



TENTMAKING

The
Life and Work
of Business as Missions

PATRICK LAI

“It is not often that we find a comprehensive and down to earth book on the topic of tentmaking. Patrick Lai has done a great service to the global mission community by writing *Tentmaking*. As one reads the book, one will quickly find that this book is not crafted from a desk only. Rather it comes out of a personal and corporate experience of many tentmakers who have been actively practicing what he has written.”

DAVID LEE TAI-WOONG, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL MISSIONARY
TRAINING CENTER, SEOUL

“Patrick is no armchair theorist. Having watched him in action for nearly two decades, I am impressed with his abilities and expertise in tentmaking. His book is an excellent tool of practicality for anyone interested in serving the Lord through the professional, ‘secular’ route.”

PHIL PARSHALL, SIM, PHILIPPINES

“Finally a book on tentmaking in a pioneer context that causes us to ‘love God with our minds.’ No glittering generalities here. Patrick is one who has planted churches, started businesses, and now thoroughly researched those who are living overseas doing ministry via secular jobs. We must be grateful for both the demythologizing and for the practical guidance herein. Don’t go overseas without it!”

GREG LIVINGSTON, DIRECTOR EMERITUS, FRONTIERS

“Patrick and his wife are two of the most experienced and effective tentmakers today. This long-awaited book is the clearest and most comprehensive treatment of the subject to date. It will no doubt be a tremendously useful resource for tentmaking novices and veterans alike.”

STEVE RUNDLE, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS AT BIOLA UNIVERSITY,
CALIFORNIA AND CO-AUTHOR OF *GREAT COMMISSION COMPANIES*

“Patrick Lai has done an outstanding job! The combination of his own successful tentmaking work, both as a businessman and church planter in the 10/40 Window, makes this book relevant and to the point. Patrick’s meticulous research, upon which much of the book is based, also gives added credibility to everything he says. *Tentmaking* is a ‘must read’ for all current and future tentmakers worldwide.”

LARRY W. CALDWELL, DIRECTOR DOCTOR OF MISSOLOGY, PROGRAM DIRECTOR,
ASIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, MANILA

“This book is the definitive work for contemporary tentmaking. Patrick Lai has composed a very extensive and highly-practical resource birthed from many years of personal experience and interviews from over 450 tentmakers serving in the 10/40 Window. The breadth and depth of Lai’s book makes it the most comprehensive piece of literature on the topic to date.”

EVANGELICAL MISSIONS QUARTERLY



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Today, it became clear. Driving home from the office, I caught the movement of something out of the corner of my eye. It was the blowing of a blanket. It drew my attention. Three scrawny little boys were building a tent. In the steppes of Central Asia, this is not a shiny, nylon, Sears store-bought tent, but a “blankets and sheets borrowed from Mom” tent. The best kind. The children looked so cute, I stopped to watch. They saw me and waved. I waved back. The tent was tight and strong.

“Wow! I used to do that,” I said to myself. Then it hit me. I am still doing that! I get to build any tent business I want, and it never stops. God’s grace, a talented wife, helpful friends, and this tent interest have enabled us to build several tentmaking businesses. The businesses have allowed us to employ wonderful, responsible, and fun-to-work with nationals and expatriates who, as one like-minded team, have been used by our Master to bring His good news to an unreached people group. Yes, there have been hard times, but we have lacked nothing. We have watched our children grow and move on. We have made dear friends who have helped us in our quest to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

I wish to thank Jesus for the wonderful life He has given me. This book and all that I am and do is dedicated to Him. I wish to thank the many team members I have worked with over the years for your part in God’s transformation in my life. To my current co-workers, thank you for your patience, help, wisdom, and perseverance as we struggled to start businesses and plant the church. Thank you too for enabling me to have the time to finish this assignment. *You are the best!* I also wish to thank the hundreds who participated in the survey and interviews, which provided the data for my research. In addition, I want to thank the many unnamed others who helped edit this book. And finally, I wish to thank my wife of twenty-five years who continues to put up with my propensity to start and be consumed with projects such as this book. She is my keenest critic and biggest help. A Proverbs 31 woman is defined by the respect she brings her husband. She has brought me so much. Without her sacrifices and tireless help, nothing I have done in life would be accomplished. She truly is a God-given helper for me.

I owe a debt of thanks to Phil and Julie Parshall for their challenges and guidance, forcing me to substantiate what is and is not effective in the areas of evangelism and church planting among those serving in the 10/40 Window. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to Greg and Sally Livingstone, our mentors, who have kept us on task and guided us in ministry. It is my prayer that this book will encourage and assist in adequately equipping those going to or already serving in the 10/40 Window.

As we move into our twenty-second year overseas, organizations we once begged for help are now contacting us for “how-to” information. We are thankful to our Master for our businesses, our team, and our lives, which He uses to transform us into His image. We keep three simple standards for our businesses: strive for quality, be profitable, and create witnessing opportunities for Christ. We know we are blessed to do what we do, and we know that if we keep doing the best work of which we are capable, we can always be as joyful as those little people building their remarkable blanket tents.

PREFACE

In 2 Samuel 18, we are told the story of Ahimaaz and the Cushite, messengers of General Joab. The Cushite fought in the battle. He had experienced first hand the results of close combat. In need of a messenger, Joab chose him to go and report what he had seen to King David. Ahimaaz was standing there when the Cushite was sent out. Ahimaaz wanted to run and take the good news to the King, too. As Joab's assistant, Ahimaaz had not been in the battle, yet he felt a desire to share what he heard with the King. Not weary from the battle and knowing a short cut, Ahimaaz outran the Cushite. David was waiting at his headquarters for news of the battle. He wanted specific information about the battle and especially his son, Absalom. When Ahimaaz reported to King David, he did not know the details. He had not experienced the battle nor seen what happened. As a result of his second hand information, he was told to "stand aside" while the Cushite was ushered into the presence of the King. The Cushite had fought in the battle; he had accurate, first-hand information. Ahimaaz was eager to serve, but he did not share from his own life's experiences.

What little has been written on tentmaking has been given us largely by observers who have not fought in the battle. This book is a report from those who are still in the battle. It has been in formation for years, simply because there has been little free time for anything but fighting the battle.

Antonia Van der Meer trains tentmakers at the Brazilian Evangelical Center for Missions. In a recent discussion about tentmaking, she asked me, "How can I give the answers, if I do not know the questions?" This book is written to both ask and answer the questions faced daily by soldiers fighting the battle in the 10/40 Window. A second book, which is in progress, will discuss issues tentmakers face in setting up and operating businesses among the least reached. Truly, each person's journey with God is unique, yet the stories and experiences of others who have gone before may serve to direct us, as well as provide warnings about how to proceed.

This book is written for missionaries, tentmakers, and Christians who are focused on reaching the unreached. The book is an accumulation of

nearly thirty years of service to our Master, Jesus Christ. My wife and I have served as regular missionaries, as well as T-5 and T-3 tentmakers. We have started several businesses and schools and an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization). We have team members who worked as T-2 and T-4 tentmakers. I first started this book in 1989, after attending the Tentmaking Task Force of the Lausanne II Congress in Manila. As part of my doctoral studies on the effectiveness of tentmakers, I have visited and interviewed/surveyed 450 workers who are living, working, and ministering around the 10/40 Window. The data given here comes from my research.

In this book, there are many practical stories and quotes given by real people, who are presently serving in the uttermost parts of the earth. When possible, I took notes, but some workers did not want me to write anything down. Consequently, my memory of events may differ occasionally from that of others, yet the best I can do is write the events as I recall them. For obvious reasons, most of the names have been changed, along with many of the locations. Names of real locations are often used simply for the sake of interest. The few real names which are given have been used with permission or are quotes from published sources. This book attempts to deal with the issues which separate tentmakers from more conventional missionaries (whom I refer to as “regular missionaries”) in their daily ministry, family life, and work. It provides a different viewpoint, sharing proven, workable alternatives to conventional missionary life.

After reading hundreds of articles on ministry, missions, the marketplace, and work, I believe tentmaking is a subset of mission work. Thus, I have chosen to use the terms *worker*, *missionary*, and *tentmaker* interchangeably. The term *tentmaker* is used because of its historical and biblical implications.

The working world knows that *business* is a broad term that reflects the many varied ways of making money. In this book, the term business is used in the broadest sense, incorporating any profit-making enterprise, such as schools, travel agencies, clinics, stores, restaurants, consulting firms, import-export, computer businesses, etc. Those businesses operated “not for profit,” like clinics, schools, and even some commercial businesses are referred to as NGOs. In many of the stories and examples I cite, my use of the term *business* has application for NGO workers as well.

This book is designed to be a manual of the key issues today’s tentmakers face. There are so many stories, each of which would be

helpful, but space requires me to select the most meaningful. Many of these stories are written in the first person by my friends or me. There is no pride intended, but like the Cushite, just an honest effort to report from the front lines, what we have experienced.

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming down stairs, but sometimes he feels there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.

WINNIE THE POOH

Intelligent people are always open to new ideas. In fact, they look for them.

PROVERBS 18:15 LB

chapter 1

BREAKING BOXES

What do you do when the Master has called you to preach, but having an unconventional style gets you barred from reaching the very people you are called to preach to? John Wesley faced this very problem. The leaders of his day felt biblical preaching should be done in a church behind a pulpit. Their limited view of doing outreach was based on their own experiences. They were living in a box, unable to see beyond what they already knew. John Wesley stepped outside of this box. Barred from his city's pulpits, he bought a horse and rode out to the countryside where he began open air preaching. Wesley fulfilled his calling without worrying about the traditions and structures of the church. He did not live boxed in by the inhibitions of others. He did not allow the narrow mindedness of others to hinder his ministry of evangelism and church planting. He stepped out of the box, believing the Spirit of God could manifest Himself in unexplored ways, reaching beyond structured and controlled institutions and their liturgies. Wesley appreciated the church, but he did not have a need to reform it. He understood the limitations of traditional methods of outreach and climbed outside the box to reach the less reached. He focused his efforts and resources on implementing new strategies for reaching those who were beyond the reach of the gospel.

Mission agencies now have over two hundred years of traditions, values, policies, and practices. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mission organizations enjoyed the protection of western governments and the donations of wealthy western churches. Having been built on such a foundation, mission agencies are finding it hard to remodel themselves to fit today's world. Many agencies embrace strategies and methods that contrast with those of the world around them. The ways of bringing missions and business together are difficult. A paradigm shift is needed. We must break out of our boxes.

It is a waste of time and resources to train people to learn more and better things, when the context in which the learner thinks has not shifted. It is like trying to add ten new storeys to a building without making adjustments to the foundation. Shifting paradigms cannot be done simply via the imparting of knowledge. Presenting facts and telling stories may or may not help. If leaders are going to look at things differently, we must willingly choose to re-look at the same situation from a totally different point of view. Old foundations need to be put aside so new structures may be built. Revamping former strategies and methodologies will not work. “We need to wake up to the fact that we can not rely on the ‘tried and true’ because what was tried yesterday is no longer true today.”¹ Mission organizations need to retool. We need to attempt new models of sending workers. Like John Wesley, we need to pray and think and then be ready to step outside the box.

Jesus says, “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”² Jesus is still seeking fishers of men; some are to leave their nets, and others are to bring their nets with them. But how are we to reach those living in countries which restrict missionary access? How are we to evangelize neighborhoods and nearby classes of society that are still largely untouched by churches just around the corner?

Encouraging changes are beginning to occur, both in churches and mission agencies. Some leaders are assessing the successes and failures of current tentmaker-missionaries. New insights are being gleaned from the lives of many scriptural heroes, like Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, Paul, Aquilla, and Priscilla. We are beginning to grasp the importance of holistic believers who go about their “business” while being agents of a much higher calling. We are being forced to recognize that the Great Commission does not end when missionary visas are withdrawn. We are accepting, even encouraging, new workers to take their nets with them.

IT’S A NEW WORLD

After World War II, there was a shift among the nations from colonialism to nationalism and independence. To demonstrate their newly gained freedom, many former colonies closed their doors to missionaries. As a result, some Christian leaders began to consider that the end of the era of sending missionaries was near. In the 1970s, such thinking was modified, with Ralph Winter drawing the attention of mission leaders to the priority of unreached peoples. But the question quickly arose, “How can missionaries serve in countries that do not grant missionary visas?” Churches and missions were told they needed to study the situation, to develop new

strategies, and to pursue a higher order of performance. During the past thirty years, the discussions have evolved from “how to do tentmaking,” to the “ethics of tentmaking,” to the “biblical basis of tentmaking,” to the “historical basis of tentmaking,” to “evaluating the successes and failures of those who are doing tentmaking.” Though these foundational issues needed to be discussed, progress has been slow in convincing decision makers to change their positions. Only since the turn of the century have mission leaders begun to formulate creative tentmaking strategies.

In reality, many leaders and missiologists are scarcely aware of the conceptual re-tooling needed for directing change on the mission field of the 21st century. In attempting to initiate changes, most mission organizations fail to realize that, though tentmakers are missionaries, the scope of their assignment creates problems and stresses which are unique and different from those experienced by regular missionaries. As a result, tentmakers who are teamed with regular missionaries often find they are unable to relate to one another. Though the tentmaker’s approach to solving problems and relieving stresses will in some ways parallel that of the regular missionary, the differences are significant and need to be addressed. Missiologists need to come to a point where we admit that long-held perspectives are inapplicable and irrelevant to a tentmaker’s life and work.

We live in a new and unpredictable world. Governments, the marketplace, and life in general are changing at speeds never heard of before. The way of life and the values that were the norm in our grandparents’ childhood are in many ways completely out of date. Any resemblance between today and the 1950s is purely coincidental. Nonetheless, the Word of God is constant. We know that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”³ As Paul was a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, so we must adapt the delivery, not the content, of our message to the changing world around us. We have not played in this arena before. The rules are different. Everything is moving faster. What we need to know and how we need to act in order to win the world to Jesus has changed as well.

TENTMAKING

What is tentmaking? Tentmaking is often understood to refer to an economic factor: “a missionary being financially self-supporting.” A handful of missiologists stubbornly stress this narrow point of view, relating tentmaking to money. However, tentmaking is not about money; it is about God. Tentmaking is about a way of revealing God’s glory to the ends of the earth. Jesus makes it clear: “You cannot serve both God

and Money . . . Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”⁴ Tentmakers know that tentmaking is not about money, visas, entry strategies, or all the other issues missiologists love to debate. The objective of tentmaking is to put Jesus in front of those who have never had an opportunity to hear the truth about Him, or who have turned their backs on Him because of an encounter with some form of “Christian religion.” Tentmaking provides many advantages, but the most important aspect of tentmaking is giving the lost a good look, and often a first look, at who Jesus really is. Tentmaking is using daily-life strategies to tell people about Jesus. The models and methods vary, but the goal is to glorify Jesus among the unreached.

When we stop and consider the world, we realize that money is the primary motivation behind most activities. Buying, selling, and creating material wealth—that’s where people are; that’s what they think about; that’s what they strive for. The world revolves around the marketplace. That is where people learn values and methods. That is where people function and gain satisfaction. It is crucial that we meet people in their comfort zones and impart godly values, methods, and satisfaction. People need to see the Christian life lived right before their eyes. Our faith in Jesus needs to be made real; it is to be lived where the people live. George MacLeod urges:

“I simply argue that the cross must be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Christ was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talked smut, and thieves cursed, and soldiers gambled. Because that is where He died and that is what He died about, that is where the churchmen should be and what the churchmen should be about.”⁵

Whether it is in New York or New Delhi, San Jose or Shanghai, we need to live out our faith in ways that are both understandable and genuine.

As missiologists debated the tentmaking issues, a few thousand workers who could not wait while millions perished into a Christ-less eternity stepped out of the box. They picked up their nets and went without missionary visas into countries which restrict the spread of the gospel. This first wave of 20th century tentmakers worked primarily as professionals

with multi-national corporations and as English teachers in local schools and universities. Some set up Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), which for all intents and purposes, operate like a mission organization providing social services without the Christian label. Others went as students. The successes and failures of these early pioneers were duly noted. Both sides of the argument had illustrations to prove their points for or against tentmaking. As more and more young people accepted this new approach, missiologists became more informed about the how to's of tentmaking. In 1983, Frontiers, a new mission agency, was created for the purpose of facilitating the efforts of tentmakers in closed countries. Their willingness to think and live outside the box eventually led to the spawning of many similar missions and is bringing changes to the more established sending agencies.

Change—it is all around us. Our Creator is a God of change. To thrive in the 21st century, we must love change—not just endure it, but love it. Globalization and the internet, along with the rise of fundamentalist branches of the world's religions, have shaken many mission organizations, forcing them to look outside the box. This new viewpoint is leading more and more organizations to embrace entrepreneurial tentmaking as a legitimate strategy. Today, nearly every large mission organization has developed a tentmaking arm. Yet, as traditional missions cease their criticisms and embrace tentmaking, many still fail to grasp the fundamentals. The methods mission agencies use to recruit and train tentmakers and the way mission executives counsel and lead their tentmakers once they are out on the field shows little understanding of the differences tentmakers encounter in their daily life and work. My research reflects two divergent approaches mission agencies take toward tentmaking. The first is a paternalistic view, requiring tentmakers to live, work, and perform much as traditional missionaries do. The second is a hands-off approach, allowing tentmakers to write their own agenda with little, if any, care and accountability provided by the mission agency.

Rather than add to the already challenging rhetoric, this book is a manual of key issues today's tentmakers are facing, presenting both illustrations and practical suggestions for the re-examination of tentmaking life and work. I wish to encourage both leaders and workers to look beyond the box.

SUMMARY

If the church is to take the gospel to every tribe, nation, tongue and people group, it must step outside the box. Tentmakers are determined to

build roads through or around the walls which have blocked the spread of cross-cultural discipleship and church planting in the least-reached corners of the world. If the church is to see new churches planted in hostile environments, it must break new ground and build new foundations. Business as usual won't do. And that's the point. Tentmaking is *ministry* outside the box AND *business* outside the box. We want to ask Christopher Robin to pause for a moment so that Edward Bear can consider other, perhaps better, options for descending the stairs.

ACTION STEPS

- What boxes do you need to break out of?
- Are there any boxes your church needs to break out of?
- In what ways does Edward Bear's problem relate to missions today?

“Dad,” a polar-bear cub asked his father, “Am I 100 percent polar bear?”
“Of course you are,” answered his father. “My parents are 100 percent polar bear which makes me 100 percent polar bear and your mother’s parents are all polar bear so she’s 100 percent polar bear. So that makes you 100 percent polar bear too. Why?” The cub replied, “Because Dad, I’m freezing.”

We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-2