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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php

THE ROLE AND STATUS
OF A FULL-TIME WORKER

Neil Summerton

Neil Summerton writes as an elder of a church which has had experience of a FTW. An under-secretary in the Department of the Environment, he writes extensively on historical, ethical and ecclesiastical themes.

The rapid move towards supporting full-time workers in Brethren churches represents a decisive break with tradition. It has not been made without a good deal of heart-searching in most places, nor without encountering serious problems in some instances.

Among the most important questions posed by the development are those of the role of such persons; of the impact which they have upon eldership as traditionally conceived; and therefore of the relationship between the full-time person and the eldership. Other essays in this volume point to the tensions which can be generated by the introduction of FTWs into congregations organized on the Brethren pattern. David Clines has sounded a warning about the dynamic effects which can result from institutionalizing ministry in the church. It is to this crucial group of issues that we now turn.

The principal purpose of this and the next two chapters is to give practical guidance to churches which have not formerly called someone to full-time congregational ministry, for there are a number of real pitfalls to be avoided. The discussion may, however, be of help to churches which are in the process of adapting to such a ministry. It may also be of relevance in other traditions—for example, to recently established 'Charismatic' fellowships which have evolved to the point of supporting people in full-time congregational ministry; and to fellowships which depend, as many congregations of independent church orders do, on periods of full-time ministry interspersed with longish periods of part-time or 'lay' ministry.

Some underlying assumptions

Implicit in all practical guidance, however, is a framework of principle.

This is important. Tensions between FTWs and other congregational leaders often reflect problems of personality, lack of forethought, insensitivity and, on occasion, incompetence. But frequently there are also fundamental differences of understanding about the nature of Christian ministry and about the connexions between such matters as status, time spent in the work of the congregation, and sources of support in that work.

Elsewhere in this volume an effort has been made to catch the vibrant, multi-faceted, non-institutionalized nature of Christian ministry as it is depicted in the pages of the New Testament. It may be argued that one of the central issues facing any congregation in our day, *whatever the practical form ministry may take in it*, is how to recapture (usually) or retain the authentic biblical pattern of ministry. Specifically, the question which elders of Brethren churches are usually conscious of asking is how can a full-time ministry be introduced without cramping the opportunities for charismatic ministry and without professionalization. Those embarked on a full-time ministry may, however, see things from a quite different perspective. How can they exercise a spiritually effective ministry when there seem to be important constraints imposed by institutional tradition (of whatever kind)? These questions need, in my judgement, to be considered by reference to a number of points of principle.

First, concern to preserve the biblical character of ministry against professionalization should not lead us to undervalue legitimate authority and spiritual leadership when exercised with the humility of true servanthood. It is in the nature of fallen man to abuse power, but it does not follow that scripturally all exercise of power is wrong. Any ministry entails the exercise of *accepted* power and authority: its whole purpose is to *do* things for individuals or the congregation as a whole, and the recipients of ministry have to submit themselves to the person who ministers; they have to be willing to respect and be influenced by that ministry.

Jesus himself recognized the legitimate authority of the Roman procurator (Jn. 19:11) and Paul that of the chief priest (Acts 23:1–10). And it seems clear from the apocalyptic writings that in the Jerusalem of God, of which the church is the precursor, authority will be exercised subordinate to God (see, eg, Rev. 11:16; cf, Matt. 19:28) though the reign undoubtedly has a shared character (Rev. 22:5). Similarly, spiritual leadership, mediated through human agency, is accepted in the New Testament as in the Old: it is difficult to conceive that Jesus did not consciously invest Peter with authority as a leader among the disciples (Matt. 16:13–20). His position seems subsequently to have been recognized by the disciples (Acts 1:15–26) and by Barnabas and Paul (Acts 9:27; Gal. 1:18; 2:2, 9–10—see also Acts 11:1–18 and 5:6, 22). Paul's own leadership in evangelistic endeavour is undeniable; and his position and

authority as an apostle were vehemently defended in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Followership is of course essential to effective leadership: there must be those who are prepared to recognize the function of the leader. And function (ministry) plus recognition can be regarded as creating positional authority, ie, office.

Certainly, we must beware of institutionalization and professionalization in the church. There is no benefit in recognizing the office of elder or pastor, for example, if they are occupied by those without the necessary spiritual gift for the tasks. But it goes too far to infer that, lest an individual should, through gift and opportunity, exercise greater power and influence in the congregation than any other individual, he should restrain himself from doing more for the congregation than others can. Where a Spirit-filled ministry is capable of being exercised, surely it should be encouraged and recognized to the extent that the Lord prescribes in the particular case.

Moreover, if pastoral and doctrinal authority is to be exercised, the exercise of the requisite spiritual gifts must be acknowledged as authoritative, though I agree that there should be considerable latitude to vary the precise pattern of such authority according to gift and need in the individual congregation.

It must also be remembered that, even without office and a full-time maintained ministry, charismatic gift itself is institutionalized wherever it purports to be exercised by those who have neither the gift nor the presence of the Spirit in sufficient measure for the purpose. Brethren, please note: our history amply demonstrates that neither refusal to recognize office nor refusal to support a settled ministry in the home congregations make us proof against the exercise of gift in the letter but not in the Spirit!

Second, the following chapters assume that there is nothing in scripture which prevents an individual who is exercising a resident ministry in a local congregation from being supported by that congregation and/or others. This matter has been discussed elsewhere in this volume. Suffice it to say that it is incontrovertible that the apostles enjoyed the right to be supported by others in their ministry (1 Cor. 9:1–12a) and the Lord appears to have extended that right also to the evangelist (Matt. 10:9–13). It is not obvious why that right should be regarded as confined to the ministries of the apostle, the evangelist and the prophet, rather than being available in relation to any ministry in the church. Nor is it obvious why the right to support should be confined to those who are itinerant in their ministry and not available to those who, for the time being, are stationed in a particular congregation. The apostles themselves were resident in particular congregations for lengthy periods. The twelve remained in Jerusalem during the early years of the church and it is a fair inference that

they did not support themselves. Paul was himself resident, for example in Antioch, Corinth and Ephesus, for periods (though he did not normally exercise his right to support—see Acts 20:33–35 and 1 Cor. 9:12b–18); and it appears that his delegate, Timothy, was similarly resident, probably in Ephesus. And 1 Timothy 5:17–18 contains a strong, if not absolutely certain, implication couched as a principle, that certain (teaching) elders could be supported in their ministries. The same chapter implies a duty to support enrolled widows in their ministry (vv 5–6).

Third, if an individual may receive financial support in the exercise of his or her ministry, what are the conclusions to be drawn about the implications of that support for the individual's status and position in this congregation? Paul's practice of refusing to exercise the right of support leads to some relevant observations. Paul normally sought not to be a charge on the church to which he was ministering, probably for a mixture of reasons of principle (freedom of utterance and compassion) and prudence. Yet his authority and status were in no way impaired *since they derived not from the nature of his support but from his gifts and position as an apostle called by God*. On the other hand, it is clear that Paul's ministry was for him the *priority* in his life: at the stage with which we are concerned, his calling was to be an apostle, not to be a tentmaker—the latter task was simply incidental as the means of his support.

The conclusions to be drawn are that standing and position in the congregation do not derive from whether or not a man or woman is supported in his or her ministry by the local congregation or the church at large. Nor do they depend on whether or not their ministry is full-time or part-time (in one sense, Paul's was part-time). They depend rather on the calling, gifts, ministry and priorities of the individual concerned. But it follows also that if, for example, elders have other *callings* (whether within the church or outside it) which conflict with their calling to eldership and take prior claim over it, then there must be serious questions about their status in the congregation as against those who regard their ministries in the local congregation as their priority calling.

These conclusions are of much relevance in considering the practical problems associated with the role and impact of a FTW in a congregation which subscribes to plural leadership in the form of eldership of the kind commonly found in Brethren assemblies. It is to those practical problems that I now turn.

Priorities in calling a full-time congregational worker

In Brethren churches which have not previously called a resident FTW, the leadership and the congregation may well have to invest much time and emotional energy in deciding to seek such a person. Hard biblical

study and discussion may be needed to convince those who are anxious that FTWs may not be consistent with either scripture or the traditions of the elders. Even those who have no objections of principle may be inclined to think that the need for a FTW reflects poorly on their own commitment and performance: 'if we were doing the job properly, we would not need a full-time person'. Such a statement is in itself revealing, because it suggests that calling a full-time person is in essence a second best, rather than the positive will of God and therefore an opportunity to be grasped. There may be something in this (as a matter of fact it has been observed in the United States that older, maturer congregations tend to need more full-time staff than younger, less mature ones—this may be a function of the general spiritual fervour and commitment of the congregation at large[1]). But such attitudes are in themselves relevant to the issues of the role of a FTW and his or her impact on the church.

If there have been intellectual and emotional struggles in coming to terms with the need for a FTW, once the decision has been made, there may be a temptation to relax and think that it is now only a question of finding someone to accept the position. More probably, the tasks of deciding whether to seek a full-time person and discussion of the possible role of such an individual will be undertaken in parallel rather than *seriatim*. There is then a danger that in the mêlée of discussion the issue of principle will be the focus of attention and thought rather than the more practical questions of role and selection. In either case, neglect of important preliminaries to the task of selection, and of the process of selection itself, may prove to be a recipe for disaster. It is essential that both the elders and the congregation devote adequate time and attention to these matters.

Prayer and guidance

Some may think that the suggestions in this chapter and the next place an excessive emphasis on rational analysis. That is a serious point which deserves a two-fold response. First, the principles suggested are simple, even if couched in the language of modern management; using different words, they have no doubt often been applied in the history of the church. More important, however, is the point that no congregation can live other than by the grace of divine revelation. It remains true that in the past simple and unlettered men and learned ones alike have received direction from God as to who should undertake ministry among them and in what ways (cf. Acts 13:1–4); and in the absence of such leading from the Lord, all the analysis and modern management techniques in the world will lead to nothing, or, worse, to choices which are wrong. The task is to find the right person for the right role. So the first and continuing requirement in

selecting a FTW is for prayer for revelation as to the role which the FTW ought to discharge and the individual who is God's choice. Without this prayer the effort invested in defining roles and in selection may turn out to be an exercise of the flesh. In prayer, prophetic guidance and utterance of knowledge should be sought for the analytical task to which this chapter now turns.

Considering motives, objectives and needs

In an environment of prayer and dependance on the Lord, the congregation should try to analyse its motives and objectives in seeking a FTW, and to assess its present circumstances and needs, with the aim of identifying the optimum role for the person being sought. The process of identifying the role has a three-fold aim. First, it should help to prepare the church and the elders for the presence among them of a FTW. Second, it should have the goal of drawing a template or target to assist in the search and selection. Once a fairly precise definition of the role has been drawn up, it will then be possible to ask what kind of person would best be able to fulfil this role—what age, what sex, what personal qualities, and above all what spiritual gifts will the person need in order effectively to discharge the responsibilities proposed? Third, if the role is properly defined, a number of practical points will probably become clearer as a basis for discussion with possible candidates: the accommodation, equipment and support services which the congregation can expect to have to provide, and the likely terms of engagement (hours, salary, etc.). The aim should be to draw up a document specifying the proposed role as a basis for advertisement (if that is intended) and discussion with possible candidates. In turn, that document can form the basis of a detailed job specification which, when a choice has been made, should be of help in two ways. Whether or not the FTW has recently been a member of the congregation, he or she can reasonably expect to know in detail what is or is not expected by the church. Equally, such a document should be made available to the church: as some may have had questions of principle, or about the merits of the person being called, the congregation should be in no doubt about what the FTW has been asked to do. The congregation should also be left in no doubt about what is expected of them by way of practical and spiritual support. If there are widespread misconceptions in the congregation or in the minds of key people on these matters, there will be a ready source of misunderstanding, and criticisms are likely to emerge that the FTW is doing too little, too much, or the wrong things; or that the congregation is failing to meet its obligations to the FTW either practically or with respect to the role promised to him or her. The result will be unhappiness, mutual suspicion and tension, and insecurity for the FTW.

Such emotions can be self-reinforcing so that a spiral reaction sets in, ending in disaster for the relationship and perhaps, in a very practical way, for the FTW.

Defining the role

Elders and congregation should not underestimate the difficulty of defining the role in sufficiently clear terms to give the outsider an idea of the tasks which the particular congregation has in mind. Self-discipline is required to produce a satisfactory definition at a sufficiently early stage. In the Brethren context, the decision to seek a FTW may reflect not so much of the definite call of God (or of a recognition of natural progression for one individual within the particular church), as a rather unspecified feeling that the church is not making the progress which it should do and that those currently undertaking the ministry of the church are not meeting all the evident needs either quantitatively or qualitatively. Added to this may be the sense of guilt about poor performance already noted, or that the concept of a FTW in a single church situation does not conform to the practice of earlier years. This is an inauspicious basis for the innovatory step of calling a FTW. It is likely to generate on the one hand unreasonable expectations of the results which a FTW might achieve; and on the other hand conscious or unconscious resistance to his or her work. It is probably much easier for a younger, lively church which has recently come together as a congregation to decide that the time has come for one of its number to be set aside full-time for work within it. Conversely, in the mature, second or third generation, it may be easier for a newcomer to make progress as a FTW: an insider may be too sensitive to, and therefore hamstrung by, its traditions.

This inauspicious background would in itself be sufficient reason for careful thought about the proposed role. But there are two further considerations. First, in the absence of careful thought, minds may move quickly to the nearest analogy, that of the pastor or minister in nonconformist churches of other denominations. Second, some of those seeking positions may have very consciously in mind not only that role but the relationships of leadership which are normally found in non-Brethren, nonconformist churches. (It may be that the existing courses available in Bible colleges tend to reinforce this view, ie, that there has been insufficient adaptation of attitude and course content to new views of ministry which are gaining acceptance widely in the churches.[2] Indeed, if the FTW is to be integrated successfully into Brethren churches in this country without losing the best of the traditional view of the nature of ministry in a local congregation, it may be necessary to establish training arrangements in which full-time and part-time workers and 'lay' elders can be trained together.)

Of course, it may well be that the immediate need of some churches, if their present decline is to be reversed, is precisely for an individual to discharge the role of the traditional pastor or minister of other nonconformist churches: the requirement for effective leadership, pastoring and teaching are so great that that is the best way of seeing that they are met. But Brethren churches have a very different tradition of ministry and great risks may be run if a congregation and a FTW slip into a relationship with concepts of role which are at wide variance. If this is the need, everyone in the church should be aware of it and consciously accept it, even if they have difficulty in embracing it emotionally.

But there are many other roles to be discharged in the live and growing congregation and the wide view of ministry traditional in the Brethren is consistent with a variety of role and combinations of role for the FTW. It may be that the full-time resource can best be applied in a role not traditionally associated with full-time workers in Christian churches, or at least not traditionally occupied by full-time people when the traditional role of the full-time person is being discharged by part-timers or by people in full-time secular employment. This last arrangement, and the relationships which it implies, may often be the norm in churches which are appointing a FTW for the first time. There are good grounds for believing that it can prove to be a very difficult relationship indeed. Because of common conceptions of the meaning of full-time service in a church, it requires considerable maturity on the part of the FTW and his 'lay' masters if the arrangement is to be fruitful—though it is perfectly common in secular circles and seems to provoke few problems there, eg, in local authorities (traditionally at least), in trade unions, charities and trusts for all sorts of purposes (perhaps it is a case of the children of darkness being wiser after their generation).

Analysing the need

All this argues for careful prior analysis by the elders, in co-operation with the congregation, of the tasks which might best be discharged by a FTW. This should be done systematically by the elders, perhaps by arranging that each be asked to identify in writing the area of activity in which full-time assistance is most needed. Such a procedure might also be extended to the congregation—provided that the elders are prepared for some surprises about the congregation's perceptions of their current performance!

In any case, it may be helpful to analyse the congregation in two ways. First, the elders could list the character and quality of the spiritual gifts available in one and another member of the church, and to assess the manner and effectiveness in which those gifts are at present being used, and in which it might be practicable to use them in the foreseeable future. In effect, this represents the preparation of an inventory of existing gifts

and their deployment and possible deployment. Part of this task should be to identify the gifts which are lacking in the congregation, or which, though not actually lacking, cannot for whatever reason be deployed in a sufficient way to meet the needs of the congregation now and in the future. This step needs careful thought and prayer as it is normally easier to identify what is there than to identify what is missing.

Second, in parallel, the elders could consider the ways in which they believe the Lord is calling the church to develop in the next five years. What are the conditions required for such growth? To what extent is that development and growth likely to be constrained by lack of gift, or lack of time, commitment or personal circumstances (legitimate or illegitimate) on the part of those in the congregation who do have the requisite gifts?

Analysis of these two kinds should give the elders three options in defining the role of the future FTW. Either they may identify areas of gift which are lacking in the congregation and associated tasks which are not being discharged effectively or at all for lack of gift or available gift. Or they may decide that the priority is in the development of some areas of work in which there is ample gift, but where supplementary or substitute gift is needed. Or they may decide that the need lies in some appropriate combination of these approaches. In practice, some combination is the most likely outcome.

The first approach is bound to have attractions for churches with the Brethren tradition of ministry, because it implies that the FTW will be an *addition* to existing gifts and ministries of the congregation and will enable present members to continue to play a full part in the life of the congregation. But the gaps in a church's ministries may take a very odd shape, and result in strange and incoherent groups of tasks and an imbalanced and unsatisfying job for the FTW. While the 'lay' member may be able to tolerate a strange collection of tasks the full-time person will probably need a more coherent schedule of tasks.

The second approach will need careful and tactful handling in advance by the elders and a clear-eyed understanding of the probable impact of a FTW whose remit is to replace or duplicate existing gifts and tasks, especially as the people chiefly affected will be likely to be within the eldership itself. More will be said about this point later. But in the long run this approach may imply that some elders must be prepared to accept a very different leadership role in the church, and perhaps even that they should stand down altogether. This possibility needs to be understood and embraced from the start. It has moreover to be recognized that, even if the accent is upon seeking to give the FTW a role and tasks which are supplementary to those already discharged in the congregation, in practice the outcome is virtually bound to entail some replication of existing gifts and tasks.

The process of calling an individual to full-time work in an independent church can be fraught with difficulty and at best is likely to be lengthy. Careful analysis on the lines suggested above will take up precious time. But it can be a sound investment. In some cases, the result will be a definition of role which is rather different from that originally proposed. In other cases, it may even be concluded that the resources for the life and growth of the congregation already exist, whether or not a full-time worker is found. Careful review of the gifts and other resources of a congregation can be a valuable procedure in itself.

1. See Lyle E. Schaller, *The Multiple Staff in the Larger Church* (Nashville, Tenn., Abingdon Press. 1980) 59–61. There is much to be gleaned from this book about the opportunities and problems of deploying FTWs in local congregations.
2. As evidence of the extent of this change of attitudes, see John Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry* (London, CIO Publishing, 1985) especially 115–131.