

Tentmaking in America

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On a chilly, damp, November night the University of St Mary on the Lake (Mundelein, Illinois) would make an eerie setting for a horror movie. Its brick and stone neoclassical buildings, with dark conifers planted too close to serried ranks of tall windows, are separated from each other by dimly-lit paths. It was built in 1921 as a Catholic seminary and the atmosphere remains – there is still a cross on every door-handle and lamp-post, and bedrooms are named after ecclesiastical alumni. The plumbing is intriguingly antique, and the ghosts of ancient spiritual crises seem to hover in the long corridors. Or maybe it was the jet lag.

The number of seminarians has shrunk dramatically, and much of the site is now a conference and retreat centre for the diocese of Chicago. Its setting, on its own lake amid hundreds of acres of woodland, is quite splendid in daylight, and this was where Phil Aspinall and I arrived for this year's Tentmaker conference. It was my first visit, but Phil is a much-respected regular. Over dinner on the Friday evening I started to get acquainted with the thirty or so other participants, a mixture of Episcopalians and Presbyterians. "We don't talk about religion," said one, "we just talk about our ministry wherever we are." CHRISM members would clearly feel at home with this group – even more so when another gruff Midwesterner remarked: "I have to go to a lot of in-house meetings. This is an outhouse meeting!"

We started on a packed agenda with a session on comparative terminology (not English vs American, but Presb. vs Episc.) Some words (e.g. deacon, call) are used differently in the two denominations, while others (e.g. vestry, bishop, synod) are unique to one church – but everyone is familiar with their own jargon and naturally assumes that everyone else understands it too! The rest of the evening was devoted, as at our conferences, to introductions and tentmaker storytelling, which eventually adjourned for "social time" and refreshments in proper MSE fashion. As with us, the conference (and tentmaking generally) has moved on from vague discontent to constructive dialogue. "There's something cooking here, much more than five years ago." Stories increasingly focused on relationships rather than "lone ranger" experiences, but it struck me that they almost all related to the ways in which tentmaking helped people to contribute to churches and congregations. The pressures experienced by small churches in isolated communities came through strongly, and the point was made that no one in a rural area has only one job – so tentmaking seems quite normal in that context.

The Bishop of Chicago is a strong supporter of tentmaker ministry, so much of Saturday's programme had a local flavour. He and three other panellists (one Presbyterian working in congregational development, another who lectures at a seminary with a tradition of training for frontier mission, and the Dean of Seabury-Western Episcopal seminary) discussed and were questioned on various topics. Routes to ordination via various flavours of professional qualification loomed large, as did the inability of two-thirds of Presbyterian churches to support a full-time minister. All the speakers acknowledged the additional perspectives and skills that tentmakers bring to ministry – and the failure of many churches and seminaries to recognise this. But only Bishop Persell really emphasised the value of ministry in places of work, or acknowledged that this would be the only place that many people might now encounter a member of the clergy.

Two contrasted sets of stories followed. One was from new tentmakers, who described their various journeys towards ordination and the points at which they realised that full-time stipendiary ministry was not for them. There is no part-time ministry training in the US, and it can be an immense struggle for many people to attend full-time seminary training and keep a full-time job going – let alone, for some of the women, to keep in occasional contact with their families. This is one area in which the UK is well-ahead of our transatlantic neighbours.

The other stories, from established tentmakers, were equally fascinating. One woman has been specifically ordained as chaplain to a private company which places corporate and industrial chaplains around the USA. In Chicago Bishop Persell is experimenting with another form of tentmaker ministry, by putting a team of five into a semi-moribund church. We heard from two of this team, all of whom share ministry and administration and are working out whether the church should be re-launched or helped to die. The 25 current parishioners find it hard to grasp that no-one person is in charge, and that their priest may be any of five people, depending on the date and time. But the congregation benefits from a combination of inspiration, skills and commitment way beyond the ability of any single minister, and there are already hopeful signs of growth. It will be very interesting to hear how this develops.

One of the five, a professional spiritual director, ran an excellent session on "Finding our Voice". This explored the relationship between theology, spirituality and religion and suggested some principles for making our voices (collective and individual) heard within our own organisations. Part of this may well feature in our February Reflective weekend, so if you want to know more there is still just time to book!

The conference concluded with various denominational reports (we gave a quick update on CHRISM's activities) and business meetings, followed by the final liturgy during which, as it was All Saints Sunday, we had both a sermon and a hymn about tentmaker saints. And then it was back to Chicago, passing the offices of the splendidly-named Resurrection Healthcare en route and, as we walked through the long tunnels to find the Blue Line train for downtown, overhearing one traveller say to another: "O'Hare is a really neat airport. You ought to spend a few hours there sometime."

There are clear differences and fascinating contrasts between American tentmakers, English MSEs and European worker-priests. The prime focus of ministry varies from helping a tiny rural congregation continue to meet and worship, to sharing work with the most exploited and excluded people in our society. Work may itself be ministry, or the means by which liturgical and pastoral ministry can be exercised. Our church hierarchies have differing views of us and expect different things of us. (I wonder whether, given the increasing shortage of priests in many parts of Europe, the Roman Catholic authorities will also begin to see worker-priests as a means of maintaining parish structures?) We are at different stages of working out our understanding of this eccentric (*sensu stricto*) and intrinsically prophetic ministry. But the enthusiasm, the inclusivity and the commitment are the same in every group, and everyone's determination to help build the Kingdom in offices, shops, hospitals, schools and factories overcomes any inadequacies of language. These international encounters are some of the most stimulating experiences CHRISM can offer. Why not try one – you'll like it!