

Tentmakers and their Churches: Mutual Responsibility

Ruth Siemens

You can multiply your church's missions involvement with little or no increase in your church budget! Send tentmakers -- lay people who support themselves abroad in secular jobs as they make Jesus Christ known, in the tradition of the Apostle Paul. They may be young graduates, professionals in mid-career, or retired people. They may even be "study abroad" tentmakers. But churches and their lay people who go abroad have a serious responsibility to each other...

Pat and Sandy went to make Jesus Christ known in a difficult Muslim country that has only a handful of local believers. Both had teaching contracts, Pat in the high school and Sandy in the elementary division. Their salaries and benefits would amply provide all their financial needs. The school helped them find a place to live and provided use of a car. They began to settle in. But three days later they were all under house arrest! Riots filled the city.

It was not the best introduction for new arrivals. Then Pat developed worrisome physical symptoms and needed medical attention not available in the country. Then the Gulf War broke out! The pro-Saddam riots intensified and foreigners were ordered to remain indoors for their own safety. Then the U.S. State Department and employers began to evacuate Americans and Europeans to their homelands. The school declared a vacation, hoping to make up lost time during the summer. For Pat and Sandy it was a serendipity leave.

Pat's health problems and the war suddenly made the couple's home church worried about them. When they arrived home, they were overwhelmed to discover how many people were praying! Even though they were members of an excellent church, they had not felt any such concern before they left.

A few months later when they could return to their Gulf country, they went with a strong confidence they had lacked the first time. Now they knew they were not alone--their church was praying for them. God always has multiple purposes in the calamities he allows- as many purposes as he has people! But he used drastic measures to make sure this young couple would not be working without the prayer support they desperately needed in this unreached, spiritually hostile country.

A major argument repeatedly made against tentmaking is that unless you need financial support from your church you cannot get their prayer support. That is often true. But worse, even most people who give do not pray. Many hope generous gifts gets them off the hook. In either case, prayer support must be laboriously cultivated. But it is more difficult for tentmakers because their own churches often do not understand tentmaking or do not take it seriously.

We are thankful for every informed, caring church. But many do not even give tentmakers a send-off! They provide no chance for them to explain to the congregation what they will do and to request prayer. Churches rarely include tentmakers' names on their list of missionaries (unless they need partial support). On return, they are rarely asked to report, in the way other missionaries are. They are considered second class and part-time. Yet most tentmakers work in more difficult pioneer situations than most missionaries.

All genuine tentmakers are in full-time ministry in every sense of the word, even when they have full-time jobs. They integrate work and witness, by their lives and words on the job, and do additional ministries in their free time--like church planting, campus ministries--even Bible translation. Most tentmakers go into countries that do not readily admit missionaries, but welcome people with technical and professional expertise. Eighty percent of the world's people are found in these restricted countries. Tentmakers are essential for world evangelization!

In our 20 years of experience helping missions-motivated Christians to go abroad, we have sometimes felt that churches are three decades behind in their missions thinking on the subject of tentmaking! But how can churches be blamed when even the missions community still struggles with definitions.

Nearly every missions book and nearly every talk assumes that all Christians who take employment abroad are tentmakers. But this is not the case. 99% are merely Christian expatriates with jobs. They have no cross-cultural ministry in their new host country, because they had none at home! Genuine tentmakers are missions-committed, fully qualified professional people, many of whom take great risks in hostile countries. It is not fair to lump them with mere expats!

The Apostle Paul supported himself, in part, to provide his converts with a model for unpaid evangelism. He wanted to be sure they would never be exposed to complacent, half-hearted Christians like the majority of today's lay people. He would be appalled! Paul's labor was a non-negotiable part of his carefully designed strategy for missionary pioneering and for missionary finance. Why did he spend so many hours making tents when he clearly approved of church support and he says he could have received it. He takes great pains to tell us why.

For a fascinating and important study of how Paul's tentmaking fit into his overall strategy, read *Why Did Paul Make Tents?*

In view of our changing world, local churches should be recruiting and preparing their members for tentmaking abroad and providing the spiritual and moral support they need. But now we will consider the responsibility the church and its tentmakers have to each other.

I The local church's responsibility to its tentmakers

Assume that in your church the Smiths wish to go to a Muslim country where he could teach physics in a university and she could teach third grade. The Smiths have two children. What responsibility should your church assume for them? Let me suggest ten points for consideration.

1. The church should equip its members for workplace, campus and neighborhood evangelism.

This first responsibility of the church to its members should take place well before the Smiths and others decide to go abroad. Laypersons must be fully equipped to work and witness in those environments where God has placed them. Jacques Ellul says we Christians lament the mess the world is in, but we are largely to blame, because we have the answer to all its problems, collective and individual, but we keep it a secret. He says the church has only one way to speak to the world--through its lay people! They are the only ones on the front lines, associating with outsiders every day, facing the frustrations of a godless, immoral culture. They are the only ones in a position to challenge the false assumptions of people around them, and to present Jesus Christ. But most do not have a clue what to say. Paul said the main task of the pastors and teachers in the church was to equip the members for effectiveness in the world (Eph. 4:9). Yet our churches today pay little attention to lay people. Our entertainment model services produce mainly spectator Christians. I have a dozen books on mobilizing the laity, but most are concerned with getting every lay person onto some church committee. Most do not even mention making them effective witnesses in the world around them.

According to Paul, our training should not focus on techniques of evangelism, but on our lifestyle--on our personal integrity on the job, the quality of work we do (as though our employer were Jesus Christ! Col. 3, Eph. 6), our caring relationships, and our occasional, fitting words about Jesus Christ. Then we must be ready to answer the questions which will surely be raised. Instead of indiscriminate, confrontational evangelism, we fish out the seekers whom God's Spirit has already made hungry, and we work sensitively with him to lead them to Jesus Christ. You let the seekers pace the conversations with their questions, as they are ready. Their questions show us where they are spiritually, what they know, what they lack, their felt needs, etc., so we know exactly what to answer and how to pray for them. The questions quickly lead into one-on-one Bible studies, and to friendship which enables us to take more initiative in conversations.

Paul gives these instructions as the appropriate way to evangelize in the workplace. See Col. 4:5, 6 and context. Peter gives the same instructions as the appropriate way to evangelize in severe persecution. See 1 Pet. 3:14-17. Of course, he learned it by watching Jesus, whose evangelism consisted almost entirely in answering questions which were incited by something he first did or said. It was selective evangelism. He put out bait.

This approach removes one of the biggest obstacles in today's evangelism: We do not feel comfortable invading the privacy of other people and imposing on them a religious conversation they do not want. I do not find that model of personal evangelism in Scripture. By fishing out seekers we have the joy of telling the gospel to people who want to know it!

Basic training for tentmakers is exactly what every Christian lay person needs. So aim at preparing every member for local lifestyle, fishing evangelism and your church will outgrow its walls, and your lay people will be ready to take Jesus Christ to that 80% of the world that is off-limits to missionaries.

You may want to read our papers, Workplace Evangelism: Fishing out Seekers and Tentmaker Preparation.

2. The church should counsel the applicants.

If the church has long been involved in the Smith's preparation, they can rejoice together as they take steps toward going abroad. But often the prospective tentmakers may not even tell the church in advance, if they think it has little interest in missions or tentmaking. Or they fear embarrassment if their plans do not work out. When we at GO have screened a couple (or an individual) and feel they probably should be encouraged to go, we contact their references. We send a form to one of their pastors, to learn about their participation in their home church and to discover personality or marriage problems that can be detected only through closer, longer association than we can have. But we often send the form with trepidation. Why?

It is often the pastor who talks the applicants out of going! We sympathize with the very difficult task that pastors have these days. Some may feel they cannot handle one more project. Or they are not eager to lose some of their most capable members. Or they want the couple to get denominational training and go under their own mission agency. Or they believe the applicants need much more formal training. Churches are often unaware of quite effective ministry a few of their lay members have on their campus or in their workplace. Or they do not know what qualifications a tentmaker should have. One widely distributed booklet by respected mission leaders says it takes 12 years after high school to be ready to go as a missionary! Good training is important, but in this cosmic war for control of the world, not all the soldiers need officer training! But they must know their Bibles and Bible study, evangelism, and spiritual warfare. Even if the pastors are keen on missions, they may still discourage tentmaking because they have little understanding of it. They approve of formal religious workers but have little confidence in witnessing professional people. They don't know that most of the world's population is off-limits to missionaries and open only to people with technical and professional expertise!

Even pastors and missions committees who approve of tentmaking may have little information and few resources for providing the counsel the prospective tentmakers need--because few resources exist. GO seeks to provide that help to applicants and to churches.

GO helps applicants evaluate their readiness to go abroad, provides training, and recommends the training of other groups, like the Perspectives Course on missions. GO regularly researches secular, salaried positions around the world and provides job and missions counseling. GO also gets applicants in touch with people already serving in the target country, and helps them get into a fellowship and accountability group.

We can recommend speakers on tentmaking, from our own staff, or our tentmaker friends who are home on leave. Pastors can invite the congregation's missions-interested people (all ages) so they can talk and pray together about options. But pastors and church missions committees must be thoroughly familiar with tentmaking or they can find themselves opposing what God is calling some of their members to do!

3. The church should help the tentmakers to enlist the prayer support of the congregation. Most of the new tentmaker sending agencies require their applicants to raise donor support even though they will be earning overseas, partly to help defray overhead costs, but also to get the prayer support of the churches. If churches are not contributing financially to individuals they do not accept them as missionaries. Yet most tentmakers go into difficult countries that are still almost totally under the devil's control. They may not invade his territory with impunity! It is dangerous without prayer backing.

Why should the source of support determine the value of the ministry? That is the charge the Judaizers brought against Paul. If he were really an apostle, if he were anybody at all, he would not have to do manual labor. They said he earned his own way because he knew he was a phony and the churches would not give him support. Paul thoroughly answers the charge in 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Fortunately, some churches are very solicitous of their tentmakers. But I recall the Thompsons, from a very good, missions-oriented church. They had already done two overseas assignments, in industrial food science--fisheries. But their church had shown little interest. This time they were determined to get their church behind them, because they were going to a Muslim country, with no known local believers. They were both disappointed and hurt when church leaders showed little interest.

Nor could they get their church to provide prayer support a few years later when they went to serve in a largely Hindu country, with a significant Muslim population. This couple had good Bible and missions training (including Perspectives) and proven cross-cultural and ministry skills. Fortunately, some of their personal friends formed a support group for them.

But the Thompsons were never listed among the church's overseas workers, and continued to be ignored by the church's pastoral and missions staff. Church and mission leaders often have a strange need to control, and to accept only people who fit into the projects they have formally initiated, or only denominational programs. They design rigidly structured missions programs. In some churches it is necessary to do that to get any funds from the church's financial committee. Some church missions programs are hamstrung by their many rules and multiplicity of committees. Sometimes applicants allow us to call and ask their pastor to give them a few minutes in church to present what God is leading them to do--maybe in a Sunday evening service (at least in adult classes and youth groups). They want members to commit themselves to pray.

One fine pastor was delighted with our request to give Jane time to speak to the church before she left for China. He was sorry he had not known sooner that she was going. He called to tell us what kind of sending service they then planned for her and how meaningful it had been for the whole congregation.

Some churches may want to have a more formal commissioning service, depending on the applicants, and your church's rules for commissioning. (John Stott's church in London has a commissioning service for all the lay people who complete their training course, and become involved in ministry.)

Tentmakers are ideal people to get the church turned on to missions because they provide a fresh new concept of missionary work--one that appeals to lay people, to the ordinary working members of the church. Most do not think of missions for themselves because they cannot see themselves as formal missionaries.

But here is a different model! A model for all ages. Many get excited about using their vocations for Jesus Christ in other cultures. The church can multiply its missionary involvement, without money, because these professionals earn secular salaries and often receive round trip travel and benefits. They are self-supporting. We cannot get the world won without a massive force of them! By limiting missions to the conventional approach, we exclude the majority of church members from consideration.

4. The church should form a support group for the workers. It could be an adult Sunday School class or a group of other people who volunteer to meet once a month to pray, because they are friends, or they share the same vocation, or share a concern for the target country. They take on the responsibility to pray and care for the tentmaker and to keep the church informed. They may choose a coordinator and rotate meetings in each other's homes. They should consider themselves as serving abroad in the person who represents them there! God uses the individuals who have gone abroad and their senders, as a team.

5. The church should pray regularly for the tentmakers. The tentmakers' ministry begins on arrival. Even though many jobs can be done in English, tentmakers should get to work on the local language if they do not already know it. They need it for their own cultural adjustment, to gain the confidence of the people and to sensitively share the Gospel. But there are often local people who speak English and tentmakers can befriend them. In praying, it does little good to say "Lord, bless Larry in Timbuktu." You need information.

The whole church should learn about the country and its people. Use Operation World. Have some group make up a notebook with basic data, newspaper and magazine articles, and the newsletters of the tentmakers. Pick out prayer points from the tentmaker's prayer letters. Always you can ask for: physical protection and provision for the family, good health, encouragement, protection in temptation, strong friendships with local people, boldness to present the Gospel, conversions among the seekers. Pray that the tentmakers will make a thorough adjustment to the culture and become fluent in the language. Pray for their relationships with Christian colleagues.

6. The church should communicate with them. Send letters, but no packages unless that has been cleared with the tentmaker in advance. Packages may never arrive, or be superfluous (everything may be available), or require expensive import duties. Occasional phone calls are not too costly and are helpful even if you just say a few sentences of encouragement. E-mail allows for even more communication, and is immediate. Letters and greeting cards can be sent at Christmas and other holidays--the loneliest times. Know the birthdays of all the family members. If your tentmakers are working in a spiritually hostile country you must use great care in all of these forms of contact with them. One careless person could get the tentmakers fired, imprisoned or expelled from the country. E-mail, phone calls, letters and faxes are easy to intercept. Never use words like missions, evangelism, converts, etc. Assume that everything you say or write may be monitored.

7. Some church members may be able to make a visit abroad.

In this day of airline price wars and frequent flyer miles, one or two of your members could make a personal visit and report back to the church. This could be a great encouragement to the tentmakers, especially if the visit is not too long nor too demanding. It is great if family members can go. Or send the pastor! More than one pastor has caught fire for missions by a visit abroad.

Take into account that visits to some countries are impossible unless the tentmaker knows someone with great clout. Many Muslim countries do not allow informal tourism. You cannot just land in the airport and expect to go to a home or to a hotel. Airlines usually will not sell tickets without verifying your tourist visa.

A quite different problem occurs in Europe. So many Christian visitors come every year, that for any missionary to provide food, lodging, and guide service for very many, would turn them into a tourist hotel, and destroy their ministry. It would be financially impossible. The doorbell rang at my place even in the middle of the night!

The best I could do was provide one meal, refer guests to inexpensive lodging, and explain how to get to the tourist sites. If you can go, it is ideal if you can make your own lodging arrangements in advance, and then, if the tentmakers insist that you stay with them in their home, you are free to accept or not, as you wish. They will want to accommodate people from their church if they possibly can, and if not too many come.

8. The church should welcome tentmakers on brief leaves. Many receive fully paid round trips in the summer, or they may come home from a Muslim country during Ramadan (like our Lent), when everything shuts down for a month. Some tentmakers travel in their part of the world and even investigate other countries for future service. But many come home annually during one of these periods. They may visit relatives across the U.S. and then visit their home church. Their own home may be rented out, so they would welcome a place to stay and maybe the use of a car. They should have a chance to report to the congregation, to classes and youth groups. Most are good to excellent speakers, and others, like many missionaries, do better in an interview format.

9. The church should be prepared to give emergency help. This should rarely, if ever, be necessary. The U.S. consulates and U.S. employers are prepared to deal with political crises. The firms usually have insurance, and evacuate Americans and their families at no cost. American employers abroad also handle health emergencies, and can repatriate families. But tentmakers who work for local employers abroad may have to bear all the expense of bringing their families home in an emergency. A psychology professor found himself fired and stranded in the Middle East, with a wife and three children. This is rare.

Jobs with local employers abroad usually pay much lower local wages, and no travel and benefits. But the "tentmakers" who seek these jobs usually have full or partial donor support, and are with a mission agency, or a tentmaker agency. This is one of several reasons why agencies require their people to raise support even though they will be earning in their target country-to take care of agency overhead and of emergencies.

So the chance is small that any tentmaker will become a great burden on a church. But any big emergency causes sudden disruption of plans and possible need for temporary housing and transportation.

10. The church should help them with re-entry when work abroad ends.

It takes some effort to get used to our own culture again when we have been living in a foreign one. Some tentmakers only intend to work abroad for a year or two or three, and they have plans for further study or work at home. Others would welcome temporary housing and transportation, and help in finding new employment in the U.S. This may be easy for the tentmakers to handle on their own, if their jobs paid well and included relocation assistance. But some tentmakers deliberately take lower-paying positions, if these are more conducive to the ministry they envision. If they went abroad under a tentmaker agency and raised donor support, this support should tide them over a transition. But a few may need considerable practical help.

We felt sorry for Jim, who told us he had been pressured by a youth missions group to drop out of college to go overseas. During ten years abroad with this mission agency, he married and had three children. But now, home again, he said, "I have no good way to earn a living in the U.S., and no way to finish my education." He felt betrayed by Christians who had taken advantage of his youth, his missions commitment and his enthusiasm, to persuade him to go abroad prematurely.

We think most tentmakers should have at least a bachelors degree before they go, in a vocation that is marketable at home as well as in other countries. God cares more about the worker than he does about the work. Young people who still have their education to complete, can do vacation service or study abroad, and then begin their longer term missionary or tentmaking service when their studies are complete.

Many tentmakers do not intend to serve more than a couple of years. But most commitments to long-term missions are made during short terms. Two years will not get the world won and it does not produce missions experts. But two years can turn people into effective advocates of missions and tentmaking.

Art Beals has a great program going in Seattle churches. They send many people each year on short terms. These are professional people who earn well and can pay their own travel and expenses. They may volunteer for a few weeks or take salaried employment for a year or two. The missions pastor says these people come back with a great burden for local evangelism. Their experience abroad transfers to the community where they live and work, and especially to the internationals around them. This short-term program has transformed their large church.

The returning tentmaker's greatest usefulness to his church may be after his return home. A single person or a couple can become excellent recruiters and counselors of others. Although they are not missions experts, they can become valuable members of your missions committee.

Often tentmakers come home because a contract ended, and they seek another open door. Or one of their children needs to be in the U.S. Or aging parents need them. Or they seek further preparation before returning as tentmakers or as regular missionaries. If mission agencies could recruit more people who have had a couple of years of tentmaking they could probably eliminate a great financial waste--the attrition rate of regular missionaries. A third of new missionaries do not complete their first term or return for a second one, although they have been supported through their language and culture learning period.

Tentmakers have already worked on these at their own expense and gained cross-cultural ministry experience. It is a good sign when they wish to make a long-term commitment, because they know all the negative aspects of serving abroad as well as the more romantic side of missions. They are likely to stay in missions for the long haul. In any case, your temporary assistance to these people is likely to count for Jesus Christ.

II The tentmakers' responsibility to their church

1. They must get their church motivated for missions if it is only minimally interested.

It was to his men, already in Christian ministry that Jesus said, "Pray the Lord to send laborers into the harvest." People who are already committed to missions should get other Christians and their own churches excited about global evangelism. They should form a prayer group with others who care. They can create interest through small activities. They should plan how a missions committee should function and then get the pastor and other church leaders interested in helping to implement it. They should never go over the pastor's head, nor use missions to cause dissension if church leaders are against it. But probably the pastor has been too busy and short-handed and assumed the congregation didn't care, or he hopes it will be possible in the future, when the budget is bigger.

Actually, churches that put missions first tend to do better financially and in other ways--maybe because the congregation gives much more importance to local ministry when they see how it fits into God's overall plan for the world and human history. It also motivates Sunday school teachers and others. Is this what Jesus meant by Matt. 6:33--"Seek first the extension of the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you?"

The pastor may be delighted with the small group's initiative. The problem may be a lack of money to support missionaries, so the tentmakers provide a model that doesn't require donor support. For a pastor's suggestions on how members can help their church start a missions program, see our GO Paper on Your Church: A Sending Base for Missions.

2. They should enlist the counsel of the pastor and missions committee when they believe God wants them abroad. Many people do not let anyone know until everything is worked out, to avoid embarrassment if things do not work out.

They shouldn't feel like that. It pleases God that they desire to serve him abroad, and he will honor the fact that they stuck their necks out in faith. Often they are only putting out feelers to see if God wants them abroad, when an opportunity opens up. It is necessary to take initial steps toward going abroad in order to receive guidance from God. But then they should invite church leaders into their planning.

3. They should prayerfully consider the church's counsel.

But if the leaders are not missions-informed and missions-committed, the tentmakers need not be bound by their advice. Although many churches are able and eager to be of expert help, unfortunately, a few constitute bottlenecks in missions.

If the prospective tentmaker couple has confidence in the church's missions commitment, but fear they do not understand or appreciate tentmaking, they should patiently and tactfully try to increase church leaders' understanding. GO has materials and suggestions to help.

4. They should seek ways to share with church groups.

They should tell about their target country, the need there, how they will earn their living, the ministry they hope to have on the job, other ministry they hope will be possible. This kind of sharing is much easier when they come home on leave, after they have first-hand living experience in the country and they can share about specific people they have tried to evangelize, etc. But there should be no pressure on them to report great things. Much of tentmaking is one-on-one sharing of the Gospel. In these difficult, unevangelized countries it can take time to have even one genuine convert. But a slow beginning often gains momentum after awhile.

Tentmakers can make their talks more interesting with maps, overheads, slides, items from the country, and even folk music from the country. Some even serve a snack sample of a typical recipe. They can use statistics from Operation World and data from newspaper and magazine articles. They may prepare a presentation also for children.

5. They should express their appreciation for the communications home.

It is good for tentmakers to depend on this source of encouragement and let prayer supporters know how indispensable they are. Try to respond in some way to each person who shows interest. If the professionals work in a spiritually hostile country they must make sure all prayer supporters understand the need for caution in communicating with them. If the situation is unusually sensitive, they may want all letters sent to one person who will read them and decide if they can be sent. People must also be cautious about what they fax and E-mail. Also, tentmakers should not overdo their use of E-mail. With the possibility of daily communication with home, there is a danger of never psychologically leaving home even though they have crossed an ocean. It is extremely important to put down roots in one's new culture, and for this, one must leave home, and be wholly involved in the local culture.

6. Their letters and E-mail home should be interesting.

Why write if the letters will end up in the waste basket, unread, because they were unattractive or boring? Computers have greatly facilitated this communication. Tentmakers can write a paragraph every day or two about what they have seen or heard or done, and then easily rewrite the best of this material for the main body of all their newsletters for one month. If they send the letters directly to individuals from overseas, they can personalize each letter. People also love to get envelopes with interesting foreign stamps. But stamps in other countries can be very expensive. Personal letters may be risky. Tentmakers often have one copy of a letter hand-carried to the U.S. and mailed there to one friend who will reproduce and mail copies to people on the address list. You should take a supply of US stamps for this purpose, but they should not be affixed until arrival in the U.S., since this is against the international postal code.

7. When home on leave, they should spend time with their prayer groups.

They should prepare interesting presentations of their work and use this chance to increase the missions interest of the whole church, and to recruit people of all ages to go overseas, at least for vacation service--as a start. This should be a time to renew old friendships and to make new friends.

Conclusion

All of the above seems more complicated in one sense, and greatly facilitated in another, when one realizes that many couples will have not just one home church. There may be the church in which the husband grew up, the one in which the wife grew up, where their parents are still members, then the one both attended during college, and the one where they are members now.

They may want to seek prayer support in all four churches (for themselves and for the missions input they can have in them) and among other friends who may be scattered across the U.S. and around the world. But their present church will probably be their main base.

Tentmakers and their churches should have a mutually beneficial, mutually enjoyable relationship. It can make all the difference in the world for the tentmakers and for the church, and for getting this world won for Jesus Christ!

--Ruth E. Siemens

GLOBAL Opportunities