

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

Evening Presentation – “Ministry and Mission”

The Rev. Dr. Jim Lemler, Director of Mission for the Episcopal Church

It's a delight to be here. As Davis said I have been a part of the council here in the Diocese of Chicago since its inception and then had to kind of step out in this new role. We've talked about bi-vocational? I'm bi-vocational at the same time. In that this works out very nicely with our offices in New York and we have one daughter in college and then a senior and junior in high school and we said “Girls, you can finish Evanston High School.” So that works out nicely for us as a family. I've known the agony and the ecstasy of tentmaking ministry as well.

The agony of being misunderstood –the Rodney Dangerfield effect “I get no respect.” When I was a very young priest, I was 29, was serving in a cathedral parish in our church and had a chance to become a college chaplain which was way cool. So I went in to tell my partner canon Episcopalians – talk about two languages, even three and four languages Episcopalians speak – went in to tell my canon pastor that I was going to do this thing – he was a great priest from the church of Ireland and spoke with an Irish brogue – and he said to me “Ah, Jim, I hope you come back to the church someday...”. So I know the agony of being misunderstood when you are not in the norm of what this ministry is.

And I also know the ecstasy of when gifts are utilized in varieties of ways both in the context of daily ministry and in the ministry that people who are tentmakers can bring to a congregational setting. The last six months before I took this new job as well as still being the dean at Seabury, I had a chance to be at a parish in the Diocese of Chicago along with two other tentmakers where we kind of looked like the Ghostbusters and we acted like ecclesiastical Ghostbusters for that period of time which was a great thing to do. I think they are writing a book about the conflict in this parish; it was so utterly conflicted and now it's a much healthier and happier place. And I think partially because these were folks who brought a wide range of skills and also a different kind of sense of connection with the parish than would have been the case if they'd put in another sacrificial...excuse me, another rector in the parish.

In the time I have left I want to talk about two things that are near and dear to my heart and really connect with you all as tentmakers. And that's whether you are Episcopal tentmakers or Presbyterian tentmakers. And those two things are mission and leadership. They go together hand and glove – mission and leadership.

The reason I took the new job of being director of mission for the Episcopal church, is because the Episcopal church – like the Presbyterian church – and I know this firsthand...we had a meeting of our Executive Council, which is the board that meets for the three years between our General Convention which is the same as [the Presbyterian] General Assembly. We met in Louisville and had some really good conversation with Presbyterian church leaders about mission. That's what we were focused on. There's a mission revolution that's going on in American Christianity right now. An understanding of the global nature of mission – and by the

way when Davis read off all those areas I have responsibility for, needless to say there is a director of each area. There's good staff; you know I'm not that crazy by any stretch of the imagination.

And this mission revolution that's going on in the life of the church right now is affecting the way in which we view what the mission of the church is globally and internationally and it's having a tremendous, tremendous amount of effect on the way in which we view the mission of the church, the work of the church domestically. The name of the Episcopal church corporately as Davis said is The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America, That's its corporate name. I know that because my paychecks don't say "the Episcopal Church"; they say, "The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society." And that was done in the 1830's when the decision was made that every Episcopalian would be a member of this society about mission.

Well now about 150 years later or more, here we are at the same juncture in American Christianity and the Episcopal church to understand the domestic - and let's use a more politically nice word - global nature of mission in the life of the church. There's both urgency and hope to that. The hope is that God continues to do wonderful things through God's mission and the mission of the church itself. It is also hopeful because there are talented, gifted people that do mission and ministry.

The whole baptized (Presbyterians and Episcopalians alike) have discovered the power of the ministry of the whole people of God. That's the kind of hopeful part of this. The urgent part is that the world is changing so darn fast that we simply have got to take a more mission-focused approach and mission framework in order to do our ministry as the church in the 21st century. How many of you have heard the words post-modern, post-Christendom, post-denominational? - the post-toasties I used to call them to the seminarians when I was in the seminary setting. The change is so dramatic in every possible way that that brings urgency for us to approach our mission even more urgently and with more zest and zeal than we had before. If you look at the Episcopal News Service tomorrow you will see a news story in which I am quoted extensively because what we needed to respond to was the fact that for the third year in a row the Episcopal church is declining in membership and in average Sunday attendance. By the way, whoever wrote the article also put the Presbyterian figures in. Guess what - what do we call this in polite circles? Main-line decline. And with that comes an urgency not out of panic, not out of saying that, "Gosh, what are we going to do? There aren't as many Presbyterians or as many Episcopalians as there used to be." - but rather the question of the mission to restore people and invite people and connect with people's search for meaning in this post-modern period. So mission is - I believe - what it's about.

Now, you can't do mission without leadership. That's why the two things go together. Mission and Leadership. And also, leadership, which is missional, if I can use that word (it's an honest-to-God word, although if you type it in your word processor little red lines will come up underneath it and you have to fix that). We need leadership that realizes that doing this mission, this work, this primary purpose, call of the church, is what are called to be and the way in which we affect that mission in a hopeful, positive and urgent way.

And part of that leadership is the whole people of God. We - like Presbyterians - are working hard on the ministry of the baptized of all of us, on leadership. Part of the work I did before I came to Seabury with the Lilly Endowment in Indianapolis was to work on processes of governance for sessions, and vestries and church boards generally, so that lay leaders in those

worlds – who said they went off to a transformation conference?, so that that can be part of the renewal and empowerment of leadership.

It's also true for clergy. We as the clergy of the church are called at this point to take a much more intentional, mission-focused approach. And there are some challenges to that. Part of the challenge is that whether you're a tentmaker or a clergy person who does congregational ministry on a full-time basis, that the world has changed so much. I love Lauren Mead who used to run the Alban Institute, who said that in one generation the clergy M.O. has turned from being a high-status, low-stress vocation to a guess what? – a high-stress, low-status, low-regard vocation. In the Episcopal church – and this is also true as I understand it from other mainline denominations – we are facing some serious, serious challenges in terms of ordained leadership - the number of clergy. We had a period where more clergy were trying to work on recruiting younger clergy because both Presbyterians and Episcopalians were starting to set up a barrier to recruiting younger clergy about 30 years ago.

At the same time we set up our clergy deployment office and whatever the equivalent is in the Presbyterian church – that's an interesting thing to think about. We also are a graying clergy. And thank God. I'm glad that my gray hair exists every day that I exist because that means I exist. But we are facing a shortage. Matthew Price, who works for our Church Pension Group in the Episcopal Church, came to my office one day and said “Jim, guess what? I figured it out.” Using some very reasonable assumptions, he said, “By the year 2018 there will be 237 clergy serving who are serving today, that's all.” If you take the regular trends of stepping out of full-time ministry into other fields and in terms of retirement, the average age of Episcopal clergy – and I believe it's the same for Presbyterians too – is around 55 years of age. (Question from the audience asking if 55 is the average age of retirement, and Jim clarified that it was the average age of the current clergy). So there are these challenges. Urgent and Hopeful. Mission and Leadership.

Let me talk about the hopeful part of tentmakers in this. There are three tremendous areas of hope. One is the one that you hear about the most and it's the one I have a little bit of a problem with, and that is “thank God there are all these tentmaker clergy, because when congregations run out of other clergy, they're there”. Now, it's kind of like, “you Presbyterians have got to do something with that definition of tentmaker, that's terrible”. But let me assure you the Episcopal church thinks in exactly the same way often times. Instead of saying something negative about that, let me suggest, that IS wonderful. My goodness, this parish that some of us were working in the Diocese of Chicago, would not have had the kind of skills that were brought to it if that connection to where it was in it's life, in it's mission, in it's cycle of development, if those clergy had not been there to do that. So I don't want to diminish that too much. It is a great gift.

But there's a second and in my mind more important benefit of tentmaker clergy leadership in mainline Christianity today. And that is that this is the time when we really, really, really have to connect with the culture. And the problem is that most clergy who are full-time in congregational life are way, way too churchified. . Still part of that is because you have to deal with all of this stuff all of the time. There's wonderful definitions but my God it makes you tired just looking at this stuff, doesn't it? Holy Moly. We need clergy, people who understand that form of mission and leadership who also are rooted, rooted, rooted in the culture and can interpret the culture in a way that can't be done otherwise. And that's a tremendous gift I think that tentmakers bring. And Brian and others in this room know more about tentmaking than I do but it's something that I believe the church, the Episcopal church, is just finding its way in to.

The third major benefit, blessing, of tentmaker ministry for mainline Christianity today, is that we need gifts. Gifts. A plentitude, a multitude, of gifts if we're going to do missional leadership instead of just kind of a traditional and old-fashioned mode of leadership in mainline Christianity. And some of those gifts, the people sitting in this room, got in theological seminary. Isn't it wonderful to be able to read Greek, Latin and Hebrew and to think theological thoughts and to know something about the Bible, and we still need those gifts? But one of my former (not retired) colleagues at Seabury and an associate did a lot of research on effective Episcopal clergy. (The Lilly Endowment gave them enough money to do that – In Indianapolis we used to call them the church's one foundation. They were just wonderful in every way.) And in this Lilly-sponsored research, we discovered that for the effective clergy (and these were primary clergy in full-time congregational settings), they relished what they learned in seminary, about the Bible, about theology, about all those things that are the traditional seminary curriculum, but they (unlike what we call the struggling clergy – you have to have another group, right?) – they learned other skills and developed other gifts of management, administration, entrepreneurship, leadership, all of those sorts of things. Now as I read it, tentmakers bring a rooting in those other gifts that is sometimes – well, usually – far superior to that which is expressed in the traditional seminary curriculum. And we need those gifts for missional leadership.

In conclusion, what these are, and feel free to pick one up – some of us realize that we have not been telling the story of mission in the Episcopal church very well at all – Presbyterian brothers and sisters had the same conversation about this – and also since Americans are so financially focused, this doesn't happen in the Presbyterian church, but in the Episcopal church, congregations sometimes complain about money that goes beyond their local congregation. That doesn't happen in the Presbyterian church I presume. After telling the congregation for the last decade that they need to do narrative budgets and talk about how finance can be used for mission, we said, "Well we've never done it ourselves." We need to tell the story of how resources are used for mission – human resources and financial resources. So this was a quick (you have no idea how quick) thing that a couple of us put together, to describe mission and the mission priorities as they exist in the Episcopal church right now. Sort of a souvenir in that way. But as you read it, two things – one, the same thing could be written and is going to be written in a more mission narrative form. For the Presbyterian church, the same story needs to be told. And as you read through this, the other thing is that you will read about leadership throughout it. Why? Because ministry and mission do not happen without good leadership.

So I'm here to say thank you to you all for your leadership, for your focus on mission. It's a delight to be back home in this setting and to be with you and it worked out nicely because there was another thing happening in Chicago this weekend that I needed to be a part of as well as seeing my family which is not a bad thing to do, is it? And, I also bring greetings from (pick up your purple sheet) the Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold – who used to be the Bishop of Chicago – he sends his greetings as well. We were having coffee this morning and I said I was going to see friends and talk about this tentmaker ministry and that led us to start talking about leadership in the church and how we develop and encourage and are thankful for the great gifts of leadership and ministry that tentmakers bring. So thank you for that and it's great to be with you this evening.