

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Harold Rowdon

Harold Rowdon, who is the author of The Origins of the Brethren and a consulting editor of Harvester, lectures in church history at London Bible College. Here he writes not only about the attitude of Brethren in the past towards full-time ministry in a local church situation, but also about the situation in other parts of the world today.

This brief exploration into the question of full-time ministry in the light of Brethren history will be divided into two parts. The first will look in somewhat summary fashion at Brethren history in this country. The second will look at Brethren practice in other parts of the world. For some time now, it has struck me that the ecclesiastical practices of the Brethren around the world vary far more than we commonly think. That they vary in this country must be obvious to anyone who has moved around *among the different types of Brethren church* in the British Isles. The diversity of Brethren practice around the world is even more marked as I hope to show in the second part of this paper which will draw heavily on the returns of a random survey conducted during the last six months.

Brethren practice in this country

Early Brethren practice of the ministry was strongly influenced by their rejection of the concept of the ministry held by virtually all contemporary churches. One of the reasons why they attracted such bitter hostility from other Christians was their uncompromising rejection of what came to be disparagingly described as 'one-man ministry'. Their objection to it arose not only because it savoured of professionalism and was associated with theories of highly dubious validity, such as apostolic succession and 'democratic' election, but also because it simply did not square with their understanding of the doctrine and practice of New Testament scripture. We need not go into details, since they are well-known, and have since been discovered (independently, in most cases?) by many who would not wish to be known as Brethren! The alternative to 'one-man ministry' was not—or need not have been—'any-man ministry'. True, the Darbyite misunderstanding of the church—that structurally it is 'in ruins', is

apostate and lies under God's displeasure, and that any attempt to reconstitute its outward forms and offices is a sign of disobedience rather than obedience—opened the door to the latter phenomenon. Sadly, too many Brethren churches of the more 'open' variety have been influenced by this misunderstanding—sometimes without realizing it—and have allowed ministry to fall into the hands of any vocal male, whether or not he is spiritually gifted.

Early in Brethren history, the concept of 'stated ministry' was canvassed, whereby those who evidently possessed the gift of ministry were recognized as such. The extent to which oral participation in worship and ministry should be confined to them was the next question. For it is evident that Darby held the view that spiritual gifts were distributed by the Spirit to the members of the gathered congregation on what might be called an ad hoc basis.

On the question of resident, full-time ministry, it is not difficult to find examples, from the earliest times until now. Men like Robert Chapman at Barnstaple and Müller and Craik at Bristol were not alone in exercising their ministry predominantly—though not exclusively—in the context of a single church. The tradition was maintained throughout the years. It was particularly marked in the area directly influenced by Bethesda, Bristol. Unity Chapel, Bristol, regularly profited from the ministry of a pastor. Referring to the early years of this church, Keith and Alan Linton, in their valuable account of '150 years of local church work in Bristol' (*I will build my Church*) tell us that 'the pastoral work in the St. Philips district was taken on by the retired Army Officer, Major R. S. Tireman'. One suspects that many a Brethren church owes a similar debt to this kind of resident full-time ministry. During the decade, 1899–1909, G. H. Lang served as pastor to this church, Unity Chapel, though it must be said that he developed conscientious objections to this form of ministry. Copse Road Chapel, Clevedon, is another example of a church, influenced by Bethesda, which continued to engage full-time pastors. There were also resident workers in the Blackdown Hills who devoted all or most of their time to local churches.

Clapton Hall, London, was served by a pastor for some time, J. G. M'Vicker serving in that capacity from 1880 to 1900. New Park Hall, Barking, maintained the tradition until it passed out of the orbit of Brethren churches in quite recent times.

The late G. K. Lowther is an example of a man who combined a wider ministry with a local one of church planting and nurturing, leaving behind him churches at Wareham and Grimsby to bear testimony to the sterling quality of his work.

In recent decades, an increasing number of evangelists, including some associated with Counties Evangelistic Work, have been spending more

and more of their time in fewer and fewer places. Several have seen their role as principally that of planting and nurturing new churches, and in a few cases this has become their almost exclusive preoccupation.

The nature of such single-church ministry is varied. Sometimes, it has been predominantly pastoral, usually combining Bible teaching with pastoral care (as with Chapman, M'Vicker etc). At other times it has been chiefly evangelistic. The emphasis—which may be a combination of several of the above—has varied in accordance with the gifts of the worker and his sense of God's calling.

It has been normal, if not universal, for resident FTWs to be recognized as elders of the church. Certainly, Müller and Craik insisted on their being seen as *no more than* elders among elders. It would probably be correct to say that, where this has not been the case, the church in question has, sooner or later, drifted away from its Brethren moorings.

As for remuneration, the general reaction against current practice was sufficient to ensure that Brethren would set their faces against fixed stipends. Nevertheless, A. N. Groves was one of those who took serious note of the biblical principle that the labourer is worthy of his hire, asserting that 'if a pastor be worth having, he is worth paying, and wherever there is much spiritual work to be done, it is bad economy to let much of his valuable time be employed in mere labouring for his earthly sustenance' (*Liberty of Ministry*, p.51).

It should be apparent from what has already been said that the line between full-time and part-time local work is not easy to draw. All that one can say, by way of summary, is that while itinerant ministry on a full-time or more commonly a part-time, basis, was *generally* characteristic of the practice of Brethren, this was not to the exclusion of local full-time work, sometimes combined with itinerant ministry but not to the exclusion of men who spent the overwhelming majority of their working hours in a locality.

Brethren practice around the world

With a view to discovering more about Brethren practice in respect of full-time ministry in other parts of the world, I designed a simple questionnaire (see Appendix 1). This was distributed with a covering letter (see Appendix 2) to Brethren known to me in 16 different countries including at least one in each of the continents. Replies were received from 11 countries, in some cases with more than one reply from a country.

The sample was avowedly random, dictated largely by the range of contacts possessed by me. This means that the correspondents were not

fully representative of the Brethren spectrum! Some correspondents felt able to speak on behalf of the whole country; others limited themselves to the area best known to them. The correspondent for Papua New Guinea divided the country into three distinct areas reflecting the variety of local conditions. In New Zealand, The Christian Brethren Research Fellowship was in the process of conducting a thorough survey on this very issue, and my correspondent was able to share some of the preliminary findings. It appears that, in a few cases, the category 'local full-time worker' may not have been interpreted correctly, despite the covering letter of explanation. Or it may be that the difficulty of differentiating clearly between local and itinerant workers—spelled out with clarity in the reply from Peru—may have resulted in slight distortion of the picture.

In view of limitations such as these, no attempt will be made to analyse the returns on a statistical basis. Instead, a number of general impressions will be offered as a basis for reflection, and an attempt will be made to enlarge a little upon the situation in one or two countries where the data obtained is clear and supplemented by explanatory notes or other material.

The first general impression—which should come as a surprise to few perceptive observers—is the extent to which expatriates serve as resident FTWs. Ever since I heard a missionary on furlough reveal the fact that the local church with which he was connected was bereft of pastoral care in his absence, I have suspected that this was the case. It rather looks as if, with the increasing number of believers and churches in countries like Nigeria and Zaire, the role of expatriates in local, church planting and nurturing ministry is now passing to the nationals, while the expatriates are concentrating on more specialized ministries such as Bible school work and Bible translation.

A surprising number of localised workers—national as well as expatriate—seem to be unrelated to local church leadership, though it looks as if this is less likely with nationals than with expatriates. From South Africa comes the intriguing observation that there are many cases of local FTWs being unrelated to the church leadership, few known cases of recognition as elders/leaders and a few known cases of their being 'above local elders as with missionaries'! In Singapore, all known cases are recognized as elders/leaders.

As far as financial support is concerned, it is of considerable interest that, whereas expatriates are almost always placed under the category of 'living by faith', nationals are not so. 'Almost always', because in one case the return indicates a combination of 'living by faith' and 'salary provided by the local church', with the revealing note: 'Elders say they are giving the worker a "thank you" gift, but it is regular and related to family needs.' In a European country it is openly stated that, while there are many cases of expatriates 'living by faith', there are also many known cases

of them receiving a salary provided by the local church, and a few cases of a combination of the two.

With nationals, however, it is rather different. What is good for the missionary goose seems to be less appropriate for the national gander! In some African countries it is common for subsistence farming carried on by the family to make a substantial contribution to a man's support. In the plantation areas of Papua New Guinea, a pastor is able to do several hours employment per day to supplement income. In South Africa, however, one estimate is that 90% 'live by faith'. In New Zealand, while there are relatively few instances of this mode of support, pure and simple, there are many cases of a combination of it with a salary from the local church—doubtless a reflection of the fact that 'salaries are almost never adequate'. Singapore, consistent once again, reports that all resident FTWs receive a salary.

Of particular interest are the benefits and problems thought to have resulted from the use of resident workers. Benefits include an impetus in evangelism and church planting, though this is mentioned somewhat infrequently, except in 'missionary' countries such as Nigeria, Zaire and France. In New Zealand, qualitative rather than quantitative church growth has generally resulted.

More effective pastoral care is rated among the most significant benefits in countries such as South Africa, New Zealand and Singapore. The availability of a 'contact person' (Singapore) is welcomed in numerous instances.

Benefits in the area of leadership are frequently mentioned, Spain, Italy, Singapore and Papua New Guinea being among the countries where this is underlined. From Spain comes the comment that resident FTWs have been able to supply 'local leadership and . . . give time that other elders have little time for, as for many years there were very long working hours'. Continuity in leadership is stressed in some cases (eg Italy) as a particular benefit.

There are surprisingly few specific references to benefits in terms of Bible teaching, though from Singapore comes an allusion to the 'organizing' of Bible teaching, Papua New Guinea (Southern Highlands) bears tribute to the 'quality Bible teaching' made available and British Columbia appreciates the 'consecutive teaching and visitation' made possible. From Johannesburg comes a somewhat cryptic tribute to 'uncompromised ministry'. It is also from South Africa that the one reference comes to the drawing out and utilizing of 'all the gifts' as a result of the stimulus of a local worker.

As for the problems, it is evident, for a start, that not all are committed to drawing out the gifts of others. Some try 'to do most of the preaching'—in South Africa at least. Others, as in Spain, (both expatriates and

nationals, be it noted) tend to become 'pastors of the churches' though in fairness it should be noted that this may result from the tendency of some church members to use full-timers 'for all purposes' (the phrase is from Singapore). In Papua New Guinea the tendency has been noted for church leaders to lean so heavily on the FTW (expatriate or national) that the work is placed 'at risk' should he move elsewhere. Appropriately enough, a warning comes from Italy against creating a class of 'leaders/cardinals'.

In passing, it may be noted that one of the correspondents who commented on the danger of developing a 'one-man ministry' also deplored a local worker who was not serving his own church effectively because 'he was still engaged extensively in other assemblies'.

From British Columbia comes a warning against the FTW who pushes his own ideas and, as a result, takes a church out of the mainstream of Brethren life.

A number of cautions on financial matters emerge from the survey. There is the problem of unrealistic levels of financial support, to which reference has already been made. Financial pressures may be felt not only by the FTW but also by the church, struggling to raise adequate support for him in addition to meeting existing commitments. There is one reference (from South Africa) to a reduction in giving to 'outside missionaries and works' as a result of having to support a local full-timer. In this connection it is perhaps pertinent that the current increase in the number of resident FTWs in this country is running in parallel with a striking decrease in the number of overseas missionaries.

Finally, there are perceptive comments from New Zealand about the problem of roles and relationships. Among the specific issues raised are tensions about the 'proper role in an assembly' of a FTW, particularly when the relationship between the worker and the church—especially its leadership—comes under strain. These are seen to be especially acute when the worker is brought in from another church or is serving, say as a youth worker, and is not an elder. It is with these tensions in mind that the suggestion is made that the nearest thing to an ideal situation is when an existing elder 'goes full-time'.

The need for a proper job description is ventilated not only from New Zealand—where approximately half the resident FTWs have them, though few are satisfactory—but also from British Columbia. Thence comes also the plea that 'a man must have a measure of authority as well as responsibility', the assertion that 'it is important that the full-time worker be part of a team of elders otherwise he does not have the "feel" of things nor is he aware of goals (if any)' and the suggestion that 'a program of internships with assemblies that have full-time workers would prove invaluable'. The problem of recruitment is touched upon only in the comments from New Zealand.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most surprising thing that emerges from this survey is the fact that, wherever soundings have been taken, local FTWs seem to be a recognized and, sometimes, a widespread phenomenon. Something like 10% of Brethren churches in New Zealand have them and (not altogether without connection in view of the preponderance of New Zealand missionaries who work there!) it is estimated that there is approximately one pastor to every 2–2.5 assemblies in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In Spain, there are about 60 full-time nationals, as well as many expatriates, who spend most of their time in a local church situation.

The difficulty of drawing a line between local and itinerant workers has already been mentioned. With this in mind, the report from north Peru spells out the situation as far as nationals serving the 60 or so assemblies are concerned as follows: 'Two married men are pastors/teachers in their local churches with little itinerant activity. Five married men have a heavy input in their local churches and are recognized as elder/pastors along with others. In addition all have a substantial itinerant ministry . . . One single man has a heavy input in a local church and is a recognized evangelist in his area. Two single women are recognized as deaconesses and have a substantial responsibility in their local churches, while also extending their ministry elsewhere.'

There are few claims that resident FTWs are universally successful, and none that they are the answer to all our problems! The overwhelming verdict, however, is that they are generally successful, though a few expressed the opinion that they were only sometimes successful. Occasionally, a note of urgency surfaces, as in the statements that 'The old style itinerating has gone for good so something must take its place,' and 'It is about time we Brethren stop fooling ourselves that we can manage the church without a full-time person and be bold enough to call him a pastor if he is fulfilling pastoral responsibilities.'

While considerable variety exists in the use made of local FTWs, their relationship to the leadership and the way in which they are supported financially, the most usual scenario is of a man fulfilling pastoral functions as one of the leaders of the church, in receipt of a salary which needs to be supplemented in many cases in order to provide an income that is roughly comparable with that of the *average* church member. More or less serious problems are likely to occur in the areas of financial arrangements, role definition and relationships with other leaders and the church as a whole. Despite this, there is every indication that the phenomenon—which is not totally new—is likely to increase, particularly in situations where leadership qualities are in short supply or the pace of life is so hectic for

church members that pastoral care and even consistent Bible teaching is in short supply.

As a footnote, it is well worthy of note that the January, 1985, issue of *Interest* contains an article by W. Ross Rainey entitled 'Changing Ministry Patterns' which shows that the situation in the United States of America broadly bears out what has been said in this study.

APPENDIX 1

London Bible College, Green Lane, Northwood, Middlesex, HA6 2UW, England

Dear

I have been asked to prepare a paper for a consultation on local Full-time Workers to be held here in July 1985 under the auspices of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship. It would be an enormous help if you were able to spare the time to answer this questionnaire, and let me have it back, if possible by the end of December, 1984. Very many thanks in anticipation.

Harold H. Rowdon

Please answer questions along a scale of 4, where 1=all known cases, 2=many known cases, 3=a few known cases and 4=no known cases.

1. *To what extent are local full-time workers being used?*

A. Expatriates

i. as evangelists ii. as pastors iii. as teachers iv. as pastors/teachers v. in any other way (please specify)

B. Nationals

i. as evangelists ii. as pastors iii. as teachers iv. as pastors/teachers v. in any other way (please specify)

2. *To what extent has itinerant ministry continued?*

A. Expatriates

i. as evangelists ii. as Bible teachers iii. in any other way (please specify)

B. Nationals

i. as evangelists ii. as Bible teachers iii. in any other way (please specify)

3. *How do local FTWs relate to the elders/leadership?*

A. Expatriates

i. they are unrelated ii. they are recognized as elders/leaders iii. any other relationship (please specify)

B. Nationals

i. they are unrelated ii. they are recognized as elders/leaders iii. any other relationship (please specify)

4. *How are local FTWs supported financially?*

A. Expatriates

i. Traditional form of 'living by faith' ii. Salary provided by the local church iii. Combination of i. and ii.

iv. Any other arrangement (please specify)

B. Nationals

- i. Traditional form of 'living by faith' ii. Salary provided by the local church
- iii. Combination of i. and ii
- iv. Any other arrangement (please specify)

5. *What specific benefits have local FTWs brought?*

A. Expatriates (please specify)

B. Nationals (please specify)

6. *What problems have arisen as a result of using local FTWs?*

A. Expatriates (please specify)

B. Nationals (please specify)

7. *How successful are local FTWs thought to be?*

A. Expatriates

i. Universally successful ii. Generally successful

iii. Sometimes successful iv. Rarely successful

v. Never successful

B. Nationals

i. Universally successful ii. Generally successful

iii. Sometimes successful iv. Rarely successful

v. Never successful

- 8. i. What country are you reporting? ii. Is your report confined to one area? (please specify)
- iii. Approximately how many assemblies are you reporting on?

Signature *Date*

thank you for persevering to the end! PLEASE RETURN, IF POSSIBLE BY 1 JAN. 1985 TO HAROLD H. ROWDON, LONDON BIBLE COLLEGE, GREEN LANE, NORTHWOOD, MIDDLESEX, HA6 2UW, ENGLAND.

APPENDIX 2

MEMO

30.9.84

A striking feature of the Brethren scene in Britain in recent years has been the increase in the number of local churches utilizing the full-time services of men (and, occasionally, women) in a number of capacities. Some have served primarily as youth workers, others as evangelists or Bible teachers, or pastors, or social workers, or any combination of these.

The relationship of such local full-time workers to the existing leadership varies very considerably. They may be responsible to the eldership, form part of it, or, in one or two cases, act as pastors who are to all intents and purposes distinct from the body of elders.

Financial arrangements also vary—from 'living by faith' to a fixed salary, with or without free accommodation, pension rights etc., or a combination of these.

Some local FTWs are provided with a detailed job description, others have little or no idea of what is expected of them. Not surprisingly, misunderstandings and tensions have sometimes arisen between them and the leadership—even the church as a whole.

In an effort to provide help for the many Brethren churches in Britain which already have such FTWs (perhaps 30–40), others which are moving in this direction, and the men (and women) who already serve in this capacity or feel called to it in the future, the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship is arranging an extended consultation for July 1985. I have been asked to prepare a paper for this consultation surveying Brethren practice in the matter.

Of course there is nothing new about the phenomenon of full-time workers operating in a local church situation. There have always been such, throughout Brethren history. And it is clear—though not generally realized—that they are widely used in church-planting and missionary situations overseas.

It would be enormously helpful to me if you felt able to devote an hour (or less) to prayerful consideration of the attached questionnaire. Please answer as many of the questions as possible, and return it to me at LBC before 1 Jan. 1985. If you could persuade a *national* to complete the second form (independently), this would be a bonus. We hope to send a copy of the published findings in due course.

Harold H. Rowdon