

What is a Tentmaker?

The apostle Paul carried on his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) on some of his missionary journeys. Many people since have followed his example, taking their businesses and professions to other cultures and continents. Thus the word "Tentmaker" has passed into Christian vocabulary.

"We have ever held it to be an essential principle in the conduct of mission, that whenever it is practicable, missionaries should support themselves in whole or in part through their own exertion."

William Carey

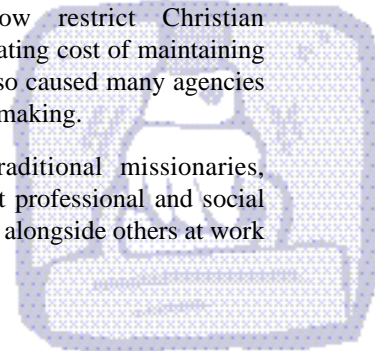
A tentmaker, simply put, is a disciple of Jesus Christ who is called by God to a cross-cultural ministry using marketable skills and services. It is recognized as a valid and important aspect of world mission and is, in no sense, inferior to any other type of service.

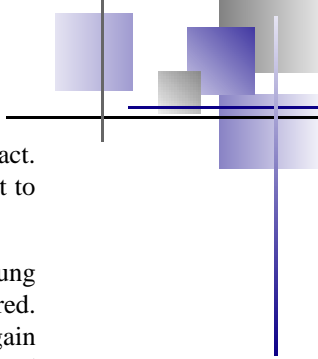
Not too many people are actually sewing tents together as part of missions strategy today, but there are some who have set up small craft businesses. Those who go overseas today are more likely to be teachers of English, administrators, business people, bankers, water engineers, medical professionals, mechanics, students in overseas universities or secretaries. Their jobs may be offered by companies, Governments or international aid organizations and arranged before they leave their home.

Why so important now?

Before the advent of organized Missionary Societies about 200 years ago, tentmaking was the normal pattern for overseas Christian service. Today tentmaking has a new imperative. Many countries now restrict Christian evangelism in some way. The escalating cost of maintaining missionary families overseas has also caused many agencies to rediscover the advantages of tentmaking.

Even in counties that receive traditional missionaries, tentmakers meet people of different professional and social classes in a natural way. Their place alongside others at work





gives them a credible identity and easy point of contact. Friendships develop which can earn the tentmaker a right to be heard.

All ages can be part of tentmaking; young people, young families and those taking early retirement or already retired. Those just out of College or University may need to gain some practical experience before their expertise is welcomed overseas. On the other hand, those who have retired but still have lots of energy, those who are considering a career change or who have been "downsized" may be particularly sought after and may be immediately ready to proceed overseas without much delay. Still others are already on overseas contracts but are wondering what their contribution to Christian service can be.

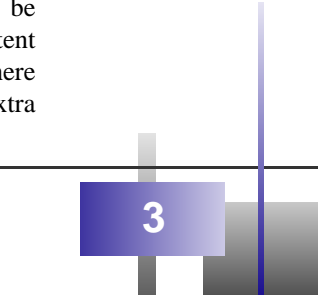
Work and witness: Do they really mix?

Paul provides us with a good model. His primary motive as an apostle was to preach the Gospel, whether in a lecture hall, matted living room or smelly backstreet. But his workbench was also a

"platform", as he was able to demonstrate his faith through hard work, integrity and business ethics. At the same time he could avoid being a financial burden on the infant churches. (Acts 20: 32-35; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3: 6-10).

We may not share Paul's specific apostolic call, or his gifts, but God does call us all, whether at home or overseas, to use our work to glorify Him. A calling to use our God-given skills and experiences in an overseas setting is no less worthy than a call to a specific country.

In practice, there can be difficulties. Our companies and organizations may allow us very little time to prepare adequately, learn the language and become acquainted with the culture before we leave. While there, we may also be expected to be a part of the expatriate community to an extent which makes contact with local people more difficult. There may be pressures from our employer demanding that extra



*"My father would not be in heaven now
if it were not for tentmakers who came to
Argentina"*

Luis Palau

time we had reserved for our special "Christian" work. Indeed, we may find that there is very little time left for witness, apart from our job.

In view of this, would-be tentmakers need a clear understanding of the nature of Christian witness.

- Western distinctions between Sunday and Monday, spiritual and secular, are unhelpful. We should see our entire lives as ministry, 24/7. We can honour God in our workplace through our behaviour and attitudes, the quality of the products and services we provide, and our integrity and morality. In some parts of the world, Christian morality contrasts sharply with the behaviour of others from Western cultures and this invites questions.
- Tentmaking is not "cover" for gospel preaching. Tentmakers obtain visas for a specific job, which they are required to carry out in an exemplary manner. A tentmaker should therefore have no ethical dilemmas about being a first-class professional and first-class witness for the Lord Jesus Christ and should be happy and confident with holding and explaining that identity.

"When I arrived in Asia I found myself with a staff of 72, including Muslims, Hindus, Parsees and Christians. It was a challenge to ensure that they all worked well together and I sought to demonstrate my high regard for each one as I believe Jesus would have done in a very unequal society."

Roy

Isn't self-support the key issue?

Our self-support can be an advantage in that we are not paid by the church or any Christian organization. This can give an independent credibility to the faith we seek to share. But self-support is not essential and

local salaries often have to be supplemented by payments from home churches and elsewhere. More important is that:

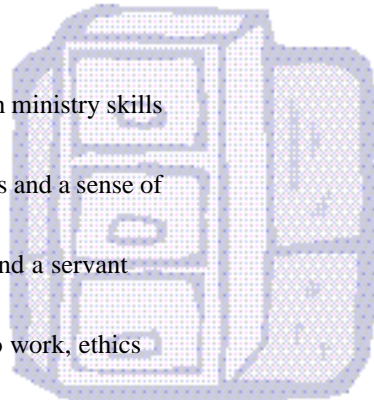
- God has called us to use our gifts and skills in a cross-cultural setting.
- We take opportunity to share the Gospel sensitively and with integrity. The work itself will be one means of testimony and sometimes, depending on the circumstances, may be the only way.

- We are recognized and commended by our home church, and in most cases are connected with a mission society or agency that can encourage and help us through the difficult times.
- Whenever possible, we link up with a national church in the country of service.

What other qualities do we need?

Many, but here are just a few to consider:

- A marketable skill, preferably with some years of experience.
- A good relationship with God and – this is vital – a sustained prayer life.
- Good biblical knowledge.
- A growing ability to witness for Christ with ministry skills in evangelism, teaching and discipleship.
- A concern for people who don't know Jesus and a sense of calling.
- Growing self-acceptance, love for others and a servant heart.
- A biblical perspective on issues relevant to work, ethics and social matters.
- An excitement about other cultures, or at least an awareness that we need to understand other cultures.
- A flexible and adaptable approach to others who are different.
- Respect for other Christian workers with different roles and perceptions of ministry.
- An ability to set objectives realistically, while being open to God's unexpected demands and provision.
- Good physical and psychological health.
- The ability to cope with culture stress, family stress, isolation and loneliness.



But, is it for me?

How do we know if "tentmaking" is for us? There are missionaries and others who tell amazing and exciting stories of God's leading in their lives, but often guidance comes in undramatic ways. A calling does not have to be to a specific country; it may be to use our God-given skills and experience overseas in a number of countries in our lifetime, or perhaps for a shorter period of time during our careers.

"God opened the way for us to teach English in the Far East and to make friends with so many. They came to our house eager to know more about us and our faith"

Anna and Patrick

Guidance may involve spreading out all the available information and specifics about different countries and job opportunities and praying through the various possibilities. What is important is that we ask the following questions:

Do I desire to serve the Lord?

"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart"

Ps 37:4

Am I reading His word and praying to know and do His will?

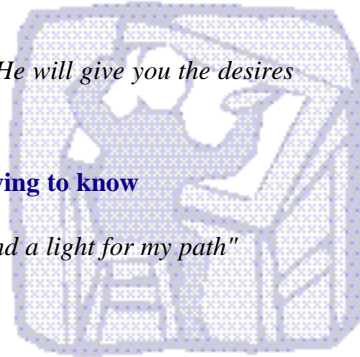
"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path"

Ps 119:105

Am I an "overseas" type?

Some people have a buzz of excitement about living in other cultures. God gives us many different gifts and personalities and not all of us are going to be "overseas types". Some will recoil at the thought. God normally uses our natural gifts, adding to them other spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit. He has plans for us, which will complement the way He made us.

Having an excitement about life overseas is not everything; we also need to check our motives carefully. Tentmaking also demands a servant heart and often real sacrifice, both to our careers and in personal ways. God always knows our individual circumstances and will supply our needs as we trust Him (Phil 4:13). Training can be part of the spiritual equipping.



A strategy

If tentmaking is for us, we should start to develop a strategy which will involve our becoming experienced in our chosen profession, being in fellowship with our church and being practiced in cross-cultural communication and other ministry gifts.

Examine the options

Why not begin by looking in the newspapers and professional journals for the sort of jobs that you will be qualified for? See what countries they are in. Find out about those countries and the sort of strategic opportunities you might find there for sharing the Gospel.

"We opened our house for Bible study for both expatriates and nationals. It was a most effective way of sharing in that country."

Robert and Jan

Consider a Short Term ministry opportunity in a country that interests you. Ask mission agencies to help you, and talk to others who have worked in those countries. Build up a file. Pray about the responses you get. Talk it through with someone in your church whose judgment you trust. Lay out your ideas to God. Read your Bible faithfully. Let God lead you, step by step, into what He wants you to do.

If you have not YET decided on a career, or are open to a change, it may be right to consider training as a teacher of English (TESL/TEFL). There are many challenging openings and intensive training can be completed in as little as five weeks.

Should I go with a Mission Agency?

The past experience of many people has shown that we need an agency with whom to relate and who can encourage and assist us. Some who have completed one term overseas independently, opt to be linked with an agency for subsequent assignments. Many tentmakers can be lonely and vulnerable, which makes it difficult to survive spiritually. Some who have gone overseas independently have had to be "bailed out" by mission groups, diverting time and energy from their own work. There are enormous advantages in being a part of a "tentmaking" team.

A list of Canadian Tentmaker Network (CTN) members, many of whom recruit tentmakers, is provided at the end of this booklet.

What if my secular job already takes me overseas?

Some Christians already go overseas as a part of their professional or business lives and want to have a part in the

“Since a boy I always wanted to go abroad, spinning my bedroom globe and wondering where it would be. In the event it was to be many places using my profession as a diplomat.”

Roger

Great Commission while they are there. Some have become excited to be involved once they see the strategic opportunities in that country, but there are many more who need to capture the vision and be encouraged to reach out cross-culturally. To be effective in that role we need to

be prepared spiritually and to be accountable to other Christians for our ministry for the Lord. Training is less easy once we are overseas, but courses may be available during downtime back at home.

Where does the home church fit in?

Your church at home needs to affirm you and encourage you and perhaps formally "send" and commission you. You should talk to your pastor and /or missions committee; you may need to explain your vision and perspective carefully so that they see and understand the strategic importance of your desire to work overseas for God.

The home church should be involved in your training and ensure that you have basic experience in friendship evangelism and other ministry skills, such as running an evangelistic Bible study in a home.

They could help you establish realistic objectives about what you can achieve in your Christian activities overseas.

They can direct you to a mission agency and should be prepared to stand with you during your stay overseas, to pray for you and to keep in touch with you on a regular basis. In some cases, they will need to supplement your income.

How can Canadian Tentmaker Network (CTN) help?

CTN exists to help those who are or want to become tentmakers, and will elaborate on any of the points in this booklet. CTN will also put you in touch with those agencies involved in tentmaking and will help you with preparation, training and advice about tentmaker service.

What specific preparation is needed?

Tentmaking is not a quick, cheap, easy way to the mission field. In many ways becoming a tentmaker is more difficult than traditional missionary service and often requires more preparation and training. Many who have just packed their bags and gone have returned disillusioned.

"I was fascinated by my first overseas posting: ladies with veils over their faces driving cars, donkeys pulling carts, interesting ceremonies"

Sharon

Apart from the training and experience that you will take with you from your profession, business or trade, you will need spiritual and practical preparation to be an effective tentmaker. A brief look at the "Check list" that follows may seem intimidating, but there are few short cuts and it is really necessary to be prepared in most of the areas listed.

You may have already taken some of the training at your home church without realizing it! The church or fellowship that you attend is the best preparation ground for developing a dynamic spiritual life and learning the basic communication and relationship skills needed in friendship evangelism. You will need to decide the best approach to your training. Establishing an early relationship with some of the mission agencies listed at the back of this booklet will also help as they can guide you from their own experience.

You may be able to spend time at a Bible College, Seminary or on a course, like 'Perspectives', that looks into mission issues in depth. Even then, a number of issues related to tentmaking may not be covered, so check the syllabus carefully. CTN can make you aware of the issues in tentmaking which may affect you and can direct you to seminars, workshops and literature on the subject.

CHECK LIST OF TOPICS FOR TENTMAKER PREPARATION AND TRAINING

1. The call to go

- Q God's heart for missions from Genesis onwards
- Q The Great Commission
- Q The unfinished task and the present day challenge
- Q The growing number of "tentmaker only" or Creative Access Nations
- Q The nature of a "call"
- Q The right motivation

2. The practical and strategic advantages of tentmaking

- Q The Biblical mandate
- Q Biblical and historical examples
- Q The present necessity to develop creative strategies
- Q Opportunities for the professional and business person today

3. The tentmaker's biblical and doctrinal foundations

- Q Knowing the Bible, achieving biblical and doctrinal competence
- Q Dependence on the Holy Spirit
- Q Doctrinal stability, in relation to the uniqueness of Christ and a biblical view of other religions
- Q Clarity about which truths are essential to the Gospel and an understanding of with whom we can work together

4. The tentmaker and his job

- Q Work as a ministry; one's whole way of life
- Q Pursuing excellence as a means of testimony
- Q The bi-vocational dilemma; the problem of time; the possibility of conflicts of interests with one's employer

5. Spiritual Preparation

- Q Spiritual birth, growth and maturity
- Q Maintaining one's life in God
- Q Assessing one's natural and spiritual gifts, including leadership
- Q Emotional and psychological readiness
- Q The issue of survival, support, help and encouragement
- Q The tentmaker called to servanthood
- Q A growing love for others
- Q Resolving issues with others
- Q A healthy approach to marriage and singleness
- Q A witnessing life, developed within a local church, here at home

6. Other aspects of personal preparation

- Q A considered view of world moral issues and an ability to articulate them
- Q An ability to manage time
- Q Assessing suitability for a particular country
- Q Adjusting to a different security situation, surveillance and security of communications

7. Ethical issues

- Q The ethics of "cover"
- Q Ethical use of time
- Q Ethics of the marketplace

8. Accountability

- Q How to ensure it. The possibility of mutual accountability
- Q Setting realistic and measurable objectives

9. Identification with the host culture

- Q Language
- Q Understanding the host culture and world view
- Q Understanding the nature of culture; knowing how to separate culture from issues of faith and Christian behaviour
- Q The extent of identification, living conditions, etc
- Q Balancing the relationship with one's own country with that of the new country
- Q Overcoming our prejudices, helping those of the host country overcome theirs

10. Developing skills in evangelism and discipleship

- Q Friendship evangelism
- Q Leading an evangelistic Bible study
- Q Discipling others
- Q Church planting
- Q Dangers of inadequate training

11. The roles of home church and local national church

- Q The home church vision of the tentmaker's work; their prayer, support and help
- Q Prayer letters and information on activities
- Q The tentmaker's relationship with a local national church, where that is possible and wise

12. Teamwork

- Q The advantages of teams; are "lone rangers" ever justified?
- Q Forming a team from tentmakers already established in an overseas location

13. Spiritual warfare

- Q How Satan attacks the family and the team
- Q Entering enemy held territory; dealing with demonic powers

14. Personal, vocational and family stress

- Q Culture shock and stress; its nature and remedies
- Q Burnout and leaving the country early
- Q Rest and relaxation away from the work location