

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

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Panel Presentation

The Rt. Rev. Bill Persell, Bishop, the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago

I just took this assignment very literally with the questions that were going to be asked and just went down and made some notes and so here goes:

What role do you see tentmaking ministry playing today?

An important role of ministry in the workplace seems to me to take place because associations with clergy may only happen for some people in their places of work or where they live. Many people are less likely to be found in an institution of religion or in a church, so the workplace may be the place where the real evangelism of the gospel can take place effectively.

I see tentmaking giving us opportunities for new forms of ministry. You're going to hear about one of them – Davis Fisher and Paul Brouillette are involved with one of our church's where they have been consulting and leading the congregation and are going to be reporting back to the Diocese about the future possibilities of this congregation.

I think that the tentmakers play a role in enriching the clericus of the diocese with the variety of their experience and different points of view. As Gary was referring to today, they are not so tightly linked to the success of the institution, and they have a little more freedom to bring a more movement-type aspect to the ministry. In terms of just within the Diocese of Chicago, some people whom I'm familiar with – some of the people here – are involved in the life of the wider community, including medical doctors, spiritual directors, consultant on money, investment advisors, counseling, librarian, night ministry, hospice care, seminary teachers (a couple of our tentmakers are offering a course at Seabury right now), teaching, police chaplaincy, editing of a theological publication, and others. And these are just some of the many ways that tentmakers are involved in the roles they're playing today.

What roles could I envision for the future?

With more and more ministries and congregations that cannot pay clergy on a full-time basis, I could envision an ordination process where a marketable skill or profession would be a requirement for entering the ordination process of a diocese. You said that at this conference five years ago I said something provocative and I think that I just did again. It will probably come back to haunt me at the next meeting of the Commission on Ministry, but anyway.... I could see that happening and being more and more necessary in the life of the church. I could envision strong support groups for and greater recognition of tentmaker clergy to encourage them and to help them to discover what God might be calling them to do in their places of employment and how they can do effective ministry there where they are working. I could envision much larger numbers of congregations being led by tentmakers. I could envision greater number of Hispanic and Asian tentmaker clergy to work with growing congregations that we have in those areas.

What challenges need to be met for this vision to be realized?

The laity need to assume more responsibility for ministry and mission in the congregations and get away from the old idea that the clergy are there to serve them and to move to the idea that they're there to serve the world and the clergy are there to celebrate the sacraments and to help them in that process. The Church needs to understand and respect the calling of tentmakers more so than is presently the case. Commissions on ministry and governing boards would need greater understanding and acceptance of tentmakers.

I think we're making some progress in this area but still I feel that, throughout the Episcopal church (and that's the one I'm most familiar with, obviously), a sense that if you're not really expecting to be full-time in a parish or something like that, you're really not totally serious about commitment to ministry.

We need to overcome that. Seminaries would need to offer courses accessible to part-time students and faculties would need to have a mindset focused beyond training people for full-time parish ministry. Tentmakers would need to be willing to locate and find work in small communities away from the city. More and more we have places that would be perfect for tentmaker clergy in terms of the needs of a small congregation – say, out on the prairie – but considering other job availability, desires of where people want to live, and all those kinds of issues, tentmakers are less flexible in terms of location than some others might be. Tentmakers would need to be willing and able to support one another in ministry to stay connected to each other. When you're doing a full-time job and also doing something in the life of a church, and having a family perhaps, there isn't a lot of time left over for the very important work of staying connected with one another and supporting one another.

What impact would the expansion of tentmaking ministry have on seminaries and the shape of theological education?

For my vision to be realized, we would need some courses focused on ministry in the workplace, both lay and ordained. Course offerings would need to be available to people working full-time. We would also need sensitivity to language and culture in course offerings and seminary life, requiring us to be bi-lingual.

Church governance is another issue. With growing numbers of tentmakers, there would be less time available for clergy to participate in the governing structures of congregations. Just in terms of times that the people are available, it creates a need for more lay leadership in our diocesan structures... not as clergy-oriented and clergy-dominated.

What impact would the expansion of tentmaking ministry have on congregations?

It could bring greater leadership, diversity, different voices in the pulpit, educational programs, etc., and that would be a total enrichment of congregational life. It would allow some churches to continue to serve which might otherwise wither and die. We are facing more and more situations where the reality is that our small congregations cannot make it in the way that they have been trying to make it with clergy serving the parish full time. This year the health insurance costs have increased by 23%. Of course you all know the cost of gasoline and heating oil and all those kinds of things have been skyrocketing so more and more places are finding it a struggle to keep going.

For the institutional church as a whole, expansion of tentmaking ministry would introduce lay persons to the church's ordained leaders whom they might never otherwise encounter.

Seeing a variety of ways to serve and be the church would open us to new ideas and new ways of doing and being church. More of the church's resources would be available for outreach and mission, less on institutional maintenance for clergy salary and benefits, with an expansion of tentmaker ministries.

I just want to close by thanking you all for what you do and the wide variety of ways you serve the wider community and the church. Thank you.