

7 SHORT TERM AND NON PROFESSIONAL MISSIONARIES

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INTRODUCTION

This kind of 'missionary' is the problem child of the UK missionary movement. More so because the child is now well into adolescence—in terms of age, well past adolescence—and should be approaching maturity, but the churches and missionary societies, and the assemblies in particular, have been unable or unwilling to face seriously the task of parenting the child. The short term mission concept has been with us since the 1960s, and the self supporting model has been a subject of discussion and renewed interest for almost as long. However, our attitude is basically to wish we could recruit a 'more superior' force of long term professional missionaries. We probably need to do that also, but in this paper I am arguing that important strategic opportunities and biblical principles are going unheeded, while we resist the task of developing the newer forms of mission activity. Inevitably, in the minds of many, the arguments presented herein will themselves fall into the adolescent category. It is therefore at the risk of overstatement that the voice is raised. However, the time allotted to this important matter, even in this conference, is small. Perhaps a little shouting may be justified!

Background

The Brethren movement has traditionally stressed that its 'ministers' are its membership, and that biblically all believers are priests. Furthermore, our members in the UK, though well less than 100,000, are to be found in all grades of society and all walks of life.¹ Our missionaries, together with colleagues from North America and Australasia, helped to turn the world upside down for Christ between the 1830s and the second world war. That was a fair heritage from which to face the challenge of the social, political and technological changes which arrived with the post war era. As a movement, however, we have fossilized, and in so doing, we have also made the mistake of labelling as 'New Testament' an approach to mission

and mission support which has become increasingly impractical as a general principle for the kind of expansion required to meet the challenges of the latter half of the twentieth century. Our forebears indeed spearheaded a radical New Testament response to the Great Commission in their age: they used the relatively limited physical means at their disposal, creatively and sacrificially, to great effect in spreading the gospel. Today we have far greater means, but live in a more complex world. We have wide open opportunities even in countries now frequently referred to as 'closed', whilst some previously impregnable ideological fortresses opposed to the gospel are showing signs of strain under the pressure of modernism. But are we moving ahead as energetically, innovatively and committedly as we should be?

Following the Spirit's direction: two views of the future

While I have the highest regard for our band of professional long term UK missionaries, they have declined in numbers from 575 in 1909 to under 350 today. This would hardly be a creditable response to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world if it represented our only option. There are, of course, a good number of Brethren people serving in other ways, for example with mission societies. However, although the *Echoes* list still represents a larger missionary force than virtually any of the major UK societies, we must face the fact that more than 40% of our missionaries have now been on the field for 30 years or more. Recruitment of younger people into fully supported service is at an insufficient pace to provide real hope for the future. We must either accept that our faith has become smaller and that we have lost the vision, or ask the fundamental question of whether God's Spirit is telling us to explore other models more seriously in order to meet today's challenge. Our heritage is one of innovation, our prime distinctive is of being 'open to the Spirit'; both of these have, for some time now, been in mortal danger of being replaced by a more recent item of baggage which our forebears knew little of—tradition! One missionary recently wrote:

Many seem to be losing interest in assembly distinctives and almost look on our traditions as something to be ashamed of or perhaps to be laughed at. But listening to missionaries from other groups they too bemoan the lack of interest in long haul missionary work. People seem to go more for the social needs and what are good aids—radio, team visits, tracting missions, etc.—but this cannot substitute for 'hard slogging, face to face' missionary work.

We can agree with this view to an extent. In many parts of the worlds, including an estimated 3,000–4,000 tribes and people groups still unreached with the gospel or without scriptures, there may be few options

but the traditional hard slogging approach. 'Professionals' are still required for pioneer work, especially in translation and literature and in other specialist ministries where spiritual gifts are most effective when the worker is in full time service. But what really is our distinctive? If it is defined in terms of full time service, are we not denying our own biblical understanding of the responsibility of all Christians to be priests and witnesses to the gospel? That is hardly our position at home, so why should we believe differently when thinking of the foreign field? Another view, developed from strategic and financial perspectives, but which also claims to be biblical, has been stated thus:

To finish the job of world evangelization, we must have a massive force of bivocational missionaries—Christians who support themselves through secular salaried employment or study, and make Jesus Christ known in that context. They may be called 'tentmakers' after the Apostle Paul, who chose to make tents for his support. Three billion have not heard the Good News in a clear form, and over 2 billion represent cultural groups where there is no viable church, or where the church is numerically very weak. To have just one couple or two single workers for each 10,000 among the unreached peoples would require some 500,000 new missionaries, seven or eight times our current world force.

At the present rate, through all mission agencies, and subtracting workers who retire or resign, it would take at least five hundred years to send enough personnel for this present generation. Besides, it would cost close to £5,000 million every year in contributions to support that many. The increased cost of living in many countries and the difficulty of raising support are two factors that keep the process slow.

But even if we could quickly recruit the people and raise their support on a worldwide basis, they would not be able to serve in the spiritually neediest 60% of the world because it is legally off-limits to conventional missionaries. Yet, Christians with marketable secular skills can enter those countries and make Jesus Christ known, at no financial cost to the church. (In fact they could be turning a portion of their income over to the support of local people God raises up through their witness and ministry.) They earn salaries, supporting themselves as engineers, teachers, doctors, secretaries and in almost any other kind of vocation. Closed countries provide tens of thousands of secular job openings, with salaries, benefits, and round trip travel. God has provided the secular job as the key to open doors so that millions of people can hear the Gospel.²

Clearly, the solution lies with neither view exclusively. God will doubtless fill the earth with his glory without 500,000 self-supporting missionaries or an income of £5,000 million from the Western world. We can rejoice in some of the facts presented in Ernest Oliver's paper—particularly the wonderful numerical growth of the church in the Third World, and the inevitable increase of Third World missionaries, including

many tentmakers. The new patterns of cooperation he describes and envisages are undoubtedly part of God's plan. His identification of the need for Western churches and missionary societies to channel more financial and other resources towards Third World initiatives and needy areas, where this is appropriate in lieu of sending more expatriate personnel, is also clearly an issue for us to consider. Nevertheless, the mission statistics available to us have another interesting message illustrated in the accompanying table.

	<i>Popu- lation (millions)</i>	<i>Active Protestant Church Members (millions)</i>	<i>Protestant Missionaries</i>			<i>Ratios (%)</i>		
			<i>Long Term</i>	<i>Short Term</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>E/A</i>	<i>C/B</i>	<i>D/B</i>
			<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>			
North America	264	57.8	22,000	27,000	49,000 ₃	.02	.04	.05
UK	56	4.9	3,950	1,400	5,350 ₄	01	08	03

The most important points to note are the following:

- 1 Approximately 55% of the total North American missionary force is made up of short termers. It is believed that over 90% of these serve in three relatively recent and 'youth oriented' missions, namely Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth With a Mission (YWAM), and Operation Mobilization (OM). However, an increasing number are serving with Christian relief and development agencies.
- 2 The UK is often unfavourably compared with North America. However, we still have over twice as many long term missionaries per active Protestant member than North America.
- 3 If we had recruited the same proportion of short termers in the UK as in North America to match our long term missionaries, our total 'missionary force' would today have grown to over 9,000. We would then perhaps be happier with the comparative figures, though of course many would argue this to be a false satisfaction.

These figures tell only half the story, however. An additional 217 UK nationals are listed as 'associates'; these are mainly self supported tentmakers serving Christ overseas in fellowship with missionary colleagues and sharing the same vision and calling. The equivalent figures for North America and elsewhere are not available at the current time, but we do know that many tens of thousands of Christians currently live overseas in strategic locations. Their effectiveness as cross-cultural messengers of the gospel or

as ministers in the local churches varies greatly: on the whole, unless they commenced their overseas assignment with a 'tentmaker calling' and undertook some considerable preparation, and unless they have strong prayer support from the home base and fellowship with like minded individuals in the field, their effectiveness can be severely limited. They often seem to have little opportunity to learn local languages or to mix with nationals, their type of job may allow them only minimal free time, or they may be constrained socially by their lifestyle and circle of expatriate friends. Nevertheless, the potential could be enormous.

The main questions to ask from the foregoing are:

- 1 Would we be justified in seeking to recruit and send more people on short term overseas assignments, and on what basis?
- 2 Is it really practical to think in terms of a larger number of tentmakers being effective ministers of the gospel, particularly in areas where conventional missionary activity is difficult or impossible, such as the Muslim world?

The short term option

The proportion of short termers in the total UK missionary force reached a peak in the early 1980s; the figure was 31% in 1982, with a good proportion of these serving with established mission agencies, who have recently retreated from the short term option on practical grounds. Valuable mission agency resources, including the time and attention of established missionaries on the field, had been diverted to the orientation, administration and oversight of short term personnel. The returns were considered to be questionable, since proper cultural adaptation and language learning were impractical for people serving for only one to three years. Thus faced with the choice of compromising their mission focus or expanding to meet the needs of short termers, several of the major societies felt it wise to back-track a little.

Nevertheless, a significant number of short termers had entered their service for the purpose of seeking out the Lord's guidance for a longer term commitment; they have remained in the field. This conversion rate is, in fact, a significant argument in support of short term service; however the proportion is now contained to more practical limits. Most societies consider short termers to be effective only in English speaking or 'less sensitive' areas, and in areas with few visa difficulties, for obvious reasons. Many also use short termers primarily for 'indirect' ministry, providing logistics and support (eg secretarial, building, accounting and mechanical skills), although there are also more direct ministry opportunities on special programmes or in relieving long term missionaries (eg in medical and educational ministries) on furlough.

Considering the financial and organisational constraints most mission agencies face then, the potential for any significant increase in the proportion of short term workers with the main societies, supported in the traditional way through donations, is limited. However, Christian relief and development presents one particular area of opportunity and need. Tear Fund, the prime UK agency in this field, currently has approximately 90 field workers; most of these can be classed as short term skilled specialists, though many have remained for longer than one tour of duty. We in the brethren movement have begun to see the potential of this kind of work, through recent experience in Ethiopia.

The most potential for growth must rest either with the tentmaking model, with individual churches involving themselves in more short term projects, or with an expansion in the UK of the evangelistic agencies specialising in short term ministry, such as Campus Crusade, YWAM and OM. These agencies are, in fact, expanding and provide more and more opportunities for participation in 'summer campaigns' as well as for longer term service (eg 1 and 2 year programmes). It is estimated that these three agencies alone recruit well over 1,000 young people from the UK each summer for up to one month in European evangelistic ministries; this is in addition to their combined longer term membership of 350 or so (which are included in the UK missionary force figures in the UK Christian handbook). They offer an invaluable first experience in missions for many young people and therefore provide a vital service to the churches. OM in particular has provided a first taste of missions for many hundreds of young people from UK assemblies, whom God has called into longer term service. The first experience was often gained in European summer teams or in our own inner city environment, leading on (for example) to a special interest in the muslim world or in communist lands, followed by joining a one or two year programme overseas, and finally to full time service with one of the major agencies, or into longer term tentmaking employment in a 'closed country'.

We must, as a movement and as individual churches, see the value of these and other short term programmes, in the spiritual and vocational pilgrimage of many serious minded people. The agencies, with increasing maturity, are also accepting their portion of the responsibility for the spiritual development of participants and for initial training in cultural sensitivity and language. They also represent an increasingly significant and lively force locally, often drawing a solid base of national believers into their activities, including at the leadership level. As for our churches at home, promotion of short term service alongside the longer term option increases our total exposure to missions. More opportunities for involvement lead to greater global interest and concern, to more informed and earnest prayer, and to greater movement out into the world. Ultimately,

more people take up the longer term challenge if church mission programmes offer more opportunities, with prayers asking the Lord to put his hand on those members who are most suited and gifted for cross-cultural service.

However, there is a broader strategic dimension to short term service. We should not fail to appreciate that in a mission environment where Christians from the Third World play an increasing part, the experience of short term cross-cultural contact and cooperation in mission will be valuable to both the Western Church and to Third World Christians in its own right. In many countries, long haul missionaries will in future be less required than those who are willing to offer their gifts in love and sincerity, for shorter periods of time, and thus to rub shoulders as equals with national brothers and sisters in the cause of Christ. We will of course be less able to dominate the development of the national churches, but we will contribute vitally for finite periods as ministers of the Word, as teachers of teachers, and as skilled servants in counselling, family education, and special programmes (eg camps, retreat centres, building projects and development). In future, we can also expect increasingly to be serving under national and Third World mission leaders and elders. Even in lands which are relatively unevangelized and closed to open forms of mission activity, mission teams will be multi-national. Finally, increasing numbers of career missionaries from the West will, for strategic reasons, be required to operate more flexibly and think in terms of shorter assignments than previously. They may find themselves having to re-enter secular employment, or to move more often from one field to another. Many have, of course, already been forced to do this for political reasons which are beyond their control; however, the future will demand a far greater mobility for strategic reasons.

Tentmaking: more than just a necessity . . .

Although the self-supporting missionary has been around, in one form or another, as long as modern missions, tentmaking has traditionally been viewed as second best—a practical necessity in some economic circumstances (ie where costs are particularly high), or to gain entry into 'closed' lands. The reason the work of the foreign missionary was considered to be ideally full time was because of the effort required to learn a language and adapt culturally if the gospel is to be communicated effectively and the needs of churches and mission stations attended to properly. It was therefore presumed that the individual called by God to serve overseas should normally aim to become fully supported through a mission agency or through home churches if either of the above conditions is a factor. This view neglects one of our fundamental biblical principles, limits the

numerical strength and cultural impact of missionary work, and may well reflect the resistance of the English speaking world to the learning of foreign languages. These points are now dealt with separately.

The biblical imperative

Self-supporting ministry has a rich heritage in scripture; God accomplished his kingdom purposes through pilgrims, exiles, public servants and shepherds such as Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah, Amos and many others. They were individuals and families whose secular and spiritual vocations were integrated. In the New Testament, Paul develops a theology around his preference of earning a living in the world of business as a tentmaker craftsman.⁵ We would do well to consider this seriously, for it should strike a familiar chord in our Assembly practices and principles. Paul clearly felt that he needed to set an example to the churches he established (2 Thess 3:6–9). He chose to work night and day if necessary in his secular occupation, because he believed his ministry was enhanced, not hindered, by so doing. His objective was to model a life of discipline, service, endurance and holiness in which a secular occupation was integrated with spiritual service and was considered to be an asset to the gospel. This principle is taught throughout his letters. Christians, such as the Thessalonians, who imitated his example were commended. In every church those individuals who best modelled an integrated and responsible spirituality were set apart as elders of the flock (examples and overseers), thus tying Church growth and discipline to the economic and social as well as moral implications of the gospel.

As noted earlier, we have accepted this principle of self-supporting ministry at home—perhaps we have even gone to the extremes—but not so on the mission field. I wonder if there are weaknesses in the national leadership of our churches overseas, and in the general quality of spirituality, which could be traced to a deficiency in the degree to which our largely full time missionaries have been able to present a credible Pauline example. There is no denying that our missionaries have worked hard, but their almost universal modelling of a kind of employment directly associated with their church planting activities (ie evangelism, Bible teaching, literature, medicine and education) has presented an unbalanced picture. Have they been examples which most local believers could practically follow? Have they been able to transfer a biblical understanding of the dignity of secular work, of Christian service and stewardship integrated with responsible citizenship? The presence of an increasing number of ministering servants who are also employed in the secular world would provide a necessary corrective in the future at least.

The cultural argument

A further consequence of the imbalance of past missionary activity is that in many countries, the world of business and industry is largely unevangelised. The bazaars, markets and industries of the developing world—the muslim world in particular—represent an arena which has seen few businessmen and craftsmen carrying the gospel since the first few centuries when the Spirit of God moved believers of all backgrounds and professional out into the known world. Today's tentmakers—Westerners, Indians, Pakistanis, Koreans, and many others—have the opportunity to be pioneers in areas where the full time missionary can never be accepted as an equal. They have natural contact with the family heads, the bread-winners, the educated, and with those in responsible positions. They have the advantage of working in the mainstream of cultural life where people make their living and develop their ulcers. Women in agricultural and rural development programmes are working alongside the rural women-folk who represent the backbone of the rural economy. The opportunities are incredible, so long as the tentmaker is called by God, spiritually able, prepared for the cultural adjustments, and willing to take language learning seriously.

Preparation and language

We have already noted that these pre-conditions have perhaps been the prime factor holding back the effectiveness of tentmakers. Mission societies have been slow to develop effective solutions for those who face heavy secular responsibilities, or employment guidelines for those who wish to be self-supported. However, the same problems of how to adapt and learn languages face non-Christian businessmen, professionals, and development and relief workers in secular employment; the most successful are those who have taken the trouble to acquire the local skills. Real cultural adaptation and language learning is, in practice, far more a matter of commitment, discipline and personal skills than of one's actual job. While UK and American businessmen are not known for their achievements in this area, we in the UK are beginning to wake up to the need for language skills through having to compete in the EEC. Tentmakers can also learn, but they must be taught to make the effort—perhaps through taking prior time off, by one means or other, to attend special courses. Here mission agencies and churches could help by providing short term financial assistance for those genuinely called to serve the Lord through overseas secular employment. Even the bank manager is not always averse to provision of a loan, given the right guarantees! The numbers of tentmakers who have to-date broken through the expatriate

social barrier and the linguistic-cultural barrier are indeed small, but not insignificant. Personal experience has demonstrated that, given the conviction that God has called, and provided that the job has been carefully selected for its suitability to the spiritual objective, and with a disciplined approach, tentmaking can be effective in almost any occupation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a serious commitment to a more complete and multi-faceted mission strategy—not a replacement of one mode of operation by another (we still need full timers). The justifications for a broader approach have a biblical foundation and we have responsibility to fulfill our Lord's commission by using every means at our disposal—faith characterized by creative thinking, and by intelligent and adventurous use of resources. Our approach to overseas missions should therefore be no less diverse than our understanding of scripture demands.

Elders should encourage gifted individuals to seek God's guidance for employment in strategic locations where their spiritual gifts and vision could be used in fellowship with mission societies, national churches and others sharing similar vision. Those whom we are convinced God has led into such overseas service should be formally commended and supported in prayer as other missionaries are. Along the way, they should be helped and counselled to assist with their spiritual, emotional and cultural preparations. We should also consider offering short term financial help or support where this would assist with the necessary preparation. Every church of reasonable size needs a mission director whose job it is to stimulate, help and counsel potential candidates, in liaison with the elders, as well as to organise the prayer and other support on a church-wide and house group basis.

Alongside this, we would do well to encourage short term commitment on special missions or secular job assignments as a means to increase the strategy to present the need for longer term service, particularly in areas of the world where penetration of the gospel remains low.

There are several ways in which we as individual churches might achieve these ends, which fit with the principles discussed earlier. For example we could be in better contact with elders of national churches through missionaries on the field and ask for their specific proposals for joint projects and opportunities. Perhaps more of our correspondence with the field could be 'two way' in this fashion. A further step towards real partnership in mission could be through twinning of home churches with churches in Europe and the Third World. Short term visits and cooperative ventures would become more commonplace, including projects requiring our secular skills such as the recent water project in

Ethiopia. How would we ensure that our participants are prepared in the basics of cultural adaptation? Perhaps by bringing missionaries home more often on short visits when they could be used as part of the planning process and for training programmes. This would not necessarily be wasteful of financial resources; it would be money well spent in helping us to sharpen our focus and vision and do a more effective job of responding to our world calling as stewards and disciples.

1 *Turning the World Upside Down* (Echoes of Service 1973).

2 Ruth Siemens, Global Opportunities, Pasadena, California (with some minor editing and updating of figures).

3 Patrick Johnstone *Operation World* (STL/WEC 1986).

4 *UK Christian Handbook* (1987/88 Edition). (UK figures have been increased slightly to include Tear Fund in the missionary force.)

5 'Tentmaking in Missions—A Closer Look', Andrew Dymond, *Harvester* (Jan/Feb 1986). (This article provides a detailed development of Paul's 'tentmaking theology' and traces its historical development and cultural importance in the mission field.)