

# Professional tentmakers open doors for ministry

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A tentmaker once told me that he felt ill-at-ease reaching out to fellow teachers in his university department because he didn't share their higher professional qualifications. This lack of standing can inhibit the effectiveness of tentmakers. A variety of jobs can provide residency, but if tentmakers are not properly qualified for their jobs and are not active professionally, they can feel isolated from the very people with whom they spend most of their time and energy. This problem harms effectiveness in ministry. Part of becoming incarnate in a society is moving onto a group's "turf" — its social territory — and living fully among people in ways they can understand. The tentmaker has a unique opportunity to do this. However, unless there is an adequate level of professional excellence and activity, the job itself can distance us from those we are well placed to reach. We want our professions to open doors to ministry.

Professional involvement in a credible job opens doors to in-depth interaction within our circle of activity and influence. I'm concerned about three relevant aspects of this issue: the value of obtaining and sustaining an appropriate level of professional skills, the advantages of making our professional context the focus of primary outreach, and how these two aspects enhance incarnational living.

**Professional skills.** Long-term effectiveness in a job improves our ability to move with ease in that professional context and increases our sense of contribution to the society. Having adequate professional qualifications and growing in our skills are foundational to that process. In my own interaction with teaching colleagues over the years, I have sometimes been reluctant to spend time with them — feeling that I was not sufficiently involved with them in the struggle to face our academic challenges, i.e., "not pulling my weight." On the other hand, when we have been actively engaged together in curriculum development, classroom research, and workshops, I have found that personal relationships develop more naturally — in the hallways, over a cup of coffee, or driving together to a seminar.

It is worth building a solid professional foundation for our tentmaking careers. Twenty-five years ago, I realized that I would have to maintain residency with a secular profession, even though my primary calling was to see the church planted. English teaching seemed to be the way to go, but I had not natural leaning toward English (it was certainly not my favorite subject in high school). But I decided that I could be an English teacher, for Jesus — and like it. A two-year graduate course at a university



then gave me the necessary professional foundation. I have never regretted that initial preparation. I may not be totally absorbed with teaching, but I can enter my professional context with relative ease.

Maintaining those skills is another major aspect of our careers as tentmakers. Without it, we dry up, and the staleness of our professional life can lead quickly to discouragement and withdrawal. In-service training should be a deliberate, budgeted part of life.

Professional journals, seminars, summer course, and a sabbatical between jobs are some of the many ways to fit it in. Another, sometimes overlooked, way to maintain skills is through locally organized training (e.g., through a chamber of commerce or in a seminar on linguistics). The additional benefit is that we receive training from experts from our host context, and in learning from them, we show respect for them. So we grow in our skills while we multiply our opportunities to be salt and light.

Our credibility hinges on our professional excellence—on the quality of our tents. If our job identity is built of cardboard and plastic, it soon

becomes painfully obvious to those who get close to use (colleagues, the authorities, neighbors) that we are not “for real.” People distance themselves — or the authorities refuse our residency applications. Even those we spend time with may find it hard to relax and allow themselves to open up with us if they can’t understand us or if they detect a phoniness about us. For example, a lifestyle obviously higher than our perceived financial means would raise eyebrows.

One unfortunate spinoff can be a tendency to reach out to our social peers from a distance — not allowing them to get close enough to pick up the incongruities of our lives. Another possible result is our ministering only to those on a lower social level; they may appear less able to understand our inconsistencies — due to our differing ways of life (or their social distance may inhibit them from raising the issue).

**Professional focus.** In addition to doing a good job, we tentmakers face the constant tension of knowing how to focus our easily diffused energy. That’s where one of the principal benefits of our pursuit of excellence comes in. It enables us to create and maintain a long-term ministry focus on those with whom we work. This may be particularly relevant in the field of education, but it can also be applied to other professions, such as those in business. Our jobs put us among certain groups of people; that’s where we naturally spend much of our time. This context, then, can generate many ready-made opportunities for entering the lives of our colleagues and other circles of relationships that overlap

(e.g. their immediate and extended families, leisure clubs, interest groups). The challenge of incarnational living demands that this aspect of our lives also be an example.

**Professional fit.** Incarnational ministry implies that we should identify with a group in society, living as its members do, and get as close as possible to them. Those who live “out of synch” with their peers have a hard time interacting successfully with them — because they are not understood or respected. Yes, often we are called to live counter-culturally, in obedience to our understanding of Christianity. Jesus often lived counter to the norms of his society, e.g., eating with “sinners” or including women in his teaching.

However, our friends will recognize our behavior as countercultural only if they first consider us as one of them. We want to reach our host society from the inside out, not from somewhere out at the margins looking in.

We tentmakers have the opportunity to fit into a society in roles that are understood and accepted. Our vision is to proclaim the Good News and plant churches. Our jobs enable us to do it—from the inside—a privileged chance to identify with and reach people where they are. Even if I were not living in a restricted-access country, I would still teach English.

[Nathan Nile (a pseudonym) has been a tentmaker in North Africa for over 25 years] (Reprinted with permission from *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 36 No. 3, July 2000) ☐