

**ISSUES SURROUNDING THE  
RECRUITMENT AND PLACEMENT OF  
TENTMAKERS IN THE GULF**

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**1 Three cross-cultural workers in the Arabian Gulf**

Hong Chien is an Asian American banker. Active in the missions program in his church in Singapore, over the years he has sensed an increasing burden for training Asian cross-cultural workers to reach Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula (AP). This call has been confirmed by his local church and leadership. They chose to go through a sending agency that had a long history of doing wholistic (integral) missions in the AP. Hong Chien and his wife enrolled for language studies for one year which required raising financial support. After the first year, he started working for a local AP investment firm which provides the majority of his living expenses. His wife continues to have a private tutor for Arabic language acquisition. They have regular ministry among local majority faith people, and are also equipping other Asian expatriate to minister cross-culturally.

In the church that Hong Chien regularly attends, the pastor regularly preaches on God's love for the nations, and the need for church members to make the most of interaction with non-believers in their workplace and neighborhoods. Barry who is from Africa and also in the finance field goes to this same church. Barry and his wife grew up in Christian families, and took the job in the AP because of the increased career prospects. Within the first two months of their arrival, they found themselves and their children making friends with nationals and other expatriates from the majority faith background. Although they wanted to be able to minister effectively cross-culturally, they felt under-equipped to respond with understanding when discussing faith issues with their

new-found friends. They were heartened when they heard their church was offering the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (Winter et al, see Bibliography) and later Encountering the World of Islam (Swartley, see Bibliography) courses. They enrolled for both courses which instilled in them a clear biblical vision for cross-cultural missions to the least reached peoples. They realized that God had sovereignly placed them through their job placement in the AP to reach some of the least reached. Increasingly, they felt God calling them to be part of the effort to mobilize expatriate Christians in the AP to be strategic and intentional in their outreach. They are making plans to cut back on their work commitments in order to devote an increasing proportion of their time to bring cross-cultural training to professionals in their city (Smythe et al, see Bibliography).

Patrick is a third culture adult whose parents were cross-cultural workers and tentmakers in Asia. Patrick took a promotion through his multinational company to the same AP city as Hong Chien and Barry. Patrick has immersed himself in the study of the local language and culture as he interacts with many locals including members of the ruling family. Because his parents were trying to reach a similar religious group, Patrick has a good grasp of the theology of and Christian apologetics relating to the majority faith. He feels very much at home in faith discussions with colleagues from work. He often has parties in his home where he invites friends and colleagues from work as well as members from his church who have a heart for cross-cultural outreach. His workplace provides opportunities to talk about how his Christian faith informs his business decisions and management style and approach. He is looking for ways to have more intentional conversations with his friends on issues of faith both in one-on-one situations, as well as in group situations perhaps through forums or management training seminars.

After reading these real stories of three different paths to cross cultural service in one location, one could ask who is/are the “pro-

totype” tentmaker? These scenarios are repeated with some minor variations over and over again in the Gulf countries of the Arabian Peninsula (the author's experience includes GCC countries and not Yemen). How does this affect recruiting and placing cross-cultural workers in such environments, and how do we ensure that they are having fruitful and productive ministries?

## 2 Definitions

For the sake of clarity and to avoid misunderstanding and misapplication, for our discussion, we will accept the following definitions, based on Interserve's approach:

*Wholistic ministry:* is intentionally bearing witness to the whole character of God and His might acts of redemption through proclamation, service, and fellowship.

*Tentmaking:* is engaging intentionally in wholistic ministry in a cross-cultural context by using professional skills that are the practitioner's primary identity.

*Marketplace ministry:* is using professional skills of tentmaking in primarily commercial context, in contrast to the not-for-profit sector.

*Business as mission (BAM):* is marketplace ministry that harnesses the potential of business for intentional mission impact with a view to profitability and sustainability.

In the Gulf region, access depends on work visas. Although Christians can enter on pastor and clergy visas, the vast majority of Christian intentional workers would be tentmakers, in the marketplace, or doing BAM. For the purpose of this discussion, we would consider Christians who come in on pastors' and clergy visas as “tentmakers” working in a church setting or religious domain. In our definition, these workers have their primary work

identity in their “job” and would be using a job merely as a “platform” or to gain access and visas, using “shell” companies without real “products.” In Scripture tentmaking could be seen as a spectrum. Paul would be an example in one extreme, as he did so as a temporary assignment possibly for strategic purposes, and probably part time (as opposed to his primary calling and identity as Apostle, church planter and evangelist). Paul's life is characterized by a distinct call and setting apart to minister to Gentiles (Acts 13).

Some would refer to this end of the spectrum as an Apostolic or Strategic tentmaker, but we will use the term “specialist” tentmaker as one called to a specific task or people group, or location. Paul's ministry is characterized by a distinct call, unifying purpose, and focused pursuit of a vision and charge (Acts 26:19). The end of the spectrum would be exemplified by Aquilla and Priscilla who as far as we know always operated a tentmaking business wherever they went but were gifted partners in ministry. Some of the characteristics of their tentmaking ministry included a work identity, ability to teach and correct, and using their resources for the building up of the local church (Acts 18, Romans 16:3). We will refer to this type as Tentmaker “not otherwise specified” (NOS).

We have chosen the term “specialist” and NOS, with the hope that the former term does not carry a sense of superiority (that perhaps the terms Apostolic or Strategic or Focused or Intentional would connote), but rather point out that there are real differences in terms of gifting and specific calling. We will explore issues that surround the placement specifically of the category of wholistic tentmakers (which includes marketplace ministry and BAM) without further delving into the specifics of the subcategories of marketplace workers and BAM.

### **3 Recruiting of tentmakers to cross-cultural mission**

From these two broad categories of tentmakers (the Specialist and NOS), there would be differing needs in terms of placement and

engaging in fruitful ministry. In most cases, placement in the Gulf generally is not recruiting in the traditional sense of finding specific called people to fill specific strategic jobs, but more typically involves placement into marketplace positions. We would like to propose that the two-fold task for sending agencies then is, a) the placement of Specialists in locations and in jobs where they can fulfill their calling, and b) the engagement and resourcing of tentmaker NOS for effective and fruitful ministry. We will look in more detail at issues related to calling, funding, and ministry support of tentmakers.

## **4 Calling**

### ***4.1 Relevance***

Most traditional missionaries and tentmakers go through a “typical” journey in which a specific call to a people group or location is identified. The biblical basis for calling in missions is typically the example of the Antioch church in Acts 13 where the church sets aside and releases (under the direction of the Holy Spirit) Barnabas and Paul for a specific task. In this framework the Holy Spirit, the local church, and the missionaries are the three requisite agents in the sending model. So in addition to what would be understood as a general command and call of God throughout Scripture to bless the nations, and in the Great Commissions to preach, teach, and make disciples of the nations with a geographical strategy in Acts 1:8, the majority of missionaries today would be able to identify a specific call. The presence of a call is often the anchor that keeps one engaged in the task and persevering in missions in the face of opposition and inevitable difficulties. The Apostle Paul refers to being obedient to the heavenly vision as a life unifying pursuit and theme in Acts 26.

#### ***4.2 Timing and sequence of call in temporal relation to job placement***

But is a specific call to a people, or a place, or a task required for placement of a tentmaker? Does it make a difference? Does the sequence of calling and placement make a difference? Our experience and the examples listed above would say that tentmakers may come to a “specific” calling by many different ways and paths, some before placement, others after job placement. Those whose “call” come after job placement, frequently may not seek a formal affiliation with a sending agency.

#### ***4.3 Call and priorities***

For those who do not have a specific call, it has been our experience placement would be heavily weighted toward job prospects rather than ministry and Kingdom expansion prospects. Rather than seek to stay in a region for maximum ministry impact, with moving as the last resort, the decisions would tend toward taking the best available job without regard for location, and to “go with the flow” for ministry opportunities. For ministry in the Gulf region (not unlike other settings), longevity is definitely an asset, required to build trust and to open doors. Those who do not have a specific call to a people group or location often will typically choose to go where their jobs lead, and “bloom” where their job “plants” them. There is nothing “wrong” with this type of path, although it would lead potentially to a tendency to think of missions and tentmaking as a series of short-term assignments or possibly a career interlude.

#### ***4.4 Calling and outcomes***

Does calling affect outcome/impact? In Scripture we certainly see examples of God accomplishing His purposes through various agents, even those who may not be intentional or hostile to Him-

self, and sometimes through events that seem to be completely random. The authors are unaware of any empirical information that would allow one to answer this question, and perhaps this could be the focus of future study and missiological research

## **5 Funding**

Closely related to the calling issue is often the issue of funding. As it relates to job placement, in broad categories, tentmakers may find themselves with job offers that provide adequate versus inadequate financial support for them and their families. This is assuming that the job environment, conditions, and demands allow us to engage in wholistic tentmaking ministry. We will not further delve into the issue of work conditions, hours and such, but limit our discussion to the financial area. In addition, one can further subdivide into two subgroups jobs that provide sufficient/adequate versus insufficient/inadequate funds, based on whether the “job placement” is an “upward” or “downward” placement. An “upward” placement (UP) would be a career enhancement and promotion; a “downward” placement (DP) would be the opposite. Thus intuitively we can encounter four possible categories depending on whether a tentmaker chooses an UP or DP and whether the placement provides sufficient financial support or additional support raising is required. Experientially we see these categories of tentmakers in our setting, and are unaware of research data to look at the demographics and do additional study of these categories. We submit that each funding category of tentmaker presents unique challenges in placement and sorting out the interplay of calling and best job placement.

### ***5.1 UP—sufficient funds***

For this tentmaker, placement is often not a problem. From a purely job placement standpoint it is a natural progression. Usu-

ally the issue is sorting out the root motivation and calling. Perhaps the more difficult issue is that one's identity as a called Specialist tentmaker could be in question. To the average believer or Church Mission Committee member, they cannot understand what is so special or strategic about this type of position. Although we do not have empirical data, this category may represent the largest majority of Mission-minded Christians in the Gulf who would identify themselves as or aspire to be tentmakers, and possibly have no sending agency affiliation. They see sending agencies primarily providing value as a funding mechanism which is not a need for them. Specialist tentmakers may also find themselves in this group, and their affiliation with a sending agency would be driven by factors other than funding needs.

### ***5.2 UP—insufficient funds***

The job placement would be an increase in responsibility, and depending on the home country of the individual could even mean an increase in pay. But the package is insufficient to provide for living expenses. These could be tentmakers who come from resource poor countries, or to jobs that are in low paying domains in the country of service. Specialist tentmakers may find themselves in this category where additional funds need to be raised to facilitate placement, which would need to be deemed of a strategic nature. These tentmakers would look to sending agencies for funding support, but also for support to achieve their strategic ministry goals.

### ***5.3 DP—sufficient funds***

This category of tentmaker could include people who want to take a smaller job or a slower pace, but may also include those who want to have a strategic presence and are willing to “downsize” for the sake of Kingdom priorities. They may receive a smaller salary than job offers in other locations, or even similar jobs in other domains, but choose to be DP for strategic Kingdom reasons. In

many ways their needs would be similar to those in the category of UP with sufficient funds.

#### ***5.4 DP—insufficient funds***

Usually people who voluntarily choose this type of job placement do so as Specialist tentmakers who would make this type of voluntary downward career choice and live in a setting to maximize their Kingdom effectiveness. Unless forced to do so, this is not a natural career progression for most people. Affiliation with a sending agency often is a necessity for funding reasons. Usually it is not difficult to communicate the reasons and strategic nature of this type of placement to supporters.

Obviously these categories are not static, especially for those with specific ministry callings. Similar to the Apostle Paul, one could transition from having sufficient resources to insufficient resources during a lifetime of service (Philippians 4). There were times when Paul saw fit to accept financial support, and other times where he worked hard and he and his team provided their own financial support. Flexibility on the part of sending agencies in regards to funding policies to accommodate the changing financial needs of tentmakers would be important from a recruitment/entry as well as long term retention standpoint. Also, it is important for agencies and sending churches as well as tentmakers to communicate clearly when choices of strategic Kingdom nature are being made, as this is not a framework through which everyone filters job placement.

## **6 Support**

Finally in the area of support of tentmakers, agencies are aware that in addition to serving as a funding mechanism, tentmakers are looking increasingly to what value-added dimension there is in their relation and affiliation with agencies. For NOS tentmakers who come with job placement and not necessarily a specific call,

this may be the first point of discussion on affiliation with an agency, i.e., “What do you provide as an agency as I do not need to raise financial support.” We offer some of the following areas for consideration.

### ***6.1 Assist tentmakers to process their calling and vocational identity issues***

The “journey” and process of tentmakers to effective ministry is different from that of “traditional” missionaries. As we noted from our three examples at the outset of the article, each story is unique in its presentation and yet there are some common themes and issues that all tentmakers have to deal with and process. Not all local churches and their missions committees have the capacity or resources to understand the needs and help map out the pathway for tentmakers to discover their God given calling. Sending agencies that have strong tentmaking ethos and cultures can be resources for churches and individuals on this pathway to cross-cultural service. For most Specialist tentmakers, part of the process of being called involves counting the cost of following Christ in missions. This may include adjustment in expectations from work identity, and grieving over real sacrifices to be made in light of career choices. Much of this is normal and an expected process as one follows Christ in incarnational ministry, personalizing the gospel dynamic of being poured out for others’ benefit (Phil 2:17) or becoming poor so others may become rich (2 Cor 8:9).

### ***6.2 Teaming around specific calling and focused ministry***

Whether one senses a specific call to a people group, a country location, church planting, wholistic ministry or diaspora ministry, there can be a sense of isolation if there are no others who share in that call, ministry or location. Although there are many examples of “solo” practitioners who accomplished “great things” in missions, working in teams and partnership with other believers is the

norm in the New Testament and should be the goal on the field. The specific “team” needs of tentmakers has been outlined recently in a paper by Jones et al. to “create” the nidus for teams to achieve “critical mass” in terms of numbers and team member gifting.

Networking sufficient numbers of practitioners in a given domain or with a specific calling into Communities of Practice (CoP) is another potential contribution that agencies can make. These CoPs would serve as a foundational resource for networking and support, experiential learning and sharing of knowledge, with the goal of collaborative activities/affiliations/partnerships, determining best practices, and incorporating and training of new and next generation practitioners. Even in a globalized, networked and connected world, churches and individuals cannot go it alone on the tentmaking journey. The “last mile” (or inches?) of the tentmaking placement journey typically requires organizations with people-presence and first-hand knowledge on the “ground”/on location, where trust and relationships are forged and true partnering can result.

### ***6.3 Accountability toward fruitful ministry and effectiveness***

One of the criticisms of tentmakers, especially those who have sufficient funding from their employment, is the lack of accountability and “lone ranger” or a “go it alone” mentality. As there are no “controls” from the funding side, there can also be the temptation to do as one pleases and be unaccountable in ministry pursuits. Sending agencies are probably best positioned to engage with tentmakers in discussion of these types of issues. Having conversations about ministry goals and aspirations, how to develop appropriate ministry plans and to set up accountability mechanisms to monitor progress would be natural outgrowths of these tentmaker-agency relationships. In the Gulf, plans are in place for a formal mentoring program that would facilitate fruitful ministry growth for tentmakers. For this effort, templates to understand knowledge base, competencies, and ministry skills will be needed. Also, goals

that account for and measure spiritual formation, ministry processes and ministry goals will need to be articulated.

#### ***6.4 Specific expertise in cross-cultural interaction and capacity***

Agencies are best positioned to leverage their understanding of cross-cultural issues and organizational DNA, and apply them to the tentmaking team context. This can range from member care to team issues, especially when one places tentmakers into multi-cultural teams.

### **7 Conclusions**

By some estimates, there are upwards of 3-4 million Christians living in the Arabian Peninsula. Of these a small proportion have come to the Gulf with specific intention of ministering cross-culturally as tentmakers. In addition, others (undoubtedly a larger proportion) come with job placements then catch a vision of what God is doing, and want to participate effectively. Sending agencies are in a unique position to meet the different needs of tentmakers, ranging from processing and discerning the call, vocational identity issues, strategic placement, and ensuring ongoing ministry effectiveness. Our goal is to develop Christ-following, cross-cultural tentmakers who are lifelong learners in community, fulfilling their calling, impacting their world and discipling the nations.

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