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A PERSONAL VIEW

Colin Holmes

Colin Holmes, an experienced evangelist, has served as an itinerant and has also been involved in local church-based evangelism as a resident FTW. He has served two churches in this capacity, in one case combining the appointment with some itinerant work. He shares his thoughts and feelings about the FTW, with special reference to his present appointment.

‘What is it?’, Grumpy was asked. ‘A woman’, snapped Grumpy, ‘and I don’t like them’. ‘Why not?’, questioned Doc. ‘They are full of wicked wiles’, returned Grumpy. ‘What are wicked wiles?’, asked Sleepy. ‘I don’t know’, Grumpy replied, ‘but I am against them!’.

This extract from the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs seems to me to sum up the numbed mentality of many elders regarding FTWs. But the concept of a FTW who is resident in one place is a biblical one, and even if it were not, sheer commonsense demands it! My changeover from being a full-time itinerant evangelist going around from church to church and from place to place to becoming a residential FTW does not involve a contradiction. It is simply a change of position in the game.

When I went to Chiltern Church there was a sense in which I interviewed the leaders. Having had some experience I went armed with about 20 questions. They included these: What do you see as the need for this locality? Could you give me a breakdown of age and sex in the membership of the church? Has the church grown at all during the last three years? Is the church one-hundred-per-cent behind the idea of a full-time worker? Does the church suffer from any environmental problems (eg very few children, all elderly people)? What is your purpose in wanting a full-time worker? Do you have a good relationship with other churches in the area? What other churches are there within a two-mile radius? Would you see me as meeting with you as an elder, and, if not, would I meet elders on every occasion when they meet or just now and again? Could you define the nature of our work more specifically as you see it, and do you see us shaping and spearheading the work in the future? What is the state of the youth work and the children’s work at this moment? What do you see as the need for the church—pastoral, evangelistic,

teaching? What percentage of the pulpit ministry would you expect me to do? What is the church's attitude to the gifts in Romans, Corinthians and Ephesians? Can you see any problem that may arise between one worker leaving and another arriving, in terms of personality and style (they had a part-time youth worker just before we arrived)? When would you expect us to start? For how long a period? Would you expect us to take other bookings (eg houseparties)? What about schools in the area for our children? What about housing? In what way will you maintain us? How much will you pay us? What part do you allow women to play in the church? These were very important questions as far as I was concerned.

It is said that a need does not constitute a call, but the call certainly came for me out of several needs, both in what I saw and also in what I was. I commenced my work at Chiltern Church on 1 September 1982 (the day that Bobby Robson became England Football Manager: and I often make the parallel as to our progress). But the build-up to the day is important, because it is only as you look back that you can see how God has been guiding you.

So I must go back a few years, because of the need in my own life as an evangelist. I was involved in evangelism with Counties Evangelistic Work from 1970 to 1982. As an evangelist, my diary had drifted into what I called a convenience-without-conviction diary, with bookings two or three years ahead. Now to me that was not a good thing. I know that there are others who will quite happily accept bookings two or three years ahead, but I had the feeling about that time (it was the early middle seventies) of being on a spiritual treadmill. This meant that there was often a lack of sharpness in my ministry because of the security of a full diary for the next three years. At times, too, I felt that I was becoming too professional and almost bordering on the slick in what I did and how I handled things.

During this time, the Lord seemed to be saying to me: 'Look. I am more interested in what I want to do *in* you rather than *through* you.' That time in my life was very important, for God was beginning to change my thinking.

This also reflected the need, as I saw it, within the churches where I was working. I was working particularly among about 50 assemblies in Hampshire where I saw some cases of planning without commitment, activity without conviction, and missions rarely going to grassroots level. A mission seemed to be little more than an administrative exercise, something that they felt they had to arrange in order to fill in the church diary. It was very much a battery-booster for the church, and the pattern became very familiar. It involved a build-up, a boost-up and a breakdown. When I came and took a mission everything had to be good—really good. And because of my work, and my experience, and the material I had gathered together over the years it *was* good. It was the best I could

achieve, and I did the best for the Lord, and of course that was not wrong in itself. But it was so different from what they had been used to. So, instead of permanently boosting the Sunday school, or the church, or whatever, it brought it down because people saw the great gap between what had been done during the mission and what was done normally.

A more sustained, spontaneous, overall approach seemed to me to be needed, with a good co-ordinator in the church, someone who had time to give and was prepared to give it. Here was the embryo of a FTW coming to birth in my mind in the mid-seventies.

I wrote a paper at that time and circulated it to all the assemblies in Hampshire, trying to assess my own frustration and my feeling of inability to get to grips with the real need for Christians and for non-Christians in the area. I just tried to assess concisely on a few sheets of paper exactly how I felt. It met with quite a mixed reception! I can't really remember what I wrote, but I know that at the time it was all very real to me.

I also saw—and still see—the need for the Christians I was working with to be 'prepared for works of service' (Eph. 4:11–12). I believe it was at this point that God was saying to me: 'Look. Your task is not just to preach as an evangelist but it is also to bring out the gift within other Christians.' I began to see another ministry that the Lord was calling me to—in fact it was part of the ministry that I had neglected. So during that time I got involved in things like Evangelism Explosion. The training was an immense help to me personally, and it enabled me to develop training ministries in various churches in Hampshire. There were also houseparties as a teaching aid for young people. And there was a 'Teach, Reach, Preach' programme that we put on at some of our tent crusades, with twenty or thirty youngsters joining us. We used to have a teaching seminar during the day, and the young people used to go out with us into the streets of the villages and towns, evangelizing.

We also had a preachers' weekend. I wrote to all the assemblies in Hampshire, trying to find out how many people under the age of twenty-five had occupied the pulpit, and discovered that it was less than ten per cent. So we designed a preachers' weekend and tried to develop gift in these people. We also had training days. One felt very deeply the need to train others and get them involved in Christian work.

Other things were beginning to come up that shaped and influenced me towards taking up work at Chiltern Church (which I had never heard of at that time). By the late seventies we had two boys who were then five and three years of age. I felt very strongly the father and the family man in me, and I was aware that I was careering here, there and everywhere. I concluded that it was important that I should begin to get reins in my own life for the family's sake. Also I was beginning to feel that my gift was developing into a pastoral, teaching role as well as the evangelistic one, so

when in 1978/79 I was asked to spend 70% of my time working with a single church (not Chiltern) I jumped at the change. It seemed to be a perfect compromise and I thought that I would be able to have my cake and eat it too. But it wasn't all that rosy and I found a lot of salt in the cake! But it was a very valuable experience and I learned a lot about leadership in team work. I also learned a lot about myself and—most important of all—I learned more about God in the four years I was there.

In the midst of all this, and despite all the good that was coming out of it, a verse from the Bible spoke very clearly to me. It ran: 'Depart, depart, go out from there!' Now I know that that was not written for me in the first place. It was written by Isaiah for the people of Israel. But I knew it was a message for me also. And the very next verse had a message for me: 'But you will not leave in haste or go in flight: for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear-guard.' This was at least two years before we left, and it kept us from going back into secular work.

Then in March 1982 came a letter from Chiltern Church, Sutton, inviting us to join them. They defined the role they had in mind for us, and it was virtually everything we were looking for. But Ruth, my wife, and I felt a sense of caution as well as excitement that the Lord was intervening at this stage. Parallel with it were two or three other possibilities of going into full-time work with churches, and so we were very careful. I used my 20-odd questions in the interview, and we both came away with the distinct impression that this was not the place for us. Our reasons began with the size of the church. It was not very big. We counted less than 30, mainly elderly, when we actually went in September. It was also a very intellectual church which I sensed then—and have confirmed since—must give it a strong image of intellectualism in the neighbourhood. And it was a very posh church which I would describe as upper-middle class (by my standards, anyway) in a very posh area where it would be very expensive to live. Other alternatives were coming in. We just didn't want to move, yet eventually we felt a very clear inward conviction that this was where God wanted us to go. So in the light of all that we came to Chiltern Church three years ago in September.

Now with the benefit of hindsight we can say, 'Yes, it was the right thing to do, and it has been a tremendous three years.' Someone said to me that a FTW goes through a three-stage process in a church—the honeymoon, the nightmare and the reality. We have certainly not been through the nightmare, and we knew the reality of it before we went. We have been very fortunate, and I think one of the reasons for this is that we meet regularly—about once a fortnight—as elders, and share things in what is very much a team ministry. Training and equipping others, leading consecutive Bible study (I take 75% of the teaching and preaching ministry) and seeing the church becoming servants of the community in

which they are situated have been tremendously rewarding aspects of Chiltern during the last two or three years.

I was due to leave in September, when my three years were up, but in fact I am staying on. I am at the point which all Christian full-time workers get to when they need to know for certain that it is right for them to stay where they are. I need the same conviction to continue, as I needed to commence. This is particularly important for me as I see myself basically as an innovator, a pioneer, a get-in-and-get-out sort of person. I am not a stayer, a plodder. I think, maybe, that work at Chiltern has made me more of a plodder and less of a get-in-and-get-out sort of person, but I still feel that we need to be clear about what we do, and do it only because we know that God has called us to do it. That is what it has been like at Chiltern, and long may it continue.