

INTRODUCTION

Gerald West

The past decade has seen various changes of practice in many of the churches commonly known as Open Brethren. One of these changes has been an increase in the number of churches supporting a full-time ministry within their fellowships. This development has received notice at conferences and in *Harvester* magazine.

There is some difficulty in charting its progress. Various estimates of the numbers involved have been attempted. Although there is no doubt that there has been a significant increase in the practice, the numbers do not appear to be as large as has sometimes been suggested. This may in part be due to the fact that the relationship appears in many cases to last only a few years. A short life cycle seems to be inherent in the nature of the arrangement, and is partly indicative of a learning process. In some cases, no doubt, there have also been misunderstandings and mistakes. The dominant picture, however, is by no means one of difficulty. Such relationships have proved to be a blessing to the church and to the individuals involved. The period of initial experiment and growth is continuing.

Some three years ago, Partnership (CBRF) formed a study group to consider the implications of this development. The papers which follow were commissioned on the recommendation of the study group whose enquiries had identified a number of issues that could usefully be considered in a wider forum. There is no published material available to help either churches or individuals contemplating such an arrangement. A further reason for commissioning these papers was to bring together such experience as already exists to meet this need.

Taken together, the various contributions cover the principal theological and practical implications of the matter. Each contribution represents the personal view of its author. They were not commissioned on the basis of a common understanding or approach, nor with a presumption in favour of such arrangements. Their publication is not an act of advocacy. Rather it is hoped that they will stimulate further informed discussion and enable any who are contemplating such arrangements to give this many-faceted matter careful consideration.

The papers have been collected by the editor into three parts and a number of appendices. The first part, entitled 'Where we are now', commences with an analysis of a survey carried out in 1982/83 by Graham Brown and Roger Pearce ('The Brown-Pearce Survey'). Some 32 'servants of God' working full-time with local Brethren churches shared their experiences with the researchers. Roger Pearce has written up the findings and provided some comment on them. This paper is followed by one written by Brian Mills, formerly field secretary of Counties Evangelistic Work and, at the time of writing, secretary of the evangelism department of the Evangelical Alliance, seconded to Mission England. Based on the observations of a number of people consulted by him who move widely among Brethren churches, Brian's paper looks at the condition and prospects of Brethren churches, with special reference to the growing number availing themselves of the services of men and women working full-time with a particular church. The third paper of this first part, written by Harold Rowdon, author of *The Origins of the Brethren*, attempts to place the matter under discussion in its 'historical perspective'. It draws attention to the existence of full-time workers in local church situations throughout the history of the Brethren movement in this country and in many other parts of the world today. Like the first two papers, it draws on a survey—in this instance a random survey of Brethren practice around the world.

Part two turns from the factual to the biblical. It contains two papers. The first, written by John Baigent, well-known Bible teacher who is now spending half his time serving the local church of which he has been an elder for some years, is a concise yet comprehensive survey of 'what the Bible teaches' about localised full-time ministry. It looks at the practices of the church in New Testament times in the light of the principles enunciated there. The second paper by David Clines, who teaches biblical studies at Sheffield University, sounds a loud and clear warning against professionalism and the institutionalizing of the structures of ministry in the church.

The third part of this collection of papers moves from the biblical to the practical (without in any sense ignoring the former). Three papers by Neil Summerton (based on articles which appeared in *Harvester*, September to November, 1985) scrutinize the role of a full-time worker in a local church in relation to the leadership as a whole and the total congregation. The legitimacy of an appointment to full-time work is considered in the light of the warning against religious professionalism given in the previous paper. Various aspects of the calling and ministry of a local full-time worker are explored in some depth. The effects on the dynamics of the leadership and the congregation of what is for most Brethren churches in this country a new development are pointed out with great clarity.

There follows a paper given by Alfred Kuen at a conference of European Brethren held in Switzerland in September 1985 and drawn from his book, *Ministères dans l'Eglise*, which debates the respective merits of what he calls full-time and part-time ministry. Especially intriguing and suggestive is the section in which he suggests ways in which the advantages of full-time ministry can be secured—in part at least—in a church which lacks it, and the benefits of relying on part-time ministry can to some extent be retained in a church which possesses full-time ministry.

Part three is rounded off by two further papers, one of them a survey by Gerald West of the whole question from the point of view of the local church; the other a complementary paper by Colin Holmes which is the 'testimony' of an itinerant evangelist turned local church worker.

Six appendices deal with half a dozen important, detailed matters relating to the appointment, impact and relationships of local full-time workers. They should not be overlooked since, unlike the appendix in the human body, there is no question about their usefulness!

The discerning reader will observe a certain amount of overlap, as between papers. The editor has deliberately refrained from ironing out all of it, in view of differences of *nuance* and emphasis, and the importance of the points being made which seems to justify a certain amount of repetition.

Finally, the reader is notified that in view of the frequency with which the term 'full-time worker' appears in the pages that follow it has been deemed wise to abbreviate to 'FTW'.