

A LOCAL CHURCH VIEW

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A local church elder, and an architect by profession, Gerald West looks at the question of the appointment of a full-time church worker from the point of view of the steps needed to be taken by the church concerned and its leaders.

In this paper I consider the attitudes and motives which seem to be leading Brethren churches to make arrangements of the kind we are considering, the way in which a church may decide to take this step, and having made such a decision how it is implemented. This last matter requires a view of some of the practical considerations that immediately arise as soon as the church has found the right person.

Motives of the church

It must be asked why, at this particular time, a significant number of Brethren churches in widely dispersed parts of the country are inviting individuals to exercise a full-time ministry within their fellowships. Even though it may not represent a change of principle it represents a change of emphasis and practice which might be thought somewhat unexpected. This phenomenon is not the result of a single sided set of circumstances. It takes two, at least, to bring it about and both parties must feel that their faith is leading them in this direction. Colin Holmes will explain some of the considerations which have led those already engaged in a full-time ministry to seek to exercise it within the orbit of a single church. My task is to look at things from the angle of the local church.

Such evidence as I possess suggests that it is usually amongst the elders of a church that the initiative first arises for such an arrangement. It is not usual for it to come from church members. It would also seem that it is amongst elders who feel keenly the importance of their responsibilities that the suggestion is seriously considered. Bearing in mind the fact that such a proposal runs across the grain of the Brethren tradition and that it is unlikely to be a reflex response either by elders or church, it is natural to enquire what it is that brings elders to such a consideration.

I believe that by far the most important reason is the sense of

inadequacy that many elders in full-time secular employment feel when faced by the pressing pastoral and spiritual needs of their flock. This inadequacy is not necessarily one of ability or gift but one of availability. There is little doubt in my mind that the pastoral demands of the typical assembly have increased. I also believe that there has been a great increase in the expectations both of the church fellowship and its elders regarding pastoral care. This inadequacy is also felt in the area associated with the ministry of the Word. The pattern a generation ago of a weekly conversational Bible-reading, supplemented by monthly and annual conferences with attendance drawn from a wide region has largely collapsed. The situation has worsened as a result of the decline of the itinerant ministry. Church secretaries now find it difficult to secure the services of gifted ministers of the Word of God on a regular basis. Furthermore, the emphasis in many assemblies is on consecutive Bible-teaching ministry which calls for thorough preparation. Few are so adequately trained and gifted that they can exercise such a ministry without considerable expenditure of time.

If there is a sense of inadequacy amongst elders and a feeling of responsibility only partially discharged, this is made more severe by the other demands that are often made upon the time of an elder. We seem to have complicated the administrative tasks associated with church oversight. Perhaps I am mistaken, but my memories of childhood do not include my father spending frequent evenings in oversight meetings, sub-committees and so on. The corresponding brother booked a speaker for the gospel service and that was it. Perhaps we need to look at the growing bureaucracy of oversight, stewards, deacons, etc.

Apart from such demands there are the needs of wife and family. Although the home is serviced with labour saving devices there are no domestic servants in the middle class household to lift the burden which both husband and wife expect to share. Parents are conscious of the need to devote proper time and attention to their children if they are to exercise a responsible Christian parenthood. Older children and grandchildren demand, and have a right to expect, time.

Leadership in the church is often exercised by those who are leaders in their secular employment. The demands of such employment have grown. Increasing mobility brings increased travel demands. Business travel takes the elder away from home as do the legitimate demands of family and friendship.

Perhaps we might dismiss all this as mere excuses, symptomatic of a lack of commitment. In my view that would be a mistake. The pressures *are* increasing, and not only in the ways I have suggested. Pressure also comes from the church and the world. We are more questioning than we were a couple of generations ago. This is partly the result of changes in

society generally which are reflected in the educational system. An effective ministry of the Word will be judged by high standards in regard to its intellectual content and its preaching style. The TV has brought the highest standards of presentation into the ordinary home. Whatever the message conveyed by a TV commercial, the manner of its presentation is likely to be highly sophisticated. Such standards of presentation are the result of much effort and expenditure. Elders are likely to be familiar with such standards and effort in their secular employment. Is the Lord's work to be served with a second best?

The questioning generation has questioned authority. All authority figures are under pressure to justify themselves. Leadership in the church relies increasingly on an ability to elicit consent rather than command it. This requires time and effort.

Apart from the inadequacies to which I have referred there may also be a perceived lack of gift whether pastorally, in evangelism or in ministry of the Word.

The challenge to elders and oversights in such circumstances is primarily a spiritual one. How are they to respond? In prayer, that God will provide for his people?—yes! In faith, that God will provide for his people?—yes! In searching the scriptures, to see how God has provided in the past?—yes! Obviously many have come to the conclusion that if time is the root problem, then more time must be made available. It is only a short step to the conclusion that someone with the requisite gift should be set apart for the work.

The role of the church in the decision

At what stage in the thinking of the leadership about this matter should the church be consulted? It will assuredly need to be consulted—and convinced. The needs of a church and the shortcomings of the leadership in discharging its responsibilities are not necessarily clearly understood by the fellowship. They will naturally wish to know why the elders are proposing such an arrangement. Are the elders opting out? Are they shuffling off their responsibility on to a 'pastor'?

If the person concerned is already well known and exercising a respected ministry within the church, these questions, and others like them, may not arise. If, however, the proposal is first raised with the church in a theoretical way it would be surprising if they did not arise, and with them a number of fears and concerns. These are likely to include the ingrained fear of a 'one-man ministry'; the fear that opportunities for exercise of individual gift will be curtailed; and apprehension regarding the financial demands that such an arrangement will impose.

Elders would do well to prepare their case carefully and to rehearse the

matter thoroughly with the church. The support of the church is vital to success and the spiritual resources of the church must be harnessed to the decision making process. This is not a matter that can be dealt with hurriedly or under pressure.

The search

For the church which feels the need for additional gift to be exercised within it and which believes that the need will be met through a full-time ministry, the pressing question will become—how do we find the right person? There are circumstances in which happily this question answers itself as soon as it is asked. Someone well known to the church, who already exercises a respected ministry and who can become more available, is a natural choice. This does not seem to be the general pattern, but the search should begin with the fellowship (Acts 13:2).

The search is for a person. Do we know who we are looking for? Man or woman? Age? Married or single? What kind of person? What will he or she be expected to do? What gift is to be exercised? What status will he or she have in the church?

Some churches have spent considerable time and effort in answering such questions; others have not done so. There is no doubt that careful consideration should be given to them before any arrangement is entered into, but it is not clear that such thought and care is a guarantee of a correct decision. There is a danger of describing a role which is only the sum of the gaps in the church's gift. This is unlikely to describe a real role that could be exercised by a balanced individual.

As in all such matters, there must be give and take between the gifts and qualities of the individual and the perceived needs of the church. The most important element of the arrangement must be the sense by both the person concerned and the church that the Lord is calling them into the arrangement.

How do churches seek for such a person? There are two principal means. Personal introduction is probably the most important method. Personal knowledge of an individual's spiritual capabilities and gifts should not be underestimated. It is important, however, not to rely too heavily on a single such assessment. Those who are aware of individuals who believe the Lord is calling them to such a ministry should themselves be prayerfully concerned to act as links between church and individual.

I believe some churches have advertised. I suspect that many have shrunk from such a frank appeal to the unknown! It would be interesting to know what experience churches have had in such circumstances.

If there are difficulties in bringing together the individual and the church it is not necessarily because there are no such individuals. For

generations, Brethren churches have accepted, recognised and commended those whom they believe God has called to exercise a full-time ministry on the overseas mission field. We probably all know men whom God has called out of Brethren churches to exercise a full-time ministry in churches of other persuasions. It has not been the case that God has not called, but that assemblies in the UK have found no place within their fellowships for those whom God has called.

In these circumstances we can consider the likely sources of supply for such men and women. There are men and women who are already exercising a ministry within one of the para-church organisations, such as Counties Evangelistic Work; Operation Mobilisation; Gospel Literature Outreach; Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, and Scripture Union. Such organisations provide opportunities for full-time service which can lead to a settled ministry within the compass of a local church. Such individuals have experience of full-time work and may well also have received relevant formal training.

A second source of such individuals is missionaries who have returned permanently to the UK and who are still active in the Lord's work. This situation arises quite frequently. Missionaries return to educate their children, to care for elderly relatives, or through changing circumstances on the mission field.

A third potential source is early retirement from secular employment. A changing economic climate now makes retirement at 55 or earlier a more frequent occurrence and possibility. Individuals with an appropriate gift, particularly where they have already been exercising an acceptable ministry within the church, can use the opportunity of early retirement to move into a full-time ministry. Such individuals have the benefit of experience and an established status in the church.

Finally, there are those, mainly younger men or women, who feel called by God to fit themselves for Christian service either at one of the Bible colleges or by a short period of full-time Christian service. This latter group may work for a year with one of the para-church organisations such as British Youth for Christ, or Gospel Literature Outreach. Initially they may not envisage themselves moving into a permanent full-time ministry, but their experience during this period may reveal unsuspected gifts which could lead to a full-time ministry. Their training and experience, though limited, can provide a valuable resource to a local church.

The Bible college student may not be clear when embarking on a course of training to what form of Christian service it will lead. A young man or woman leaving Bible college in his or her early twenties is likely to find difficulty in obtaining an opportunity for full-time service in a church.

I have little doubt that from these various sources there are those seeking opportunities to exercise a ministry within assemblies. I have the

impression, however, that those seeking such opportunities do not always find them and, as a result, move out of the Brethren orbit. This in itself should cause concern. It is not a sign of spiritual health if a significant proportion of those prepared to devote their lives to the Lord's service are unable to do so within the churches in which they have been nurtured.

We need to consider the implications of our haphazard arrangements. Many questions, outside the scope of this paper, need to be thought through if we are to make sure that the scriptural injunction (2 Tim. 2:1-2) to ensure a proper continuity of ministry is honoured.

There are a number of important and relevant aspects of the matter which should be mentioned in this context, however. The traditional mechanism of 'commendation' seems to have broken down. Elders need to be looking for, and churches commending, those whom God is calling into his service. In the home situation there is nobody fulfilling some of the useful and necessary functions undertaken in the overseas context by the editors of *Echoes*. This may seem to some an unfortunate model to choose when discussing such matters but I wish to underline the total lack of any mechanism which, however informal, provides a bridge between the Lord's servants, the commending church and the receiving church. Is there any difference in principle between the home situation and that overseas?

The problems of those leaving Bible colleges raise important questions regarding commending, calling, type of training and, not least, the age and secular experience of those contemplating full-time service. I have heard it suggested that a significant period of secular employment prior to full-time service is often appropriate, as is also a form of apprenticeship in Christian service.

Selection and decision

Assuming that the church has decided that the opportunity to exercise a full-time ministry should be provided and that possible individuals have come to the notice of the church and/or elders, how should matters proceed?

If the 'candidate' is already well known to the church the whole process is greatly simplified. It is, however, important not to fall into the trap of believing that because the candidate is well known the arrangement can be made casually. It is vital not to drift into a situation in which there are misunderstandings about the expectations of the parties. The following comments deal with the more difficult circumstance when church and candidate do not know each other initially.

It seems to me essential that initial contacts should be channelled

through a limited number of the church elders (probably two, not one only). The way this is done will depend on the method selected for contacting 'candidates'. Whether matters have been arranged formally (by advert; application form; and curriculum vitae) or informally (by grapevine), the object of the initial contacts should be to enable both the representatives of the church and the individual to make a clear and honest assessment of each other without commitment. It seems to me that only rarely will either party be able to define their requirements sufficiently clearly in advance to make the initial contact simple and quick. On the contrary, a careful and relatively cautious approach by both parties seems to me necessary and appropriate, with a clear understanding that conversations can be terminated on either side and at any stage without embarrassment. During this stage the elders will endeavour to determine whether the candidate is suitable in terms of age, domestic circumstances, experience, temperament and gift. The opportunity to consult mutual acquaintances should be sought whenever possible. These initial contacts will be approached by all concerned with prayer and in a spirit of openness to the Lord's leading.

Given these circumstances, if in the initial contacts the calling of the individual seems to match the expectations of the elders and the church, the situation is likely to develop to a more formal stage. The whole body of elders will become involved and the 'candidate' will be given an opportunity to get to know the church. It is important that such an opportunity should be given at an early stage, if possible even before the whole church is aware of the candidate's identity. Churches vary widely and the candidate needs to be able to assess the situation in unbiased circumstances.

If the church is looking for help in a clearly defined area, such as youth evangelism or social work, the elders will naturally seek evidence of appropriate experience and gift from curriculum vitae and referees, as well as from interview. Such referees—and there should be more than one—should be properly consulted, preferably by face-to-face conversation. If elders feel unqualified to make a complete assessment they may wish to consult an appropriately experienced and qualified person in whom they have confidence.

Where the ministry required is not so easily definable, particularly if a pastoral ministry or ministry of the Word is envisaged, the situation is more difficult. It is essential that the candidate should have an opportunity to minister the Word to the church on a number of occasions over a period of time.

It is particularly important for the elders to establish that the temperament of the candidate is such as to promote harmonious working between the candidate, the elders and the church. The nature of the

situation is likely to require those qualities which are conducive to team working including flexibility, diplomacy, and a willingness to accept responsibility within an understood role. Not everyone is able to operate within a team structure. Secular experience suggests that 'gift' and 'talent' are not necessarily associated with such qualities. Furthermore it seems to me that those who announce they have been 'called' have a tendency to display a certain individualism which is hard to reconcile with a team situation. These are matters which are dealt with more extensively elsewhere in this volume, but their importance cannot be ignored during the selection process. The elders must consider carefully the implication of these matters for their own methods of work and the example they set to the church.

During the selection process the church will be increasingly informed and consulted. In my judgement a decision of this kind, even if it is technically made by the elders, must have the full concurrence and support of the church. It is the responsibility of the elders to exercise their gifts of leadership so that this result is achieved! This may prove a further reason for a preliminary and short-term trial period. There are of course obvious difficulties with a trial period—particularly from the point of view of the candidate—and these must be carefully weighed. Nor is a trial period necessarily a reliable guide to what may happen later!

Personally, I see no way in which these matters can be dealt with quickly, nor can a decision be rushed. It may well be that some temporary arrangement should be made before the final decision. This in itself simply underlines the difficulties which arise when church and candidate start 'cold'.

I have no doubt that the most satisfactory selection procedure arises when the church already knows the candidate well. Indeed in such circumstances it is hardly appropriate to discuss the matter in terms such as selection and candidate. Perhaps we need to seek to develop a sufficient variety of opportunities for part-time and full-time ministry so that more such 'natural' situations can develop.

Terms of service

The technical aspects of this are discussed in appendices 1 and 2 at the end of this volume, but something must be said here about them from the angle of the responsibility of the local church. When a candidate has been selected the relationship must be placed on some formal basis. This may be more or less elaborate but the basis of the relationship cannot be left wholly implicit. Some matters must be made explicit. I suggest that these include:

1. Some description of the task to be performed. This description will

include a statement of the time/availability expected. 'Full-time' in practice usually means 'most of the time' and this should be recognized from the beginning.

2. A definition of the appointee's status within the formal structure of the church. Depending on the church, this structure may include deacons, stewards, elders. The relationship to the elders is particularly important. Such status must be acknowledged by the church by whatever method is appropriate to the local tradition.

3. A statement regarding the term of the appointment. An unlimited term is unlikely to be wise but the length of the term is likely to be more difficult. It should not be forgotten, however, that current employment legislation allows a 'permanent' employee to terminate his employment relatively easily.

4. A definition of the legal relationship. If the individual is to be an employee, this matter requires very careful consideration. The status of the individual in relation to both tax and employment must be established. Further details are given in appendix 2, but there are two points which I wish to emphasise:

First, the law relating to employment is complex and if elders have no personal experience as employers they should not enter into or allow the church to enter into such obligations without properly understanding their responsibilities. Those who have such experience will pause before taking such a step. Who is to be the employer? Is the legal relationship of employer/employee appropriate? (including as it must a contract of employment and involving formal rights regarding termination, unfair dismissal, etc). How is the necessary administration to be arranged? Most elderships are not organized to undertake such a task.

Second, whilst self-employment is in many ways, in my view, the appropriate route, it will be necessary for the individual to establish his self-employed status with the tax authorities. This is not necessarily easy, and expert advice is needed, both by the church and the individual. The church must be careful not to destroy by its actions this self-employed status. Such self-employed status does not of course imply independence but possibly a contractual relationship akin to professional and client. In such a relationship clients' instructions are 'taken'.

5. An understanding of the accommodation necessary for the appointee and how and where this is to be provided. There are many possible options, extending from accommodation wholly provided by the church to accommodation wholly provided by the appointee. The implications of landlord and tenant legislation requires careful thought when the accommodation is provided by the church. In areas where property values are high some form of mortgage arrangement or possibly equity sharing might be possible. Expert advice is necessary.

6. Financial support. The Brethren tradition regarding financial support for the Lord's work was largely shaped in the early years of the movement by the examples of George Müller and Henry Craik at Bristol. Their example led to a fixed view that the Lord's servants should 'live by faith'. This has been taken to require the Lord's servants not to make their needs known and not to require a financial commitment from the Lord's people.

This spiritual tradition, although undoubtedly powerful and valuable, emphasizes the matter from the point of view of the Lord's servant. The tradition has become distorted over the years and has resulted in a failure to teach the Lord's people to discharge their responsibility to meet the needs of those whom the Lord calls. The faith of the Lord's servants is to be matched by the faithful free will offerings of the Lord's people.

The strength of these traditions seems to me to be waning. We need to relearn the spiritual truths that the examples of Müller and Craik convey, and put them into practice in a more balanced way. There is ample scriptural support for making proper financial provision for those who labour in the Lord's work and for using appropriate means to assess and make that provision. The elders of a church will do well if they teach the church to face up to these responsibilities before they undertake them.

Whether the appointee is employed or self-employed the church must make an assessment of the appropriate salary/fee. Circumstances vary considerably but the Lord's people would do well to be generous in such a matter. The average manual worker earns approximately £10,000 per annum, though this might not be considered an appropriate comparison! In addition provision must be made for appropriate expenses in relation to car, telephone, books, correspondence, equipment, etc. Other costs will include statutory payments in connection with National Insurance, pension scheme, and any cost associated with the provision of accommodation.

We no longer live in a society in which these matters can be dealt with on a personal and informal basis. In many cases the law requires them to be dealt with in certain ways and Christians must not allow themselves by ignorance or thoughtlessness to fall into the position of being less honourable than the world requires.

7. Last, there should be explicit provision for periodic joint reviews of all these matters.

It may be felt that in all this welter of detail the strategic spiritual objective which led to the arrangement can easily become overlooked. But it is vitally important that these objectives should be established from the beginning by the church and with the elders. Unless this is carefully and prayerfully done the possibilities for later confusion are such as to make that outcome almost inevitable.