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PATTERNS OF FULL-TIME CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY

Neil Summerton

It is, in my judgement, imperative that the task of defining the role of the FTW should be undertaken with sufficient breadth of thought, or divinely-intended opportunities may be missed.

Possible roles and tasks

There are in fact a wide variety of roles and tasks which a resident FTW might discharge within a congregation. Each has its own implications for the gifts, age, character, personality, circumstances, and even sex, of the possible incumbent. The following summarizes only the main possibilities, with some specific comments. It will be seen that some are obviously closely related to specific spiritual gifts suggested in the New Testament, while others require a wider range of gifts. The roles here described seem to me to be the main possibilities, but the list is not intended as exhaustive.

The first four are tasks which are closely related and which many churches may be inclined to regard as their chief priority for full-time assistance.

Teaching

Many congregations recognize a need to move away from the fragmented teaching ministry which has in the past resulted from the practice of sharing teaching widely not only among members of the congregation (often, it appears, on the principle of Buggins' turn next) but also from neighbouring churches. Even where a church wishes to concentrate teaching in the hands of fewer gifted individuals among their own number, there is often a lack of people who can give the time to study and preparation which a more systematic and pastoral ministry requires. Moreover, Brethren churches have generally tended to define teaching much too narrowly, as that done from the platform in the full meeting of the congregation. There is, however, an important and sadly neglected

scope for nurturing young Christians and training those of all ages for individual tasks and leadership of specific activities in the congregation. As this generally requires teaching of small groups, and content closely adjusted to the immediate need, it is time consuming and often beyond the resources of elders and others in full-time secular employment.

Pastoring

Many Brethren churches, and certainly elderships, would feel that there is an even greater need for more systematic, regular, prompt and effective pastoring to meet the varied and complex needs of the average congregation. It is this that an eldership of individuals in full-time employment often recognizes that it is least able to provide.

Strategic thinking and leadership

Elderships, especially those in smaller churches, often lack individuals among them with the prophetic, visionary gift to see the way in which the Lord wishes the particular congregation to develop, and with the wider experience to know what developments in other churches are proving profitable for life and growth there. This gift and experience can be critical to the fortunes of a congregation and to that congregation's view of the competence of its eldership. It can sometimes be provided in respect of a number of churches by an itinerant pastor and teacher who is in an apostolic role with respect to those congregations. But in other circumstances, this may be a vital contribution to be made by a FTW.

Administration and co-ordination

In other congregations, the central problem may not lie in the area of vision but of *implementation*. There may be no shortage of ideas as to what ought to be done to encourage life and growth, and no shortage of plans to put those ideas into effect. But the elders, deacons and others in the church may lack the time and energy to carry them into effect, as well as effectively to discharge all the other important tasks that appertain to these positions. This entails more than simple secretarial or clerical assistance, though some of that may be required. It may, for example, be decided that the teaching ministry should take such and such a shape, with a blending of contributions from gifted individuals inside the congregation and itinerant preachers as well. But the plan in principle and detail must be communicated promptly and effectively to the people concerned in order to carry it into effect. Or there may be a plan to develop a particular sort of outreach activity requiring the identification, co-ordination and training of

a number of individuals with suitable gifts within the church, and the plans fallow for want of an individual to invest the time in carrying it into effect. And, in addition, there is the blending of plans into a coherent whole and their presentation to the congregation as such. (Communication within the congregation is a role in its own right which is not considered in the present listing).

Evangelist

Since one of the prime reasons that Brethren assemblies are turning to FTWs is to reverse their declining fortunes, many may incline to give priority to the role of evangelist in order to secure a new movement forward of the congregation and growth in numbers through conversion. This may not necessarily be a wise decision where the fundamental problems of the congregation lie in spiritual areas which call, as a precondition of numerical growth, for the gifts and roles already described. But where it is considered that evangelism is the appropriate role in which a FTW should be called, it is worth defining more closely the precise types of evangelistic task which are contemplated, as this should help in the identification of an appropriate person. There are at least three functional possibilities, though a particular individual may of course be gifted to work in all three ways.

A 'preaching' evangelist This is a role familiar in Brethren assemblies in the past. The main task of such an individual would be the direct proclamation of the gospel in meetings specifically convened for that purpose, ranging from meetings of the mission type convened by and on behalf of the congregation as a whole, to coffee mornings and other house meetings. When this pattern of evangelism is followed, the onus of contact with non-Christians rests very much with individual believers within the congregation and it follows that the evangelist or someone else must be capable of motivating the congregation as a whole towards personal witness and evangelism. Traditionally, such 'preaching' evangelists have maintained an itinerant ministry and it seems doubtful how far a ministry of this type could be concentrated in a single congregation unless either that congregation forms a base for a geographically wider evangelistic ministry for a considerable portion of the year or the ministry is combined with some other ministry within the congregation, eg, a pastoral role.

Neighbourhood, community evangelism An individual with suitable gifts and inclinations (which would need to extend well beyond preaching) could well maintain a resident ministry in a congregation if his or her role were to spearhead a programme of pre-evangelistic and evangelistic

activity in the neighbourhood. Typically, this might entail analysis of the neighbourhood and its spiritual needs, the devising of plans of action with suitable mechanisms for contact (eg house to house visitation, community action, and house meetings for neighbours and other contacts, as exemplified by Robert Scott-Cook's methods in Bristol¹), and the nurturing of converts in groups separate from the main meetings of the church so as to provide the necessary teaching and social bridge into the full fellowship of the church. This is in essence a task of church planting, and the FTW would require the appropriate gifts. Insofar as it is carried out within a single congregation, it could be regarded as a task of replanting the congregation from within (very necessary in the case of some fellowships which, though considerable in numbers, may in effect be moribund evangelistically). In many areas, there may be opportunities for such a FTW to lead personnel from a live congregation in church planting operations nearby, eg, on an unchurched estate or in church buildings (Brethren or otherwise) which are in danger of falling out of use. In essence, this is a task of planting satellite congregations, and may again be combined with, say, a pastoral role within the base congregation.

Youth evangelist A further distinct evangelistic task, which might be especially suitable for a young FTW with definite evangelistic gifts, would be a remit to spearhead youth evangelism in the congregation, based either on existing youth clubs or new activities created for the purpose.

Youth pastor or leader

A congregation which has extensive youth activities in terms of youth clubs and outreach, or which is well placed to develop such ministry, could consider the appointment of a full-time youth leader or worker. This is specialised and demanding work for which some kind of appropriate training is desirable. To be effective, such clubs need to operate on more than one evening a week, and preferably on virtually every evening. Such is the character of this work that it is not reasonable to expect an individual carrying other heavy responsibilities in a congregation to undertake it. Often in the past in Brethren churches, youth work has been undertaken by, eg, a teacher in his or her spare time, and he or she has exhausted himself or herself in the process. It is therefore a suitable role to be undertaken on a full-time basis if growth and development is sought. Where there are a number of teenagers and young adults in a congregation, or where youth activities are successful in bringing young converts into the fellowship of the church, a full-time youth worker can be expected to grow into a position of leadership in respect of younger church members who will naturally look to him or her for pastoral care. It will be

wise, therefore, to look for leadership and pastoral gifts in a youth worker, as well as evangelistic ambitions and technical competence and training in youth work.

Community care—social worker

In modern conditions in which many people have no natural disposition towards the Christian faith and church attendance, an essential precursor of effective evangelism is action to establish a congregation's credentials in the neighbourhood. This can take a number of different forms from involvement in the activities of a local secular community centre, through practical advice on the day-to-day problems which people may have with housing, employment and social benefits, counselling, to full-scale community care. Some work of this type may well draw on expertise available in the congregation as a whole (eg legal, accounting, or local government knowledge) but its effectiveness will be greatly enhanced if it can be led and organised by a full-time person with relevant training and experience.² And in the larger congregation the needs of elderly and sick members and others with practical needs may be great enough in themselves to take up much, if not all, the time of a full-time person; in that case, the role would in essence be that of a full-time deacon.

Musical director

Some very large non-Brethren congregations (mainly Anglican) have found the burden of directing worship so great that it has proved worthwhile to support someone on a full-time or part-time basis to co-ordinate this aspect of congregational life, particularly the musical element, but embracing other aspects as well. In larger non-Brethren churches (200–300 members or more) in the United States it is common for a 'Director of Music' to be appointed as a supplementary full-time or part-time staff member alongside, eg, the Director of Christian Education (ie the individual responsible for the Sunday school, including adults, and training programmes of the church). Such developments are likely on the one hand to strike fear into the hearts of many people of Brethren background in the UK and on the other to suggest how limited are our tentative moves towards a single FTW in our congregations. In this context it is significant that at least some recently formed Charismatic fellowships are already moving towards the support of more than one full-time person for ministry within the home congregation.

Three further possible roles for a full-time or part-time supported worker are largely self-explanatory:—plant engineer/caretaker; secretary/clerical assistant; and treasurer. Where a congregation grows to large

numbers, especially if it finds it necessary to acquire substantial buildings and equipment, the pastoral leaders and deacons may well need at least part-time assistance and support to relieve them of day-to-day care for routine matters and to save them from wasting precious time in, for example, doing their own typing. Indeed, on the last point, once a FTW has been appointed, an early step should be to provide part-time secretarial assistance (and, quite apart from the appointment of a FTW, many elderships would be assisted if those with secretarial skills were to offer them assistance or, if necessary, their congregations were to fund such assistance).

Drawing a job specification

A FTW may well be able to combine more than one of the different roles summarized above. But it is scarcely practicable for one person, however gifted, to combine more than two or three at once and discharge the tasks attaching to the role in a workmanlike manner. By the very nature of things a one-man ministry is bound to be stunted in comparison with the vision of congregational ministries which we can glimpse in the pages of the New Testament. In any case, such a one-man ministry is only likely to occur in the last years of the 20th century in the West because congregations allow it to happen by neglecting their own contribution to ministry.

The shortcomings of the existing ministries in many congregations considering calling a FTW may well, however, present problems of choice. The elders may be able to see at least two or three major roles for such a person, and each of the main groups within the congregation may be inclined to press the claims of the role which it, for its own reasons, considers should be given priority. A moment's reflection, however, leads to the conclusion that it is not desirable to try to advance on all fronts at once. For, as already noted, each of the main roles described above has different requirements in terms of spiritual gifts, personal characteristics, experience, etc. An eldership must select between the various possible roles so that it may search for an individual who is appropriately fitted to discharge the chosen role in the particular congregation. Or, if it has an open mind as to the role, it must recognize that it is looking for different types of person for the different roles which it has in mind. Or if it is convinced that, quite apart from the role, it is being directed to call as a FTW a particular individual, then, in discussion with the individual concerned, it must define a role that is fitted to the particular configuration of gifts and experience of that individual. If it was to seek to impose on him or her a role for which he or she is not fitted, the results cannot be expected to be beneficial for the congregation.

Once a choice has been made, it is highly desirable that the specific tasks attaching to the proposed role should be listed in detail, ie, that a job specification should be drawn up. This will be of great assistance to possible candidates in helping them to understand in advance what may be required of them. They must form their own view as to whether the particular post is the Lord's calling for them. Where they are strangers to the particular congregation, it will help both the person called and the elders to plan the first few months of the individual's service with the congregation and to carry that plan into effect. Anyone carrying out ministry in a local congregation has a right to know what that congregation expects of them, and this is doubly so in the case of someone who is being supported materially by the congregation.

Second, a detailed job specification will be helpful to the elders in the search for the FTW of God's choice. However much time may have been invested in general discussion of the possible role for a FTW, the perceptions of different elders of the need will be bound to vary. Where there are important variations in perception, discussion with possible candidates and final selection may be fraught with difficulty and the candidates themselves are likely to be confused about the church's wishes and intentions in seeking a FTW. The preparation and agreement of a detailed job specification should go some way to educating the elders as a body as to the detailed role which they have in mind. Second, such a document should help the church to understand the role which is in view and will begin the important process of educating the church as to what they may reasonably expect and demand of the FTW once he or she is appointed.

Adjusting the job specification

It has already been remarked that in all this careful thought both elders and congregation must have room to be surprised by some revelation or word of guidance from God which will lead them in a quite contrary direction to that suggested in earlier discussion. Likewise, a job specification should not be regarded as written on tablets of stone—a natural tendency whenever something is committed to paper, let alone to more durable materials of record! No FTW can be expected to fit the ideal identikit which has been prepared by a church; almost certainly its initial thoughts would out-stretch the capacity of any mortal anyway! Once a prospective FTW and the elders are confident that he or she is the person of God's choice, the original job specification should be reviewed to fit more precisely the gifts, experience and particular interests of the chosen individual. Moreover, the elders will become fully aware of those matters only as they work alongside the individual concerned. And the FTW will only become aware of the possibilities of the role and tasks as he or she

becomes closely acquainted with the congregation and its life and activities. It would be wise therefore to expect that the job specification will also need some adjustment in the early months of the individual's ministry.

In the longer term, adjustment will be even more necessary. A Christian congregation is a dynamic and, for all its institutions and traditions, a loosely-structured community. The FTW, it is to be hoped, will grow in the course of time; basic gifts will remain the same but those gifts should themselves develop with further use, and growing experience, both general and specific, can be expected to be accompanied by a growing maturity. As in all walks of life, work-rate and competence can be expected to increase, at least for a time. The same should be true of the wide variety of individuals in the congregation as a whole, as a result in part of the influence and impact of the FTW. In addition, there will be changes of personnel as a result of conversion, movement and death. The particular configuration of gifts, roles and tasks within any local congregation will change more or less rapidly with the passage of time.

For all these reasons the FTW's role and job specification should be reviewed and if necessary adjusted at regular but not too frequent intervals (a degree of stability will be needed if the FTW is to realize the potential of the particular specification at any time). At the extreme, the review may lead to the conclusion that the particular FTW's work is done for the time being in that congregation. In most cases, however, where the congregation grows in numbers, spiritual maturity, and the exercise of spiritual gifts hitherto dormant or neglected, the FTW may need to be less involved in the front line of the work himself and, for example, more concerned with encouragement, enabling, training and preparation of church members. With the hoped-for dynamic growth may come the need for the appointment of further full-time or part-time staff workers. In that case, it will be necessary to think carefully not only about the role and job specification of the new FTW but also about the interactive effects on the role and job specification of the first FTW.

Such changes in role and job specification should not be allowed to emerge willy-nilly under pressure of events. They should be anticipated and be the subject of careful discussion by the elders and the FTW in advance, with a view to agreed adjustments in the job specification. Where possible, the congregation's view could be sought. Even when this is not possible, the conclusions should be communicated forcefully and clearly to the congregation. Christians tend to be hard task masters and if a FTW begins to shift role and task before the church is informed, the FTW and the elders will probably find themselves the target for some stringent criticisms on the lines that the FTW is failing to do the job which the congregation supported him or her to do.

1. See 'Church Planting', in *Harvester* (Feb. 1984) 6–9 and 'Building Bridges for the Gospel' in *Harvester* (March 1984) 15–17.
2. See Fran Beckett, 'Serving the Community' in *Harvester* (Feb. 1984) 12–13 and 'Care and Counsel' in *Harvester* (April 1984) 10–11, or 'Running a Christian Advice Centre' in *The Caring Church* (Christian Brethren Review, July, 1985) 39–43.