkey, China, or parts of Southeast Asia. But (non-missionary) visas are possible if a person has the necessary qualifications as an educator, engineer, health professional, secretary, accountant, scientist, or any one of hundreds of skills needed by these countries or multinational businesses operating in these countries. Not only that, but think of the other assets needed for a marketplace professional:

- Identification: Professionals have natural contact with coworkers on the job. They also share a common mind-set and specialized language with them.
- Credibility: Working for a living legitimizes your presence in the country and increases your credibility and impact.
- Modeling lay ministry: Tentmakers model a biblical work ethic,
godly living, and unpaid, lay evangelism. They set a pattern of every Christian making Christ known, not just the paid pastor or missionary.

Your profession or occupation can be the door to personal involvement in missions. Not only that but modern “tentmaking” restores the sanctity of the workplace and restores to the church the biblical concept of “vocation,” or work as a “calling.”

Even students can be involved by enrolling and attending one of the thousands of universities in the 10/40 Window, many of which offer English-language instruction. One year of study in such a university setting would provide ample opportunity to make friends and share Jesus with other students.

The New Testament concept of Tentmaking began with the arrival of the apostle Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4) with no budget, but a commitment to share the good news about Jesus. Linking up in a partnership with Priscilla and Aquilla, Paul spent the next year and a half working and sharing his faith. Paul later continued this methodology in Thessalonica and beyond. And he was intentional about it. “This was not because we do not have that right (to church support), but in order to give you an example.

In 1 Cor 9:19-23; 1 Thess 2:9; and 2 Thess 3:7-9, the apostle Paul explains why he integrated his “secular” work and mission strategy into one, holistic ministry. From these writings, we derive several important principles:

1. The witness’s role should not hinder the propagation of the gospel. This is a clear indication that the successful tentmaker must first “convert” to the local culture, without losing his spiritual identity and bearings.
2. Paul renounced his cultural rights in order to achieve maximum effectiveness in ministry.
3. He provided the gospel free of charge to avoid any accusation of wrong motives.
4. The witness should not be a burden to others. Paul would not burden others, but would free up money for others.
5. The witness should model a positive work ethic. Paul maintained his entrepreneurial way of ministry as a model for others who would follow. This is a reminder of the reality that work is not part of the curse, but, like marriage and Sabbath, has its origins in pre-fall Eden. We glorify God in our work.
6. The witness should provide an example for new believers. It is not
enough to teach, but the discipler must also model for new believers. All aspects of the life must come under the control of the Holy Spirit—the use of time, skills, relationships, money, work, family, life in the community, and personal devotional time. In contrast, conventional missionaries too often model a white-collar lifestyle.

7. The witness should be accountable. Paul always worked in a team. He was accountable to the church in Antioch, and he served in partnership with the local churches (Phil 1:5; 2 Cor 8:4).

8. The witness should not be a threat to local government or authorities. The witness should never be suspected of fomenting dissatisfaction or dissent, or be suspected of fomenting rebellion. The witness should never attack the state or any religious faith in any way, but always encourage biblical values.

There are some very interesting examples of “tentmakers,” or entrepreneurial believers, other than the apostle Paul.

The mention of donkeys (Gen 24:35) would suggest to some that Abraham was involved in an import-export business in Canaan. Joseph, albeit an unwitting “tentmaker,” was certainly involved in the futures and commodities speculation. Daniel was another politician and statesman. All of these suggest that it is not only legitimate to mix business and mission, but often an excellent methodology.

The reality is that, at the start of the 21st century, approximately 30% of the world is Christian, while another 30% of the world’s population live near and speak similar languages as the Christians. This simply means that if all the Christians in the world would run out to tell all their neighbors about Jesus, 40% would never hear anything because they do not live near Christians nor do they speak the same language as Christians. And this 40% of the world’s population live in what we term the 10/40 Window, across the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese landscapes. If we continue to do what we have been doing for the past century or so, we are likely to get the same results and no more, that is, the 40% will continue to hear nothing. There is little likelihood that all of the “professional-religious” missionaries will be able to get near these people and talk with them. The mobilization of the churches, with all their “secular” professions and entrepreneurial expertise and their disbursement into the largely unentered 10/40 Window is essential. It is, in fact, doubtful that our Lord ever considered his commission in Matthew 28:18-20 to be limited to a special few religious-professionals.

A modern “tentmaker” is a committed witness who works in a cross-cultural setting; one who is recognized by the host culture as something other than a religious professional, but is a “missionary”
in every way: in commitment, in calling, in motivation, and in training. Christian “tentmakers” are everywhere today. They are scientists and writers, housekeepers and physicians, attorneys and truck drivers. They are Karate instructors and agricultural engineers, nurses and entrepreneurs, programmers and performers, and historians. You will find them from Bahrain to Brunei, from Singapore to Azerbaijan, New York to New Guinea. They are people who understand that their work is a sacred trust to be put to the service of God. Paul had it right, “Whatever your work is, put your heart into it as done for the Lord and not for human beings. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col 3:23, 24).

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