

Remarks about Tentmaking Ministry

The Rt. Rev. William D. Persell, Bishop of Chicago

The keynote address given by Bishop Persell for the annual meeting of NASSAM, the Tentmakers of the US Episcopal Church.

How do I see tentmaking ministry playing today? I'd say it's largely hidden and not understood by most people within the context of the church. *I think the church as a whole does not recognize ordained ministry that happens outside the context of the parish or possibly a chaplaincy.* Something that they can think, "Aha, this is the church's work". I think we have a long way to go to get real understanding of what so many of you are about and have been about for so many years. I think that when people pay attention to, or recognize, your ministry they do so within the context (unless you are specifically dealing with them where you work) that you are connected to a parish or a congregation. And that's where this "Aha, well, yeah... he really is a minister"; or "He really is a priest because I see him here on Sunday morning doing something at the altar." I think that is where we are.

I'd say right now in the present context that what we have to pay attention to - as we think of the future of tentmaking ministry - is the decline and end of Christendom. In some places it has obviously ended, and in other places it is obviously in decline. We see the breakdown of denominational loyalties where people easily shift from church to church.

Another side of that, however, is ecumenism and interfaith activity. That's part of our context - secularism, economic pressures on congregations, and the need for new ways of being the church. Things that you've heard about - "Total Minister"; and also structural issues, such as yoking of congregations and clustering. Many congregations in their context today cannot afford full-time, paid parish clergy and assistants.

We also have a changed frontier for mission, where we used to think that we had to go overseas to send missionaries. If we look around people from all those countries that we used to send missionaries to are right here and if we are going to be in a relationship with them, or spreading God's word, it's right here on our own doorstep.

Mainline congregations have become sidelines. Ordained ministry has really changed from high-status, low stress kind of work to the exact reverse of that. We're now low-status, high stress in most church positions - in our multi-cultural, post-denominational, post-Christendom, post-modern world.

I hope we'll be open to opening up a number of really new and exciting ways to be the church. I think this is where tentmakers will have much to contribute to that conversation and what that will look like. *I think tentmakers need to be a lot more visible than they are in the life of the church so that we can gain more of an understanding of what this is all about.*

I see tentmakers needing to take on a real critical role in interpreting the church to the world and the world to the church. You are uniquely situated to do that, considering your theological education and understanding and being in very different contexts from the parish church. I think you can help the church adjust to the new realities that I just listed. You can remind the church that our current

denominational and parish structures are not the only way to be the church. And you can really help us to be in mission in new ways to communities, to businesses, governments, social service agencies, etc..

We need to foster respect for differences in all levels of the church's life so that this kind of ministry is not viewed as second -class. Some people, I think, look on tentmakers as having failed in some ways, as if they didn't quite make it in the congregation, so you are doing something else. Those attitudes are very much there.

We need to develop structures for more participation and interaction for tentmakers in the structures of the church as we make decision for the Church's life. And we need more accountability one to another - the church to the tentmakers and the tentmakers to the church.

What impact would the expansion of the tentmaking ministry have on seminaries in the shape of theological education? I think it would greatly enliven our seminaries with a variety of ministries and context for ministry that would force a lot of rethinking and questioning of assumptions within our seminaries. It would force seminaries to pay attention to the world of work, theology of work, economic justice issues, power issues in organizations and more.

How would the expansion of tentmaking ministry impact church government? We might need new canons, new laws. *We would need to change meeting times in order to give tentmakers greater voice and standing in the councils of the church.* Congregations might thrive that are now failing as clergy and laity share ministry. It would allow some congregations to have ordained clergy who cannot under the current system.

I think we might differ slightly in terms of "the gaps" between clergy and laity. I don't see the gap as all that bad; it's how we approach the gaps, I think, that is important that we recognize the ministry of the laity. This would further reduce the expectation that one priest or pastor or one altar is the normative thing for the life of the church. It would position the institutional church as a whole for new mission work and new forms of ministry in business and other settings. *It would strengthen the church by having theologically astute persons bringing the needs and strengths of the world into the common life of the church.*