

## **ADAPTING TO FULL-TIME CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY**

**Neil Summerton**

It was argued earlier that what we would call full-time congregational ministry was a common practice in the churches of New Testament times. That it has been the norm in the history of the church, and that congregations have generally derived great benefit from it, is beyond dispute. To put the point at its lowest, an arrangement having the sanction of scripture and practice ought to be capable of being adopted with reasonable expectations that it will be beneficial even for congregations of Brethren background. It must, of course, be applied with due regard for the New Testament's understanding of the nature of Christian ministry and for the present circumstances of congregations—which are very different from those of most other periods of church history. This is particularly the case with respect to the ability of most church members to participate positively in ministry.

But observation suggests that Brethren congregations have not always been successful first time in integrating full-time ministry into their congregational life without serious strains and stresses. One important reason for these difficulties is the blithe assumption that full-time ministry can be introduced without giving rise to any significant changes in relationships, traditions and methods. At the risk of appearing negative, the principal purpose of this chapter is to identify some of the main problems which seem to have been encountered, and their causes, and to suggest ways in which they may be overcome. If the result is that some churches are able to avoid these problems and harmoniously to integrate full-time ministry into their life, so much the better since so many congregations are experimenting in this way.

### **Impact on the church**

The fundamental problem lies in failure to recognise the impact that full-time ministry is bound to have in a congregation and to adapt to it readily.

It has already been noted that a congregation may have mixed motives in calling a FTW. Whatever the case, the whole purpose is to secure some

specific and marked impact on the church. But it must also be recognised that in practice it is impossible to realise these hopes without other important but less expected effects.

Some of the roles outlined in the preceding chapter are likely to be more self contained than others. But a Christian congregation is a dynamic and organic entity—a community or society—in which the role and gifts of one member are bound to impinge to a greater or lesser extent on those of the rest of its members. For better or worse, there will be consequences and impacts which are unforeseen even by the most perspicacious members. As always, some members of the congregation will find these unforeseen developments disturbing and unnerving, if not a straight temptation to jealousy for their own position. Such fears in a congregation inevitably create tensions which can focus on the person of the FTW, who, rightly or wrongly, may be held responsible for these troubling developments.

It is therefore incumbent on the elders that, in calling a FTW, they should make sure that in good enough time they take steps to educate the congregation as to the likely impact of the FTW, the near certainty of unforeseen consequences, and the danger that the uncertainties engendered by the latter may produce a sense of disenchantment with the individual who is held responsible for them. This disenchantment may seem all the more acute, to the extent that it is preceded by a blissful 'honeymoon' period. The congregation needs to understand that in calling a FTW, especially one who is in a position of leadership, the need for change in important aspects of congregational life and practice is being accepted—there would normally be little point in introducing a FTW if changes of one kind or another were not to be expected.

There are likely to be innovations, and old activities, traditions and practices which have outlived their purpose may be altered—to the chagrin of those who may have had a hand in creating them (as, of course, more or less radical changes in their day!). The congregation needs to understand and accept that this is a process which is bound to occur, and is in itself desirable. Especially if the FTW is from outside the congregation, he or she is bound to bring new ideas and practices, at least some of which could possibly be applied. In itself there is nothing about this phenomenon which is specially attributable to the presence of a FTW. Wherever elders wish to see change as a basis of spiritual and numerical growth, they need to invest much time in preparing the group for the consequences. But a FTW is likely to accelerate the pace of innovation by the simple fact that he is able to devote more time and thought to planning and implementing new activities and practices. The degree of impact may inevitably outstrip a congregation's expectations even where there is careful preparation; the situation may be all the more explosive where no preparatory steps have been taken at all.

If the congregation needs to be prepared for the impact of a FTW generally, members need also to be prepared to appreciate the possible impact on them individually. This will vary between individuals. It is likely to be greatest for those whose gifts and roles are most comparable to those of the FTW. This will be considered at greater length in a moment in relation to the impact of a FTW on the elders. The congregation should understand, however, that to call a FTW will not generally be to relieve them of burdens which they are having difficulty in bearing. On the contrary, the presence of a FTW is likely to increase the demands imposed on individual church members. This will be so especially where the FTW is in a position of congregational leadership and his gifts lie in encouraging others to exercise their own gifts and to take responsibility for new ministries and activities. At a more mundane level, as in the case of an addition to the establishment in any firm or institution, the presence of a FTW can be expected to increase the expenditure of the congregation. This is not only because the FTW has to be supported but also because the new activities and ministries generated have to be funded! The congregation need to understand that the presence of a FTW may increase rather than diminish their individual burdens in a number of ways.

For his or her part the FTW needs to be sensitive to the increased stresses and burdens which his or her presence may impose on the congregation. Tact will be needed both in making it clear to the congregation that their situation is understood; and in forcing the pace of innovation and change. The FTW will be wise to find out as quickly as possible about congregational traditions and their origins, and in particular who among the existing congregation (or their parents!) had a hand in starting or developing which activities and practices. There may, of course, be occasions when the congregation are in such bondage to existing practices and traditions that it is essential to confront them boldly with the need for change. Normally, however, an indirect and tactful approach will be more profitable, especially if change and innovation can be achieved within existing forms, customs and nomenclature.

### **Impact on the elders**

Of greater importance for the fortunes of the FTW and the church will be the impact of his or her presence on the elders, and the way in which that impact is managed and in which the elders respond to it emotionally. This impact and the resulting relationship between the FTW and the elders can be expected to be all the more significant for the fortunes of the worker and the congregation when the presence of a FTW is a new and uncharted experience for the congregation. In these circumstances the probability is that the body of elders concerned will have been working together with a tolerable degree of effectiveness for a fairly long period. Each will have

developed an established and recognized role within the congregation; and some, at least, of them will be discharging definite leadership tasks.

The introduction of a FTW to fulfil virtually any role in the congregation will have a range of consequences for the eldership group. First, arrangements must be made for supervision or liaison on a day to day basis. This can hardly be done with the elders as a whole; one or two must be selected for this purpose, thus affecting their position within the eldership and the dynamics of the group. Second, most people who are suitable to be a FTW can be expected to exercise leadership and initiative within the tasks assigned to them. The tasks concerned are unlikely to have been neglected completely before the FTW was appointed, and one or more elders will have been taking responsibility for those tasks, if not directly discharging them. The introduction of a FTW will have a direct impact on those individuals and through them on the dynamics of the elders as a group. These effects will be all the more acute because the FTW can be expected to devote more time and effort to this work than any 'lay' elder could do, thus magnifying the effects in question.

If these impacts are the case as a matter of general principle, they must be expected to be all the more significant where the FTW is a person of maturity and experience of life and Christian work, whose gifts and role lie in the areas of teaching, pastoring, strategic thinking, and administration and co-ordination, as defined earlier. For these are the gifts and roles *par excellence* of the elder and it follows that to introduce into a congregation a major new resource for these purposes is bound to be replete with consequences for the elders as individuals and for their functioning as a group. Obviously, the impact will be greatest for those particular elders whose gifts and role most nearly match those of the FTW.

In these circumstances, a significant impact would be bound to be felt quite apart from the question of relationships, the dynamics of the group and the role of existing elders. For the FTW has by definition much more of the precious resource of time for the work of the congregation than does the 'lay' elder, and insofar as the 'lay' elders as a group have more time than the FTW, they have a problem of co-ordinating their action if, hour for hour, their combined work is to be as effective as that of the FTW. The latter can give more time to prayer and study; to thinking about the direction in which the congregation should be moving; and to pastoring and teaching. The latter two items will bring him into closer contact with the congregation than any individual 'lay' elder can hope to achieve, and all will tend to bring the FTW into prominence as a leader of the congregation where he has the gifts and personal qualities which favour that development. The result will be a change in the relative positions of the FTW and the elders as leaders in the eyes of the congregation both in terms of work and role and, more crucially, status.

It is difficult to see how this could fail to happen if the FTW has gifts and a role similar to those of the elders. If it was the will of God that the congregation should call on a FTW with these qualities and gifts, the consequences ought properly to be embraced gladly by the congregation, including the elders, as ultimately beneficial to it. But it is perfectly possible that none of this will be anticipated or understood by the elders (and possibly by the FTW). If it is not, it seems bound to be a source of deep tension and distress, and the evidence is that more than one relationship between a FTW and a Brethren congregation has broken down in consequence. This is a problem which occurs not just in the relationship between a full-time person and 'lay' elders. Similar problems can occur when a new and gifted individual is introduced into a team of full-time workers—associate ministers, for example, tend only to be young and not to stay long in churches where there is an established and dominant senior minister.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately it is a problem in group behaviour and interaction which requires much spiritual character to overcome successfully. Certainly on the part of the elders it often requires a considerable measure of the spirit of John the Baptist when he said of Jesus, 'He must increase but I must decrease' (Jn. 3:30).

But in the Brethren (and Charismatic?) situation, the problems can be exacerbated by a more or less sharp divergence between the concept of ministry and leadership held by many elders and those held by some (many?) of those entering full-time Christian service, especially where they have been educated in the existing non-conformist colleges. The elders' concept emphasizes the obligation of the individual, whatever his circumstances, to commit himself heart and soul in service to the limit of his capacity, given his own obligations. Accordingly, it would tend not to accord any special status to full-time work as distinct from part-time or 'lay' work in the church. Indeed, it has conceptual difficulty with the term 'full-time' work, since it would wish to emphasize the biblical notion of the full-time calling of every believer to the service of Christ. My own view is that some confusion and misunderstanding would be avoided if we were to substitute the term 'supported' for 'full-time' in the designation now common in the assemblies. Further, insofar as the Brethren tradition recognizes the idea of leadership, as distinct from gift and work, as the duty of the elder, it tends to see it as a vigorously collective rather than an individual function in the church.

The emphasis among FTWs can, however, tend to be on the special status of the individual called to full-time service, so that the full-time person is regarded as ordained by God in a sense that the 'lay' person is not; on the need for leadership as a function in the congregation; and on the individual rather than group character of leadership if it is to be effective. Where there is a marked theological divergence between elders

and the FTWs on these issues, tension between the two seems inevitable, however good relationships may be in personal terms. For whatever a job specification may say, each is likely to have a differing perception of the status and role of the elders on the one hand and the FTW on the other with respect to each other and the rest of the congregation. At the extreme it raises questions such as 'Is the FTW the equal of the lay elders? Is he their assistant or are they his assistants?' It may be that both elders and FTWs need to engage in some hard biblical study on the nature of Christian ministry, particularly as it relates to the questions of the time available for a particular ministry, the source of practical support for that ministry, and the significance of the source of support for the position, status and rights of the person concerned.

### **Managing the impact**

It is vital that elders should not sit idly by, observing these various impacts, but doing nothing to assist the congregation to come to terms with them. It is of the essence of leadership that the leader should be active in managing change, seeking on the one hand to neutralize its negative and destructive effects, and on the other to explore the opportunities which it presents for the benefit of the group for which he is responsible. If this analysis of the impact of a FTW on the elders, and of the difficulties of relationships which may arise, is correct, a number of more or less practical proposals for avoiding, or at least reducing, problems can be made.

1. It is essential that in selecting (ie jointly recognizing the call of) any individual for resident full-time work in a congregation, there should be a mutual exploration not only of character, gifts and possible role, but of concepts of the nature of ministry, of eldership, and of leadership. No doubt, each individual's ideas on these matters will vary in detail from those of the next person. But where there are marked divergences of view on these matters, the scope of tension should not be underestimated because they will inevitably affect the way the FTW does his or her job, and his/her relationship with and view of the elders. If the prospective FTW is to have a role in pastoring, teaching, strategy and co-ordination, it will be all the more important to explore these matters. (Elders might of course also usefully ask themselves whether their own views on these subjects are right, and whether those views are or are not having beneficial effects on their own ministry in the congregation!)

2. In the process of recognizing the FTW's call, not only should role and tasks be carefully specified, but so should the prospective relationship

with the elders and the congregation as a whole. Is the FTW to be an elder, or a deacon, or what? If not, what access is he or she to have to the elders, and on whose invitation? What freedom of innovation and initiative is the FTW to have in his or her area of responsibility, and what freedom to communicate with the church independently on those matters? What matters can he decide for himself with or without a subsequent report to the elders? In reaching agreement on these questions, it should be recognized that elders, the congregation as a whole, and FTW will change and develop with the passage of time, and the arrangement should be reviewed and adjusted at regular intervals (without constantly uprooting the plant to see how things are growing!).

3. If the FTW's main role is to be in pastoring, teaching, strategy and co-ordination, it is difficult to see how this role can be pursued in the Brethren environment effectively and enthusiastically but without resulting tensions, unless the FTW is an elder of equal standing with his colleagues before the congregation. If such a FTW is not an elder, either he will be hamstrung by his, to say the least, ambiguous position, or the position and role of the elders themselves seem likely to be called into question. The implication of this is that a FTW for such a role *must* have the qualifications and gifts for immediate eldership; this demands maturity and will often rule out those in their early twenties, if not early thirties. That in turn has practical implications in terms of, perhaps, abandonment of secular careers, and the need for the congregation to make adequate provision for financial support and accommodation, as such an individual will usually have a wife and family.

4. Many congregations feel that the difficulties suggested above may be more likely to be overcome if the FTW is an existing member of the congregation whom they enable to give more time to the work, by developing his or her existing roles. There may be something in this, but it should be recognized that the difficulties outlined above derive, in part, precisely from the fact that the individual is enabled to devote more time to his or her ministry than other key people in the congregation are able to do. It may be of significance that an American observer of churches with multiple full-time staff comments that, on balance, it is less satisfying to add an existing member of the congregation to such a team than someone from another neighbouring congregation.<sup>2</sup>

5. It is essential to provide the FTW with scope to develop his or her ministry. To put it at its lowest, there is no point in the elders' employing even a dog('s body!) and barking themselves. If God has called an individual to a full-time role in a congregation and that person has significant gifts, it makes little sense to leave those gifts under-employed while the work is done by less gifted individuals. And it certainly makes no sense to limit the FTW's scope in this way simply in the name of not

reducing the status of another elder or other member of the congregation. This point is of special significance in respect of a teaching ministry, because of its high public prominence in the congregation. But it is also relevant apropos high-profile leadership, and the offices of chairman and secretary of the elders. The point also extends to more detailed matters of executive action. The elders and congregation need to appoint someone whom they can trust to discharge (and not, without authority, to go too far outside) the role agreed. And they must then set that person free to exercise his/her ministry without constant detailed supervision and reference back to them, except on matters of importance and principle.

6. This leads to the crucial importance, whether or not the FTW is an elder, of good and constantly open communications between him/her and the (rest of the) elders, in order to minimize the risk of fear and suspicion by the elders of the FTW. Membership of the elders should in itself greatly help, for there should then be ample opportunity for report, discussion, and the sharing of ideas. In a group leadership, this openness and sharing of important information and intentions is of greater importance than under more managerial arrangements.

Where the FTW is not an elder, the elders should ensure that they give ample time for report and discussion. The younger FTW, especially, should never be left to feel that no one, least of all the elders of the congregation, is taking a real interest in his/her work. Attendance at the elders' meeting will be essential from time to time, but contact with the elders should not be confined to that. Elders in general should make sure that they express a regular informal interest in the FTW and his/her dependants.

Whether or not the FTW is an elder, it will probably be useful if one suitable elder acts as a liaison officer, to be available for consultation and to take a close day-to-day interest in the FTW and his/her work. In the larger congregation, and especially where there is more than one FTW, it may be helpful to form an executive group to meet weekly or even more often, comprising the FTWs and two or three elders, in order to ensure proper co-ordination of work and activities, prompt pastoral action, and to take decisions in day-to-day matters. Such an arrangement can be expected to be of help in alleviating one of the important petty sources of frustration for the FTW—the length of time it can take to make even minor decisions in the Brethren system.

7. It is essential that the elders and the congregation should recognize the peculiar pressures which can be experienced by those who have committed themselves to full-time Christian service. These may be practical. There may be uncertainties about the level of financial support which the congregation will provide, or uncertainties about whether the congregations will be able to meet the financial undertakings which it has

made. There may be uncertainties about the future, eg, about accommodation or how the individual's 'career' in Christian service will develop, or about the need to provide for retirement, even though it may be many years away. More important still, the individual may have difficulties in coming to terms with the powerlessness and statuslessness which are peculiar in a secularized society to the occupation of Christian worker. There may also be anxiety to exercise a successful ministry in the congregation, to demonstrate to them and to other Christian workers that the FTW's ministry has divine approbation.

It would be easy to criticise such sentiments as being unspiritual—as indicating concern to guarantee personal *securitas* (safety) rather than manifesting the *certitudo* (trust in God)<sup>3</sup> which ought to characterize the Christian. To be sure, it is difficult to live by faith (and the FTW must do so, even when he receives a salary from his congregation) and the temptation to lack of faith is commonly experienced, even by those who have long been in Christian work. It is not for those who live much more secure and prestigious lives to cast stones. They need, rather, to ensure that they give proper support to the FTW (and his or her spouse) in prayer, emotionally, and practically. Above all, they need to recognize that the FTW, like anyone else, requires pastoral care and support, and they must ensure that he or she gets it, either from within the congregation or from outside it. The informal interest in the FTW already recommended is crucial in this.

For his or her part, the FTW needs to recognize the peculiar temptations of full-time work and his or her need for pastoral support. And, in particular, they should be willing to receive that support even from members of their own congregation (it is in the nature of Christian fellowship and humility that the Christian worker should be willing to receive pastoral support from those for whom he or she has pastoral responsibility).

8. Finally, some of the possible difficulties noted in this chapter may arise precisely because there is only *one* FTW in a large congregation with an active eldership. Such congregations should, in my opinion, consider whether they should not call *two* or more FTWs to occupy differing or even similar roles. In any case, for their own good and growth, many larger congregations need to be thinking in terms not of one full-time person but a team, working alongside other church members. It is possible that where there are multiple FTWs, the dynamics of the relationship of the FTW with the (other) elders and the rest of the congregation will be different and more positive than where there is only one full-time person in this, for Brethren congregations, difficult and unaccustomed position.

The purpose of these observations and suggestions has been to warn of possible pitfalls and to suggest possible ways of avoiding them, not to

discourage congregations from calling individuals to undertake full-time work among them. There are many congregations of Brethren background which are demonstrating the value and opportunities of setting aside one or more persons for full-time ministry in the local church. To that end, I have suggested points which elders and FTWs need to bear in mind in order to increase the prospects that the benefits will be achieved in practice, rather than being frittered away in uncertainty about role and unnecessary tensions, by which Satan is always anxious to frustrate the building of the kingdom in and through the local congregation. To achieve an effective full-time ministry without impairing plural leadership and the exercise of charismatic gift would be at once a boon to the congregation concerned and an example to the church at large.

1. See Lyle E. Schaller, *op cit*, 122ff.
2. *Ibid*, 64–67.
3. The categories are, I believe, Luther's—not the least of his deep insights into the meaning of scripture. Cf. Matt. 6:31, which does not only apply to missionaries and itinerant preachers.