EXAMINING THE MODEL OF TENT-MAKING MINISTRY IN THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Lesiba Matsaung
School of Education
University of Limpopo

Abstract

The concept of tent-making ministry emerged from the Umgababa Synod of the former Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) on 12 June 1979. This came as a response to a deteriorating situation in the church and an attempt to reconceptualise a better model in the service of congregations. Its rationale was based on a critical moment of black congregations failing to fulfil their ministerial contractual obligations for ministry maintenance due to sudden withdrawal of subsidies by mother congregations of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) who had been the financial backbone for the sister congregations. The situation resulted in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) allowing its employee ministers to be employed somewhere else while still serving the congregations on part-time basis. This article attempts to examine the problem of whether the contemporary models of tent-making ministry can be effective in serving the financial and spiritual aspects of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) congregations. Although church politics also played a role, here the researcher wants to focus on the contribution made by tent-making ministry that salvaged a ghastly situation in the church. The major results appear to be different views on understanding policy and practice concerning tent-making ministry in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.
1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of tent-making refers to a process whereby a person is involved in the making of tents. A tent is a portable shelter or dwelling of canvas or cloth, supported by a pole or poles and stretched by cords attached to pegs driven into the ground (Tullock 1993:1610). In the church context the process refers to a person who, whereas standing in an established congregation, earns a living from an external source where he offers his labour (Matsaung 1996:163). By doing this he is economically cemented, secured and insulated from the devastating socio-economic factors that a minister faces. Although the foundations of this process are traced back into the NGKA, in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) it culminated in a vivid form. URCSA is a baby born out of the Dutch Reformed family in 1994. The family was composed of Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Nederduitse Gereformeerde Sendingkerk (NGSK), Reformed Church of Africa (RCA) and Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Afrika (NGKA) which were for whites, coloureds, Indians and blacks, respectively. URCSA was born from the fusion of NGSK and NGKA. It was in the struggles of these churches that the phenomenon of tent-making ministry originated. The critical questions which guided the study are: What is tent-making ministry? How did it come into being? What were the major events of the time? Who were the role-players at the time? What is interesting about tent-making ministry? What were the main accomplishments by the church during that period? An adequate response to the above questions will help to shed light on the phenomenon of tent-making ministry in the church. In essence, the process of tent-making ministry in URCSA, and in other churches also, was influenced by both external and internal factors, especially those of economic concern and, particularly those raised by religious leaders themselves and, of course, it remains in many ways a story of good hope (Hofmeyr 2004:22). This article will look also at factors which prompted the emergence of tent-making ministry, its financial and spiritual (theological) aspects, contemporary debates around tent-making ministry (see Annexure “A”), delving into alternative strategies for effective tent-making and then conclusion.
Factors which prompted the initiating of tent-making ministry are many, but for the URCSA the few mentioned below will suffice:

- Where there are insufficient funds for the stipend of the minister and for the running of the congregation, some church Councils opted for tent-making ministry as a solution.

- Where there was apathy about the contributions of congregation members and the church could not carry the missionary work of the congregation, away-out in the form of tent-making ministry was sought.

- Poor management in the congregation by both the minister and the church council could also necessitate the introduction of tent-making ministry as a solution.

- Poverty in rural congregations and the closing of factories and mines which have been the financial backbones of the local communities can affect the congregations negatively and consequently necessitate tent-making ministry as a way out. Although in 1993, the government announced a scheme of drought aid in an attempt to assist the poor rural black people. This proved insufficient. As Nash (84:99) highlighted: “The R20m programme would provide 22 150 eight-month jobs at a wage of R46-00 per month and emergency feeding schemes for schools and impoverished areas.” The above underlines how seriously the rural congregations could be affected.

- The withdrawal of NGK subsidies from the URCSA congregations became a shock to which only the tent-making ministry was perceived as an answer. Threats of cuts in the subsidies given by white congregations or circuits (regional groupings of congregations) to sponsor black churches have been used in several instances against black ministers if they made ‘political’ statements, or joined the Broederkring
Lesiba Matsaung

(Serfontein 1982:113). To resist this financial control which had been a tool used to manipulate black ministers, some opted for tent-making ministry. Peter Bolink as quoted by Sam Buti (1974:48) once said: “Die finansiële band moet nie die Bantoeleraars in die rol van twee-gesigte dwing nie” (The financial connection must not push the Black ministers into a two-faced role.) In this situation many black ministers had to choose whether to become part of the problem or part of the solution.

- The mass production of new ministers (probationers) and evangelists by theological seminaries was another causative factor. No audit or process budgeting was done in terms of: How many congregations were there? How many were vacant? How many ministers were in the field? How many are to retire? Or exit by some others route? How many ministers and evangelists would be needed in subsequent periods? In the *Maandbrief* of November 1995, Reverend Hennie Möller analysed the situation as follows:

> Van die 118 gemeentes in die VGK N TVL, 61 het voltydse leraars. 10 het slegs ’n evangelis en 17 het geen amptelike leraar of evangelis nie … Baie min van die 17 proponente wat verwag om binnekort by Turfloop gelettertimeer te word, kan verwag om beroeps as voltydse leraars te kry. Minstens 21 van die huidige voltydse leraars se poste kan in die volgende paar jaar ernstige finansiële krisis beleef.

- The information hereby supplied clearly indicated that URCSA is caught up in its machinery. The current situation stands at 127 congregations in total, of which 28 are without ministers. Even of the total ministers serving currently, 6 are the remnants of the white missionaries.

In response to the above situation, the Northern Transvaal Regional Synod in session at Mamelodi in 1984 resolved:
Viewed from this perspective, tent-making ministry should be understood to have emerged as a survival strategy whose contractual obligations had to culminate in the labour laws of South Africa (Labour Relations Act, No 66 of 1995). The ministers had to take a clear option for the church, for their own cause and for the cause of all the poor and the oppressed (Villa-Vicencio & De Gruchy 1985:196). Beneficially, this form of strategy could be exercised in conjunction with other occupations in order for the minister to acquire additional salary by which he could survive while serving the congregation. However, the challenge faced by the church is whether this form of ministry is or can be a solution to both our financial and our spiritual problems.


In search of a better solution to the problem of tent-making ministry, in 2003, the Northern Transvaal Synod resolved that: “The principle of tent-making ministry is accepted” (Church order 2003:18, Stipulation 19.1). But the Synod left the responsibility of implementing this stipulation in the hands of the church council concerned. This included drawing of contracts subject to the control and approval of the Presbytery. For that reason this stipulation needs to be interrogated in order to find out whether it does really serve the purpose regarding the financial and theological aspects of the life of church members. This textual interrogation is based on the fact that according to the Bible the church is the body of Jesus Christ (1 Cor
12). It is explicit then that this body needs food and should be spiritually fed. Finances and spirit become the fundamental and essential aspects:
3.1 Financial aspects

This aspect has advantages and disadvantages for both the minister and the congregation.

3.1.1 Advantages

- In becoming a tent-maker in another occupation somewhere, the minister relieves his/her congregation of sustaining him/her. Such ministers do not become a burden to their congregation.
- The meagre finances of the congregation can be channelled into other projects or programmes which are beneficial and tailored to the community.
- The local based tent-making ministry is less expensive and does afford both the minister and the congregation an opportunity to execute their diaconal services properly.
- The minister becomes mentally, physically and spiritually freed from financial constraints and serves the congregation with joy. *E fofo ka mošwang* (Northern Sotho proverb).

3.1.2 Disadvantages

- The congregation and the circuit (ring) have no effective control over the minister as their servant or employee.
- The minister lives in two worlds and he/she undergoes a terrible identity crisis as he/she is obsessed by a divided loyalty. He has two masters to serve. Van Niekerk (1982:18) refers to this as two basic attitudes to life, especially if he may find himself in both the secular and the religious worlds. It may give rise to tension in him that can cause stresses and other unnecessary imbalances.
- ‘Distance’ tent-making ministry ushers in the minister’s long absence from the congregation. Members tend to relax and are deprived of active participation in church activities, and this may also result in weakening membership obligations.
- The type of tent-making ministry also counts: a business venture, or a workplace where toyi-toying frequently takes place may affect the minister’s image and therefore consequently his
congregation.
All in all, the financial failure by congregations was in a large measure a reflection of a deeper malaise - a crisis in the commitment of the churches to ecumenical theological formation, and a corresponding lack of ability on the part of URCSA to provide a viable solution to the problem that put the church in a quagmire (cf Duncan 2004:23; De Gruchy 1996:22).

3.2 Spiritual aspect

This is another terrain with its advantages and disadvantages

3.2.1 Advantages

- In the process of tent-making ministry and the minister’s repeated absences, members become more spiritually matured and responsible to one another during their interaction in church activities.
- The church council and the general membership of the congregation, if well schooled, learn to be accountable by doing home visits (huisbesoek), night vigils, talent evenings, tea parties and fund-raising.

3.2.2 Disadvantages

- Many of the church members rely heavily on their minister. In his absence they become spiritually weak and they lapse.
- Tent-making ministry limits the spiritual care of the congregation by the minister, namely; visiting the sick in hospital, doing proper home visiting. This is because he is always involved in tiring travelling for long distances. This might be cited as one of the reasons why our churches become stagnant, lacking expansive growth (Kritzinger 1984: 81). One may also say that the minister appears to be a refugee in his own congregation. He becomes displaced and lives a life of spiritual migration because he is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge (economic) in another place outside his country (congregation) of origin (Jacob et al
In short, he is an economic displaced person who goes out in search of shelter and other employment for both his and his congregation’s survival.

The above elucidations require us to look into some congregations in which tent-making ministry is taking place to see whether these congregations cannot serve as models to be copied as good or bad in the process of tent-making ministry.

3.3 Contemporary models in the debate around tent-making ministry

There are many congregations which can serve as models, but here three model congregations will suffice (see Annexure A):

3.3.1 The local model

- In this model, the minister is engaged in tent-making within the boundaries of his local congregation.
- Depending upon the type of his tent-making, his time can be scheduled to suit the activities of his congregation.
- No huge expenses are incurred.

3.3.2 The remote model

- The minister engages in tent-making outside the boundaries of his congregation.
- His time can never be apportioned to suite his congregational needs.
- Most of the congregational activities are accomplished during weekends. The congregation is run by remote control, using the telephone, paid for out of his or the congregation's funds. This is, in fact, a cellular congregation.
- Huge expenses are incurred since the congregation must carry the burden of the minister's travelling expenses to and from his place of tent making.
- In most cases the congregation is structured in such a way that it can manage itself in the absence of the minister. This may boil
down to democratic management.

3.3.3 The situational model

- The situation dictates what should be done.
- This model violates the present structures of the URCSA.
- Pastor is not the chairman of the church council.
- Chairman of church council is elected by the general church council.
- The executive committee of the church council is appointed by the minister.
- Minister’s wife is permanent member of the church council.
- Treasurer is elected by the whole congregation.
- Bookkeeper is not treasurer.
- Auditing is done by professional body.
- Congregation chart is enforced.
- Preachers are drawn from the general membership of the congregation.
- Individual members’ report concerning congregational activities is submitted orally or in writing to the executive committee annually.
- Annual programme for congregational activities is drawn up by executive committee and approved by general church council.

The above three models also have advantages and disadvantages, but the local model seems to be, tentatively, a feasible option from among the alternatives offered as solutions in the process of tent-making ministry.

In the light of all the above, we now arrive at what can be possible guidelines or strategies for this venture.

4 WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

In planning for the future, we allude to alternative strategies for effective tent-making ministry. The first is to say that tent-making ministry can never be a permanent solution to the congregation's problems, but the beginning of many more to follow. A suggested way out is to accept it as a challenge and a tentative course for both
the congregation and the minister and to welcome it as a phenomenon to live with.

4.1 Restructuring of the congregation. For the tent-making process to succeed and be effective, the congregation must be restructured into sizeable units - several wards.

4.2 The management style must focus on planning, organising, leading and control with related activities.

4.3 The congregation should have a central office run by the Administrator of the congregation.

4.4 There should be a proper agreement or contract between the minister and congregation. This should include: arrangements for travel allowance, flow of information, leave days and other fringe benefits.

4.5 The schooling of the church council in this regard is of the utmost importance. To this point Mazibuko (1987:31) alluded: “Leadership is a function which develops through involvement and training.”

4.6 Understanding and cooperation with other churches, organisations and institutions must be encouraged. Kritzinger’s (1988:45) plea for this needs our serious attention:

... tent-makerbediening trek oral die aandag as ’n belowende element in die vind van ’n oplossing. Die ouer kerke moet groot begrip openbaar vir die so nodige eksperimente, want dit kan ’n groot bydrae lewer in die totstandkoming van meer verantwoordelike en gesonde verhoudinge.

For this reason, the conditions must be created for mutual co-existence, for as the body of Christ we are all but symbiotic.

4.7 The church (URCSA) should seek for a system of partial or total borrowing from other churches, like the methods and skills used by
others who did manage to survive and grow financially and spiritually (Rom. 8:5).

4.8 Qualitative and quantitative budgeting in the production of human resources should be considered as part of the theological training of ministers. This should include different directions or career-oriented theological studies which will qualify ministers to be effective tentmakers.

5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, having said all the above, let me add that tent-making ministry is, nowadays, an existing process, but we have yet to see whether it will, in any practical sense, be beneficial to the church. "Ideas matter, but votes (reality) still carry the day." Remember what the Lord said: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12).

WORKS CONSULTED


Van Niekerk, A S 1982. *Dominee, are you listening to the drums?* Cape Town: Tafelberg.


ANNEXURE “A”

MODELS FOR TENT-MAKING MINISTRY

The local model
1 – Community & congregation boundaries
2 – Congregation
3 – Minister
4 – Place of tent-making

4.2 The remote model

4.3 The situational model