

STARTING A BUSINESS IN A RESTRICTED ACCESS NATION

By Patrick Lai

“If God called me to a people and told me I had 3 years to reach them, I'd give 2 years to preparing and 1 year to doing ministry with the people.” Those are the words Leroy Eims of the Navigators once told me. Many tentmakers come overseas with an Indiana Jones mentality, “They make it up as they go.” There's too much at stake spiritually, financially and security-wise to make too many mistakes in the beginning. Understanding that “though a man plans his way, it is the Lord who directs his steps”, we need to carefully prepare ourselves for the work/job/ministry the Father has called us to.

Reaching Muslims requires a long-term commitment. Working for a multi-national corporation or a school is tentative. Most contracts are for 2 years. Managing our time is a constant struggle for tentmakers. Keeping the team in one city with proper visas is another struggle. How can a team of tentmakers seeking to plant a church among an unreached people maintain a long-term residence in a Restricted Access Nation (RAN)? One solution is to start your own business. Establishing your own business enables you to control the amount of time needed to be with friends and neighbours

Consider one real life situation: Jim* (a businessman), Jack (an English teacher), and Joe (an electrical engineer), who, from the beginning were considered model tentmakers. They each had a clear calling to reach the same Muslim people group. They had master's degrees in their areas of expertise. Each had some cross-cultural ministry and/or formal Bible training. Jim, Jack and Joe, decided to work together as a team. They called themselves the XYZ team. As a team they joined Frontiers, a tentmaking mission that works exclusively among Muslims. Frontiers they realised, would provide the encouragement, guidance and accountability they would need were overseas. Their churches were behind them sending them out promising to pray for them, emotionally support them and gave them a large financial gift toward their air tickets and moving expenses.

Feeling adequately equipped for every good work, they applied for jobs with national firms in the XYZ country they were called to. Soon they each had a job and moved their families into the country. Jim and Joe had 1 year contracts and Jack a 3 month quarterly contract which was renewable. Despite their good start and preparation, within weeks problems began to arise. Joe's, engineering firm decided his skills were needed in another city, so he was transferred 900km away. Jack, found his teaching schedule to be unbearable. He was teaching 32 hours a week (not counting preparation time) and he was forbidden to discuss religious issues with any of his students inside or outside the classroom. Jim's business associates were all foreigners. On the average he spent 20 minutes a week at the office in discussions with members of the targeted people group. After 2 years in the country, about all they could say for themselves is -- they had survived living in the country for 2 years. Each of them had 2 to 8 good local friends, but in 2 years the XYZ team had shared the “Good News” only twice. They lived the life on their jobs, but it did not seem to make any difference.

The XYZ team came back to their home country and their churches discouraged, but not defeated. Realising their goal of evangelising and planting a church among the Muslims had not been fulfilled, Jim, Jack and Joe wondered: is there a better way? In evaluating their situation they realised they had 2 major problems, time and money. Since they worked for someone else they had little control over their time. Their jobs also limited which people they could associate with. Yet they had to have a job to feed their families and obtain a legal resident visa. The XYZ team discussed their experiences and struggles with their churches and friends at home. From the lessons learned they decided it would be best to start their own business. This would enable them to work for themselves giving them control of their time. The churches would help support them so as to reduce the actual number of hours they would need to work

For nearly two years the XYZ team prepared and planned their business. Jim and Joe organised, registered, wrote up a business plan and raised funding for their business. Jack returned to school to receive a more pertinent degree. They also raised monthly financial support to meet their basic needs. This church support enabled them to have more flexibility and keep control of their time. This allowed them to limit the number of hours they would have to be in the office, creating more time to socialise with Muslims. Operating their own business allowed them to stay nearby one another and minister together. They met at the office almost daily for prayer, and encouragement without raising any suspicion. Eight years after beginning their business, the XYZ team has won and gathered about a dozen Muslim believers and their business is currently expanding to open a second outlet.

Proverbs 18:15 teaches us "An intelligent man is always open to new ideas, in fact he looks for them." (Living Bible) Jesus said to "look on the world." Looking involves seeing. It involves searching for new ideas. To "see" something we must be where it is. The XYZ team had been in the country for one year. They had seen the needs, they knew the opportunities. They had a clear idea of what type of business would succeed. Experience has shown us we need to go to countries and "see", not just prayer walk, or do some project. We need to "see" and observe. Clearly it is the Lord who empowers our successes, yet there are six practical guidelines we should "look" into before setting up our own business.

1. Study the people.

We first need to "see" the people. Every country, every people group, every language has its distinctives. Take time to study the people and learn these distinctives. Learn their interests and needs. People are material beings. Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:9 NIV)

What do people want? Peoples, countries, societies usually fall into one of 4 basic categories. All societies want basic needs (food, water, shelter and peace), jobs, education and leisure. Once a country has their basic needs met the people want jobs. Once they have simple or semi-skilled jobs, they want more an advanced education to get better jobs. And once they have good jobs they want leisure to spend their moneys on. This is the basic scale of economies. Undeveloped countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, want their basic needs serviced. Getting training in health services, water projects, the building of homes will grant you entry into these countries. Indonesia, Vietnam, Algeria are under developed countries. They need jobs for their people. Small manufacturing companies, and building service related businesses, like taxis, hair stylists, bakeries, restaurants, or other simple retail stores will create the needed jobs. Developing countries like China, Malaysia, and Morocco need education. Setting up schools, English, computer, business schools will endear you to these governments and give you excellent opportunities to meet people while you work. Saudi Arabia, Oman and Singapore are developed countries which want leisure activities. Operating tours, or clubs or hotels, up market restaurants, or providing consulting services which reduce their work loads are good entry strategies for these places.

Initially people followed Jesus for His provision of food and His signs. The people were primarily in the pursuit of self gratification and happiness. Jesus fed the hungry. He healed the sick. Through these "attractions" people came to understand who He was. Is it more spiritual to meet those needs only and not other needs of men? There are many ways we may attract people's attention. "Look" for the needs of the people and then determine before the Lord how you can uniquely meet them.

2. Study the cultural trends of the people and the culture.

We need to study current trends to "see" how the people and their culture is moving. How does the culture work? What motivates the people to work? Does religion have a high profile? Asking and answering these questions and others will help in developing both your business and ministry strategy. Though it is good for your business to supply an income for you or the team, this is not

essential. All businesses must make a profit to stay afloat. However, if you have an additional income from churches at home you need only to ensure your business is profitable enough to cover your fixed costs and national workers salaries. This creates two benefits. One, you need not be in the office as many hours each week. Most jobs create more work and not less as time goes on. However, as you are not dependent on the business to feed your family you have more options with your time. You are free to work part-time if needed and give more time to discipleship, leadership or the theological training of new believers. Two, being salaried from home, keeps your status as a missionary with the churches. Churches like people keep track of their money. If a church supports you, they are more inclined to pray, encourage and hold you accountable to your ministry task. The priority is ministry - reaching the unreached.

The business you start should fulfil a need or want of the government. What does the government want? Usually the answer may be found in the daily paper. "Look" for articles declaring where the government is going, what projects they are undertaking and what type of job skills it will take to get there. Study the paper, learn their needs. Build a business which meets a need or creates an attraction within your target people group. Such a business will ensure your longevity in the country. Businesses which put you face to face with the target people in natural settings are best. Yet, if this does not appear feasible due to government or personal limitations, it's okay. In 9 years of living in a Muslim country only twice have I actually done business with a Muslim. I build friendships and create witnessing opportunities through social contacts with neighbours and people I meet in clubs, gyms, community centres, at community events and coffee shops. However, it is essential your business provides a viable long-term entry strategy.

Plan ahead. Think through where your target country is today so as to know where it will be going tomorrow. Don't prepare yourself for jobs the government currently needs, but for jobs they are going to need 3 to 5 years from now. Why? The training needed to qualify plus the application process to set up a business in a RAN is often 2 to 3 years, sometimes longer. Unless you already have the needed skills and/or degrees needed to set up a business or school, by the time you are ready your opportunity may be gone. As the Americans say, "the early bird catches the worm." One friend entered China in 1985, just as China was opening. More by accident than design he found a job teaching English when English teaching was hardly known in China. Yet, 10 years later he is still working there. Others coming in nowadays need higher degrees to get in. But as he was there first, he has become known. He has become a friend of the university. As a result he has been able to stay and has seen many come to know the Lord. People coming in later - after a need is well established - will need higher and higher degrees and greater experience to be accepted.

Most countries pattern themselves after other countries. Learn what other countries the people or leaders compare themselves to. This will help to anticipate what the needs are of a country. Watch and "see" the trends of countries world-wide. Poorer, less-developed countries look to similar, yet more advanced countries as a model. These countries learn from the more developed nations' examples and struggles, both good and bad. India, with its huge population problems and diverse cultures, often compares itself to China. Singapore is small yet has 4 main cultures and languages. Singapore tends to emulate Switzerland which is also small and has 3 diverse languages and cultures. Some North African countries pattern themselves after France. If you know the economy, education, transportation industry of your target country, and who they are patterning themselves after, you may easily determine where the country is headed and what type of businesses they will need 5 years from now. If you can, try and visit 1 or 2 countries which have recently (within the last decade) come through the stage that your target country is now passing through. Learn the needs of this country in all areas; educationally, mechanically, socially, materially, as well as spiritually. Look for business or education ideas which you may be able to reproduce into a business and visa.

We know how to tell the signs of the weather, in the same way learn to accurately forecast economic, educational, spiritual, and other needs of countries we are targeting. Talk to the people who are there. If there is a minority Christian population, do not rely on the Christians alone for

your information. Christians often want to please you so they tell you what you want to hear. They want you to come to their country. So get input from both the non-Christian and Christian leaders. Non-Christians will see you as a competitor. Often they will point out the reasons why you should not come. I find this more helpful, for if I can overcome the problems, I can surely begin a business. Where they disagree, I tend to trust the advice of the non-Christians over that of the believers.

3. Study the educational system.

Based upon where the country is in the world: undeveloped, developing or developed what are their educational needs? English, computer, business skills are a few of the types of schools we can open to serve the people. Even as the missionaries of the 1800s used elementary and high schools to influence people for Jesus, we too may use speciality schools to bless and influence the people. Such schools are welcome in most developing countries. Schools create contacts with a large number of people. In many Muslim and Asian countries the position of a teacher is an exalted position.

If you do not have the degrees necessary to teach or to accomplish what is needed, be committed to getting such qualifications. Be well prepared. Again, do not get degrees for today. Rather look ahead.

4. Study the resources of the land.

Many tentmakers are like the labourer who went out to the field to work. In setting up shop he decides to sell imported corn because corn is easy to import from his home country. But nothing sells. Only when he looks around does he learn no one is buying because his shop is in the middle of a rice field! There's food in abundance and the people would prefer rice to corn. Based upon the raw materials available in the country, what can be exported to other countries? What locally-made products can we export to other countries? Are there useful items in your target country which you have never seen in the USA or Europe? Why? Send a few samples to friends in your home country. Ask them if they like it and if yes, how much would they pay for it? If they would pay a price more than what you can buy and ship it for, you could have yourself a business. Vice versa, what products in your home country are needed or would be beneficial in your target country? Find out why aren't they presently being sold there? Have a few shipped to your country and try selling them in a friendly market or to friends. Again if the price people are willing to pay is more than your costs, you could have yourself an import/export business.

Based upon the location of the country, climate and geography, you could determine factors which would be beneficial for you to begin a business. "Look" at the water, soil and temperature. Everyone needs water. Can you dig wells, or create irrigation systems, or develop other systems for obtaining water? Is the temperature and soil suitable for farming a crop which is presently not available in this land?

After World War II, one missionary serving in Japan was unwelcome when he visited villages in north central Honshu. Nonetheless he became concerned about the plight of the farmers in his area. Their economic situation was steadily declining. However, he "saw" the Japanese people loved strawberries and paid well for them. While on furlough he visited a strawberry growing area in his home state. He learned the soil and climate in his state were similar to that of the villages in Honshu. When he returned to Japan he took several strawberry plants with him and numerous seeds. Today that village is known as the strawberry capital of Honshu. Obviously the farmers have been doing quite well. The missionary in turn became accepted and people listened to his message. He went on to plant one church there. The key in the midst of all these things is being willing to experiment. The capital investment of trial and error is quite small.

Your efforts should result in an idea that will bring access to the country, blessing to the people and generate profits which are multipliable.

5. Develop a uniqueness about yourself or your product.

Governments will not hire individuals who might take another national's job. Countries will not provide visas for projects or businesses which clearly do not benefit their people. Thus you need to have an angle or an idea that makes it necessary for you alone to do the job. You have to tell the government what they want to hear in the way they want to hear it. In one country a co-worker's visa application was rejected even though his business had been approved. When he asked the government official, "Why is my application rejected?" The official replied, as most officials do, "I cannot tell you." But after some prompting, the official did say, "If I were you, I'd check the national library for ideas." He did. There he found a book published by the government on how to set up a business and apply for a visa. It listed all of the questions that were on his visa application papers! Though his answers were similar to theirs he decided to rewrite his application using their exact terminology. He copied straight out of their book! Soon after refiled his application he was granted a 2 year visa. Now everyone going to that country uses that book to fill out their application forms and everyone has been approved the first time! Wording is important.

Here are some unique aspects about yourself or your application that governments usually agree to. Utilise these ideas to give yourself an edge.

- a) Timetable - I will be here for 2-3 years and then hire/train a local to take my place. (Of course you do this, and when the time period is up, inform the officials you need to stay longer to hire and train more people.)
- b) New marketing promotion - we alone understand the method which will succeed in selling the product. We need to do it ourselves.
- c) Specialisation - create your job to require specialised training or technology. We need someone who has specified qualifications (like the ones you happen to already have).
- d) Cultural advantage - my racial background, or national background is desired by our head office. As our headquarters is in Germany (or whatever nationality you are), we want a German to oversee our operations here and communicate with the home office.
- e) Language advantage - we need someone who can operate in these languages (of course they are the languages you speak).

6. Be Professional

Your life-style and presentation must fit the role you are fulfilling. You cannot claim to be a businessman and then live among the poor. You cannot claim to be a regional director and then never leave the country. Here are some basic pointers to be aware of when beginning a business:

- a) Get a lawyer to process your application papers. The lawyer doesn't have to be a Christian. One co-worker hired a well-known Christian lawyer who was locked into doing things one way. Because she was successful in getting Christian service organisations into the country this tentmaker was encouraged to use her as well. After 3 rejections by the government he tried another, non-Christian lawyer. Soon afterwards he was granted a visa. It may cost US\$1000, but a lawyer will introduce you to the right people and pave the way for the approval of your application papers.
- b) Get a local address. Almost every city has business centres where you may rent a furnished room, use of a secretary, a fax, copy machine, etc. Business centres have respected addresses. You may work out of your home and use the business centre for your address and faxes. Be sure it is legal work out of your house. Otherwise, rent a small inexpensive room for an office. You do not need to invest in a "power" office. One friend did this and went bankrupt after 4 years. I worked out of my home for 10 years and did fine. Recent growth has now allowed us to rent an office. Basically you need a street address and a business centre will provide this. Usually a P.O. Box will not be acceptable. As your business grows you may move into a more up-market facility, but do not waste capital on an office. It is standard business procedure to have meetings in hotels

or other nice restaurants. Three or four times a month I spend US\$50 on lunch with a client. That's a lot cheaper than renting an office.

c) Get a phone, a fax and an email address. These are essential. Teletypes are used only in India and even there are becoming outdated. For your initial set-up, an address with a phone, fax and email should suffice.

d) Type up stationary and business cards. The business cards should have your name, and title, companies' name and of course your address, telephone, fax and email numbers. It is good to use English on one side and the national language on the other side. Stationary is a need too. Recently one of our co-workers visa applications was rejected. We learned the reason was the stationary did not have a local office address on it. Within two days, we went and found a local business centre, rented a mail box and using their local address resubmitted our papers with the exact same wording. The visa was granted the very next week.

e) Buy a sharp business suit. "Power suits" are a part of doing business. When you meet with government officials you must look for real. You must definitely dress better than they do. Dress for success. If you look like you have money, they will think you do. Governments and businesses wish to deal with individuals who will succeed. In some Southeast and Central Asian countries western suits are not appropriate. "See" what wealthy businessmen wear and dress as they do. First impressions are important.

f) Print or have available some sharp (well done) 2 or 3 colour brochures or pamphlets of your product and/or your qualifications. These brochures should picture the product and clearly sell the product or service to a customer.

To scout out the land initially, go as a student. Most countries welcome foreign students so use the opportunity to study the language and the land. If there is no school available take several short-term trips. One is not enough to get a balanced picture. Do your homework first and then establish your entry strategy. Yes, there are financial and other risks. Yet these are risks we can and must make if all nations are to hear the Good News.

* All names have been changed.