

2005 National Conference on Tentmaking/Bi-vocational Ministry

Friday — Sunday, November 4-6, 2005
Saint Mary of the Lake Conference Center, Mundelein, IL

Edited by Davis Fisher

Friday Evening, November 4, 2005

Reflection at opening service of Prayer – “What’s At Stake?”

The Rev. Linda Kuhn (Presbyterian)

Ten years ago NASSAM & APT gathered here at Mundelein for a conference. The speaker was Jim Greene. Jim is a health care consultant, entrepreneur, tentmaker, author of the book Dual Career Ministers. We found him by way of a contact by networking with our southern Baptist tentmaker counterparts. Our theme was “Strengthening the Tent Stakes.”

I remember, because I was the coordinator of the conference that year. I confess that I chose the name of the conference by pulling out a Bible concordance to see what I could find that would have some connection to the symbol of tents and tentmaking. I found a passage in Isaiah that seemed instructive:

*“Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out.
Do not hold back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread out to the right and to the left
and your descendants will possess the nations
and will settle the desolate town.”*

Isaiah 54:2-3

It’s a passage from Second Isaiah, a vision, a vision of the New Jerusalem. These are words of hope for a besieged and beleaguered people. The passage contrasts a past of hopelessness and privation with a future of hope and prosperity, where the ranks of the people of God are expanding, growing the need for larger and larger tents, the tents reinforced and the tent stakes strengthened to provide support.

They were strong words for a troubled time, a bold vision for a time when the light was dim.

Now, 10 years later, we are here once again, same place, at another conference of NASSAM and APT. Again, our conference theme has something to do with stakes – “Pitching New Tents: What are the Stakes?”

Let me play with this word a bit to get us to reflect on what is *at stake* as we meet this weekend. What *is* at stake? What is *at risk* – for us, and for the Church?

Let me ask, have we become stuck as organizations and as individual tentmakers?

-Have we moved anywhere as organizations?

-Are we doing more than just recycling our same message?

-Are we caught in a never-ending search for recognition and approval with our denominations, rehearsing our stories of “we just don’t get no respect?”

-Have we gotten beyond doing more than shoring up dying congregations because we are affordable?

-Are we stuck promoting the institution of the church and its trappings and have lost sight of the spirit and power of the people of God?

What is at stake? This weekend,

- let us keep our sights on a larger vision of the kin-dom of God and the body of Christ.

- Let us stay true to our calling to be on the edge of mission and ministry, to be bridge builders between the sacred and secular, between Sunday Sabbath and Monday Work-day, bringing our witness into the marketplace in ways that matter.

- Let us offer innovation to our denomination side-tracked these days by dwindling membership and descending budgets and becoming ever more entrenched.

- Let us celebrate how tentmaking, self-supporting ministries allow us a freedom and focus that is energizing for us and for the church, a freedom and focus many of our fully-supported colleagues say they dare not show.

- Let us set our sights high, look wide.

- Let us hope that maybe at the end of the conference we can think that we have even moved the kin-dom of God and the body of Christ ahead a little, God willing.

Listen to the rendering of this same passage from Isaiah, this time from Eugene Peterson’s translation The Message:

“Make your tents large.

Clear lots of ground for your tents!

Make your tents large! Spread out!

Think big!”

Let it be so. Amen.