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A table of contents for *Christian Brethren Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php

IMPACT ON PARA-CHURCH EVANGELISM

Roger Chilvers

Roger Chilvers, a full-time evangelist with Counties Evangelistic Work, divides his time between itinerant evangelism and work with one particular church. He has been deeply involved in Mission England, serving as national training officer for year three. He considers the implications for para-church evangelism of the use by local churches of resident full-time workers.

Para-church evangelism has various forms. These include:

Work at a distance where money and sometimes workers are provided by the local church but where the work is done by others: eg Operation Mobilization, Scripture Gift Mission, Soldiers' and Airmen's Scripture Readers Association, and some overseas missionary work.

Para-church work where an organisation with whom we are broadly in sympathy provides a service we gladly use in a local context: eg, Covenanters, Scripture Union.

Inter church work where evangelism is undertaken on a very large scale: eg, Mission England, Mission to London.

Local inter-church work where churches combine for evangelistic activities.

It is this last group which, generally speaking, is more affected by the FTW joining the local church and which we will be thinking about in this discussion.

It must surely be accepted that the unity of the people of God, as members of the same body, is not simply a theory but a reality to be expressed in practical terms. As John Newton once said, 'If a man will love Jesus I will love him, whatever hard name he may be called by. My differing from him will not always prove him to be wrong except I am infallible myself!'

For the non-Christian community, who have little understanding of doctrinal or historical differences, any expression of unity is a valuable part of the gospel which is a reconciling message. It is, therefore, an extremely helpful thing for Brethren churches to participate in para-church evangelism, centred as it is, in the person and work of Christ.

Perhaps it is for this reason, together with a generally more 'Arminian' view of the gospel, that Brethren churches have in the past taken a lead in so many para-church evangelistic activities. Sadly this is not nearly so clearly seen today.

A number of factors, however, have not always helped Brethren churches. Para-church evangelism has usually meant 'bigger' (bigger meetings, better known speakers etc). This has its own special impact on enquirers and new Christians who, in most cases, will naturally want to continue with an atmosphere and style similar to that in which they were converted. Small churches can rarely provide such an ethos. This in turn leads to one of the problems of para-church activity, ie, in most cases the churches that benefit most are already the strongest and largest. Smaller and weaker churches can sometimes be made even weaker through para-church activity. The problem is often compounded by the fact that the inter-church evangelism has usually been under strong, clear leadership which is often sadly missing from Brethren churches.

Whilst the term FTW can and often is used to describe a great variety of gifts and abilities in Brethren churches, in these churches the FTWs are more frequently evangelists or at least people who are expected to make their biggest impact in the area of bringing folk to faith in Christ. Rarely are workers taken on as teachers, pastors or administrators etc as is often seen in other churches. Where pastoral work is seen as a necessity, it is usually amongst the unconverted fringe that the activities of the FTWs are expected to be concentrated. This means that the impact of FTWs in Brethren churches is likely to be seen mostly in the evangelism and outreach of the church. Several areas are affected.

1. *Realism* A FTW in evangelism will help the church to think realistically about evangelism: eg What impact does the 'every Sunday night' Gospel Meeting have? Why is it that the 'Morning Meeting' is such a big barrier to growth in some of our churches? Long cherished ideas may sometimes be seen to be unrealistic. This is often a very painful process.

2. *Programme* The church will be able to plan the best ways to reach both the immediate neighbourhood and further afield: eg church planting in housing estates.

3. *Development of gift* A FTW will both encourage and provide opportunities for evangelistic gift to be developed and used.

4. *Follow-up* One weakness of para-church evangelism is that the new Christian seldom has the opportunity to talk with and continue to learn from the evangelist who led him to Christ. There is an immediate problem in linking people with 'substitute spiritual parents'. This major difficulty of follow-up does not arise where the evangelist is resident in the church.

All this has both negative and positive effects on para-church evangelism.

Negative effects

1. *Motivation* If a church has its own evangelist with a well structured and realistic evangelistic programme, planned with both the unconverted of that neighbourhood and the gifts of the Christians in mind, there is less likely to be great enthusiasm for poorly thought out evangelistic projects that are organized locally. When we have been concerned at the type of work that our young people get involved in, we sometimes forget that it is because there is little alternative evangelism with the local church.

2. *Finance* Higher financial priority is likely to be given to the home church work and its worker than to inter-church projects about which we may be sometimes less than enthusiastic.

3. *Time* Because of the planning that is more likely with a FTW the church is less able to be involved in sudden or short-term evangelistic projects that local groups may organize.

However, all these points are far outweighed by the positive effect that a FTW can have.

Positive effects

1. *Status of evangelism* In practice, though not in theory, many Brethren churches give a low priority to evangelism. This is radically changed when there is an evangelist in the church. In practice, this means that the church with an evangelistic heart will be the most enthusiastic supporter of efforts to reach the lost. Practical involvement, however, will not be automatic, but will depend upon careful assessment in the light of a full church evangelism programme. Such involvement will be more committed, dependable and thorough in every way.

2. *Quality of evangelism* Churches with a full evangelistic programme will clearly have members whose evangelistic gifts have been developed, have experience in evangelism in different circumstances, and know the area well with its different needs and opportunities. This will be an invaluable resource and task force for para-church evangelism.

3. *Planning and advice* Local workers are clearly the essential foundation for any lasting work which is to penetrate the local community. With plans to be made both in the churches and in the neighbourhood, the wise evangelist (or group organizing evangelism) will want to seek the help and advice as well as use the skills of the local worker.

4. *Follow-up* For reasons outlined above follow-up work, which is always difficult, is greatly assisted by the FTW who can provide continued help and leadership.

Conclusion

The addition of a FTW will mean that para-church evangelism is strengthened and helped where the work is carefully planned and rooted in the community and where gift in the church is used and not just exploited.

The addition of a FTW will not help para-church evangelism where the work planned is at short notice, without sufficient research ('we've always done this'), and where the local churches are simply being used to serve the method or system rather than the community needs.