

**“Missionaries at Work:
A Critique of the ‘Business Platform’
Approach to Restricted Access Countries”**

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Introduction

One immediately confronts uncertainty of meaning when considering terms such as “Business as Mission” and ‘Business Platforms.’ Are such phrases identical in meaning or descriptive of quite different concepts and approaches to mission? Or, is one simply an umbrella for the other. One must clarify this issue before moving on to decide whether or not the use of ‘business platforms’ to enter restricted access nations is legitimate missionary strategy. This paper seeks to clarify the confusing terminology surrounding “Business as Mission,” examine critically the uses and abuses of ‘business platforms,’ and provide a roadmap for future development under the heading “Business as Mission.”

Business as Mission

Under the theme “A new vision, a new heart and a renewed call,” the Lausanne 2004 Forum for World Evangelization brought together hundreds of Christian leaders from around the world to focus on the task of world evangelism. 1530 participants from 130 countries attended the simultaneous consultations on urgent issues most relevant to world evangelization. One of the most challenging and critical aspects of the Forum was the selection of 31 Issue Groups in which the major challenges to world evangelism would be addressed. According to 2004 Forum Chairman Dr. Roger Parrott, narrowing the focus from a vast landscape of possible topics to the final group of 31 issues was a multi-year deliberation, including extensive Lausanne-based research of thousands of Church leaders, hundreds of small group meetings connected to the Global Inquiry, and multiple international conference calls as well as the more than frequent emails (Parrott, September 29, 2004). Criteria for final selection as an Issue dictated that the final issues be central to evangelism, and global or mega-regional in scope. They were to be the most complex challenges facing the Church and the issues were to produce an action compelling enough to bring the Global Church together to work in collaboration.

Of these 31 Issue Groups, one is established for the specific purpose of dealing with ‘Business as Mission.’ This group is guided by a “Jesus-like holistic approach,” in which God is seen as calling businesspeople and entrepreneurs to manifest God’s kingdom in the marketplace, using God-given gifts and skills to demonstrate Kingdom of God values in all spheres of society and to the ends of the earth. Inclusion as an Issue Group clearly shows Business as Mission to be an emerging movement in global missions. But what exactly is meant by “Business as Mission?” Issue Group 30 identifies the following five objectives related to “Business as Mission”:

1. Learn from examples of Christian entrepreneurs who have made a strategic difference in societies through business—especially on the mission field—seeing the Kingdom impact peoples’ lives spiritually, socially and economically.

2. Further develop a theological perspective on work and business as it relates to the holistic mission of the Church in the world.
3. Explore ways to mobilize the Christian Business Community, impart a vision for Business as Mission, affirm them in their calling and provide connection for practical application for their ministry in mission settings.
4. Explore Business as Mission's potential impact and implications on existing mission and development paradigms and practices—theologically and operationally.
5. Identify national, regional and global Business as Mission networks and initiatives (Lausanne Newsletter, November 2003).

Clearly, the concept of 'Business as Mission' for the Lausanne Issue Group focuses upon the potential for networking with existing businesses and Christian entrepreneurs, who with the right vision and training, may connect their impact with the holistic mission of the Church in the world.

Business Platforms in Mission

Something quite different is intended by most who employ 'business platforms' as access to restricted or closed countries for missionary purposes. Even then, two divergent approaches emerge. The first of these is often labeled 'tentmaking,' with reference to the Apostle Paul's trade that enabled him to move about without complete dependence on the financial support of early believers. The word 'tentmaker' may simply be defined as a disciple of Jesus Christ who is called by God to a cross-cultural ministry using marketable skills and services.¹ This may include but not preclude self-support. In practice it can include professionals in the arenas of health care, banking, engineering, information technology as well as teachers of English, students in overseas universities, administrators or businesspeople. The term 'business' for these individuals includes a range of ideas such as occupation, profession, trade or commerce. According to Stanley Davies, Executive Director of Global Connections in London, for the Christian "Business is using God's resources in the creation and free exchange of perceived economic value and benefit. In the mission context, 'Business' is the formation of a group or association that creates and exchanges economic value in the exhibition of Kingdom values, ways and means" (Davies, October 2001).

However, this understanding of 'Business' is not the one driving the creation and use of 'Business Platforms' among many mission agencies. The prevailing notion among many is that a 'business platform' is that which enables one to gain

¹One of the leading advocates of 'tentmaking' is Gary Taylor, president of Taylored Communications, International. TCI is a Kingdom company whose telecommunications products and services in the hotel and travel industry are designed specifically to enable serious marketing professionals a platform for business based access to unreached peoples. Gary was co-founder of Frontiers, Inc. and the US Association of Tentmakers. He founded and still manages a creative access facilitating ministry, Strategic Ventures Network. More information is available from his website related to Business and Missions: www.scruples.net.

entrance into and a reason for remaining in a restricted access country. In many cases, the 'platform' is merely a façade that creates the appearance of legitimacy without the substance thereof. Numerous examples could be cited but two will suffice for the purposes of this paper. The first example comes from the author's own experience while serving with the International Mission Board. Following seven years of career missionary service in a "traditional" mission setting in Kenya, East Africa, the author moved with his family to India in order to serve as Strategy Coordinator for a major unreached Hindu people group in northwest India. During a scouting trip prior to final relocation, an important meeting of the prospective missionaries and selected mission executives took place in a Bombay hotel room. The purpose of the meeting was clear, a 'platform' needed to be established for legitimate entry of the new missionaries into India and it was left to the couple to devise their own reason for residency. With a sense of vision and purpose, the couple proposed that an International Student Exchange service be established for the expressed purpose of bringing students from other countries to study in India. The underlying purpose was to bring graduates from Kenya Baptist Theological College where the author previously served as Academic Dean, into India as student missionaries. This would provide the African students an accredited bachelor's degree as well as pioneer a cross-cultural missions movement among Kenyan Baptist believers. While the author received encouragement from mission leaders in East Africa to make the plan a reality, leaders from South Asia downplayed the importance of carrying through with an actual business function. The 'platform' was in actuality not a platform from which to spring into networking and training resulting in a church planting movement, but instead was merely the legitimizing factor for gaining a visa in order to remain in the country.

A second and final example of frustration with the use of 'business platforms' for entry into restricted access countries comes from an unpublished paper by an individual that must remain anonymous. The following is a case study based upon his account of frustration with mission leadership related to the 'business platform' approach. Specific designations are removed to prevent targeting any one mission organization:

A man and his wife, motivated to go to a foreign country as Christ's witnesses, attend a job conference with a mission agency and look at many requests for two year personnel. They are presented with many specific job options in several enticing places. Through prayer and reasoning the couple narrow the options to the three most favored and then, as usual, the leadership makes the final decision. So, they go to Oman in the Middle East. They are very happy with this. The job they have chosen is called Adventure Specialist and what they are to be doing is exciting. They are, in effect, volunteer coordinators, but will be working in a travel and tour company arranging adventure tours, including fishing and hiking trips. The husband is extremely excited because his degree is actually in this area and he eagerly purchases some reading material on

how to guide groups, how to fish in that location, etc. They are to come to the field at the same time as another older couple who own a travel and tour company in the USA. This other couple is going to be in Oman only 6 months and have come with the clearly expressed purpose to set up a branch of their tour company and then train them to run it.

Arrival on the field is a little depressing, but the couple remain optimistic. They are basically driven to a hotel by their Strategy Leader (SL) and told to “chill out” there until he, their only other team member and contact besides the second, older couple, has time to come and orient them. Their first month in the country is amazingly slow. They each devour a few books to keep busy, they start a one month part-time Arabic class, and the husband plays billiards in the hotel with several locals in the evening. This situation holds for about a month but a few distressing things that happen in this first month start to sour the experience. One is the inadequate amount of orientation or training “in the field.” Another frustration is living for a month in a hotel room. Third, while the husband is meeting many locals, albeit not good contacts, the wife is struggling to meet even one local lady, as Omani women are not in public as much as men. Trying to remain optimistic, the new couple visits different cities and areas of the country in order to evaluate the idea of planning for tour groups. They have now moved from the hotel to an apartment and are slowly furnishing it as the SL has time to give them to go and purchase things. They also develop, by direction of their leaders, business cards, pens and stationary with the company's name on it for promotion.

About their third month in Oman and the second month in the apartment, the couple begins receiving frequent phone calls from the landlord and real estate agent about their visa and labor card number. These were not included in the lease agreement, although their SL persuaded the agent to rent it under the husband's name. They did not know until then that, legally, you must have a residence permit to rent housing in Oman. They do not have a residence visa. Bringing this to the attention of mission leadership sparks an effort to find some way to procure a residence visa for this couple. Options are researched and situations evaluated, but this is all curious to the couple because they expected a travel company to be set up into which they would be employed and thus provided a residence visa.

About their fifth month in Oman a deal is struck with a local businessman to purchase a visa from him. This can be done because this businessman has family members in the government and other contacts through which he can get extra visas for foreigners. He then sells the visas at profitable prices. They meet this local through their SL. This arrangement is not a good one in the husband's opinion because he knows it is circumventing the law in Oman that says one must actually work for his or her

sponsoring company. The man knows that he does not work for the national's company and, in fact, is paying over \$2500 of the mission agency's money to the businessman so that he can have a residence visa through his company. (Companies are only taxed about \$100 annually for visas for foreigners, so this means the local businessman is making a huge profit.) At first, the missionaries do not openly question this arrangement because it was set up by two older mentors and their leader, the SL and the other mission volunteer who was to be setting up a branch of his tour company.

In the seventh month in-country the couple is involved in making arrangements for a brief weekend retreat/conference where the Strategy Associate (SA) will come to meetings with all missionary personnel in Oman and the United Arab Emirates. The second older couple has returned to the US by this time, but without setting up a branch of their tour company. In the process of making arrangements for this retreat the husband uses his new business cards and letterheads with the tour company's name on them. Two things result from his use of these. First, the hotel checks on the company's status and finds out that it is not a legally recognized business in Oman and questions the husband about it. Second, because a fax with the bogus letterhead is seen by the government department of industry and commerce, the husband is brought before a local governmental authority and aggressively challenged and threatened about doing illegal business here in Oman. This was very stressful and humiliating. At the retreat, a meeting takes place with the SA and the SL in order to discuss what to do. It is suggested by the SA that because a true platform for work was not established, that perhaps it would be best to relocate the couple to another country and team where they could do other work. The SL of Oman is very defensive and insistent that the couple stays in their country. The couple is shocked and offended when their SL's wife directly states that if they leave Oman, they are neglecting God's calling on their lives and even the Mission of God Universal. Contact between the SL and the couple is now reduced now to an awkward once-a-month meeting for the purpose of financial accounting.²

Critical Issues Related to 'Business Platform' Use

Most western missionaries are trained and recruited for ministry rather than business ability, with church planting or the initiation of church planting movements having highest priority. Few are trained or experienced in business and, therefore, when attempting to enter a restricted or creative access nation they face acquiring a new skill or acquiescing to a business "front" with no

² From an unpublished paper prepared in February, 2005, for presentation to a large U.S.-based mission agency.

intention of ever performing tasks related to a legitimate business. This creates an ethical dilemma. Is it acceptable for a missionary to use a legitimate means of gaining entrance and residence in a country while never intended to carry out that legitimate purpose? Or, stated in a different way, does the end justify the means? Admittedly, this is not always the case and there are numerous examples of individuals teaching English to nationals or working in relief and development while straining all the time toward a church planting movement among their target people group. Few would question the legitimacy and even strategic importance of such an approach. Few would question the potential of Kingdom companies, ones that exist to provide legitimate, profitable platforms for creative access church planters and national Christian leaders needing economic support. In the words of Gary Taylor: "What an idea. Serving by working alongside those we intend to grasp the Gospel. Then, staying at their side in business and relationships until they embrace it in the ways that will multiply themselves naturally. It might look like the concentric circles of true discipleship we've talked so much of and seen so little of" (Taylor, undated *Scruples Business and Mission* newsletter).

Few would also approve the approach described in the case study concerning the couple who were provided a visa essentially on the black market and faced one difficulty after another as a result. Therefore, the critical issue is what to do about the use of 'business platforms' when they serve the purpose primarily, if not entirely, to simply provide legitimate entrance and residence in an otherwise "closed" country. It is this issue that should gain as much attention for debate as our interest in seeking ways to foster the 'tentmaker' movement or developing networks with key organizations that are already experienced in serving Christian business people and assisting them in their effort to make a difference for God's Kingdom in the marketplace.

A Roadmap for the Future (Or at Least a Sketch in the Sand)

Mission leaders need to consider the ethical as well as strategic importance of their decisions. While some may see legitimate entrance as the critical issue, others will recognize that legitimate residence is the more critical one. Is it really necessary to walk a fine line or play in the grey area when it comes to creative access? Or, is our failure to draw the line related to the inadequacy of our own preparation for those who will enter these restricted access fields in order to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and initiate church planting movements among unreached people groups? Which is easier, to hide behind a business "front" or provide the actual training necessary to equip a new generation of missionaries with necessary skills for work in restricted access countries? Evidently, for many mission leaders the former appears the better choice, albeit the myopic one. For long-term and holistic impact for the Kingdom of God in restricted access nations, a radical change is needed in our approach to missionary preparation and selection. This preparation will focus upon legitimate skills of use in the two-thirds world, supplemented by cross-cultural preparation, rather than focusing on

cross-cultural preparation with little or no thought to skill acquisition. Admittedly, the second is the most difficult and least immediate of the two; however, it offers the greatest potential for the long term.